

Schooling in the Shadow of Conflict: A Study of Poonch District in Jammu and Kashmir

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ABSTRACT

This study explores into the profound impact of cross-border shelling on the schooling of children in the border area of Poonch district, Jammu and Kashmir. The persistent conflict between India and Pakistan, compounded by territorial disputes, has given rise to enduring regional instability. This border region is marked by frequent cross-border gunfire exchanges and a dearth of crucial infrastructure, including adequate healthcare and educational facilities. The conflict has resulted in significant physical, economic, and psychological repercussions for the residents, with children being particularly affected. Displacement resulting from cross-border shelling disrupts the daily lives of residents, especially the education of children, compelling them to seek safety in camps or with relatives, thereby interrupting their academic continuity. The study adopts qualitative research approach to analysing existing literature, academic papers, and reports to comprehensively understand the multifaceted impact of cross-border shelling on education. The findings of the study highlight the adverse effects of explosive violence on the educational landscape, emphasizing disruptions in academic continuity, trauma, and the psychological challenges endured by children.

Keywords: Conflict, Displacement, Cross-border Shelling, Education, and Schooling

Since 1947, the conflict between India and Pakistan has persisted, particularly in the region of Jammu and Kashmir. This longstanding conflict has led to three wars over the territory, with both countries asserting their claims over the entire area. Additionally, China also holds a significant portion of the disputed region. This historical and unresolved issue has fuelled agitation and created persistent regional instability, undermining efforts toward demilitarization in the area. The territory administered by both India and Pakistan is divided by the Line of Control (LOC). Life across the LOC is exceedingly challenging and filled with hardships, primarily due to cross-border gunfire exchanges and the lack of essential infrastructure such as proper healthcare and education facilities.

The demarcation runs through seven districts of Jammu and Kashmir: Jammu, Kathua, Rajouri,

Poonch, Badgam, Baramulla, and Kupwara, all bounded by the Pakistan border. The wars between India and Pakistan have profoundly impacted the lives of the people across the line of control. The exchanges of gunfire along the border have had immeasurable physical, economic, and psychological consequences on the civilians residing in the conflict zone (Dixit, M., & Yasir, S, 2015). People residing across the Line of Control (LOC) in the Poonch district face dual hardships. On one hand, they contend with negligence from the central government and union territory administration (UT). On the other hand, they grapple with

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cross-border conflict. Despite the initiation of government policies like the Hill Area Development Program (HADP) and the Border Area Development Programme (BADP), which have brought about some improvements in infrastructure, certain areas continue to face challenges in the border region (Sohail, Tarif, 2020). However, various flagship initiatives have been taken by the government in the border area but still, the schooling system remains neglected by both the central government and the UT administration.

To reduce the risk and provide relief during the cross-border shelling, the government has sanctioned 14,460 bunkers, including 1,431 community bunkers and 13,029 individual bunkers. There are no provisions to build the bunker near school. According to government data, only 7,856 bunkers have been constructed to safeguard the residents living in proximity to the LOC in Jammu and Kashmir. The frontier dispute profoundly affected the schooling system in the area because there was no provision to construct bunkers near the school. Due to the bombardment, schools often remain closed for security reasons and parents feel anxious and hesitant to allow their children to attend school during cross-border firing. During such times, all activities, including schooling, agriculture, and economic endeavours, come to a halt.

Cross-border Conflict and Displacement

Displacement is the process by which people are forced to leave their native place due to war, or their livelihood, which causes a lot of socio-economic, and psychological damage, people lose their rights and land. Displacement as a result of conflict, development, and disaster is a serious concern for all developing countries including India (Adeola, R., 2016). Children suffer from displacement, and face violence, sexual abuse, separation from family members, and denial of the right to education create psychological problems among the children (UNICEF, n.d.). In the border regions of Jammu and Kashmir, when cross-border shelling occurs, people are forced to flee the affected areas for safety. They seek refuge in camps or the homes of relatives, disrupting their daily lives, especially for the children who are unable to attend school during this displacement. These disruptions happen whenever

there is heightened border activity, intense firing, conflicts, or increased presence of security forces. In border areas of Jammu and Kashmir especially the residents of borderlands have been displaced several times during the cross border shelling, some time they are displaced for some days or some months, and they face different problems in displacement camps, like lack of proper facilities of education, or health (Mahapatra, 2011). Conflict and forced relocation are intricately connected, and the repercussions of displacement significantly affect an individual's daily life. Moreover, this upheaval has a substantial impact on the educational trajectory of children, leading to disruptions and hindrances in their academic performance (Sharma, 2019).

Children, being particularly vulnerable during conflict and displacement, experience profound challenges in their educational pursuits. Relocation often leads to disruptions in their schooling, as the upheaval causes a break in their academic continuity. The abrupt change in surroundings and schools can result in a lack of stability, making it difficult for them to adapt to new educational systems, curricula, and teaching styles. Moreover, the emotional and psychological distress experienced by children during conflict and displacement further hinders their ability to focus and engage effectively in their studies. The trauma and uncertainty associated with their circumstances can manifest as anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder, significantly impacting their overall learning experience.

An overview of district Poonch

The present study is conducted in block Mankote of district Poonch, which is one of the most backward areas of Jammu jurisdiction. This district is restricted with the line of control (LOC) from the north, east, and west according to the 2011 census 90% of the population is living in villages. People residing in district Poonch have still been deprived of the proper health and educational amenities especially the girl's education is very low in rural areas of district Poonch. The conflict between India and Pakistan impacts the overall development of the district. Poonch is considered as a backward district of Jammu and Kashmir. This border district has also been hit by the armed insurgency for the past 25 years situated close to the line of control the district

also witnesses the high infiltration of terrorists from across the line of control beside the killing of the civilian's school are also damaged due to cross border firing (Suri, K., 2014).

Objective of the study

- ❑ To analyse the impact of cross-border shelling on school children.
- ❑ To analyse the impact of the ceasefire agreement on life children and local inhabitants.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to investigate the challenges faced by the people living along the line of control in the Poonch district of Jammu and Kashmir. Secondary data are utilized to comprehensively analyse the situation and gather insights into the experiences and perspectives of the affected population. A thorough review of existing literature, academic papers, reports, and relevant publications will be conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of the historical context, policies, and previous research related to the conflict in the Jammu and Kashmir region, cross-border shelling, displacement, and its impact on education. Analysis of official government reports, policies, and initiatives related to education, border area development, and conflict mitigation efforts will be undertaken to comprehend the current situation and government interventions. By employing this methodology, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by school children in border areas due to cross-border shelling and the necessary steps to mitigate the adverse effects on their education and overall well-being.

Discussion and Analysis

This section comprises the impact of explosive violence on schooling and life before and after the ceasefire agreement. Researchers analyse the comprehensive review of literature, articles, and reports on the topic to generate robust results.

Impact of Explosive Violence on Schooling

Quality education is not just improving the individual capability to generate economic growth but also contributing to the overall development of society (Qian, X., & Smyth, R., 2008). Education

decides the development of a country and brings transformation in the society, Explosive violence impacts on countries development especially on the education system of a country. Shelling along the line of control has caused major disruption to the schooling system. According to an Aljazeera report of (2016) exchange of shelling was hit a school van in the Nakyal sector of Pakistan where a driver was killed and several students were injured by a mortar shell (Aljazeera Report, 2016). School Children are from the conflict zone experience psychological trauma and feel deprived and isolated due to the panic situation along the border. According to Zahid Mushtaq (2017) children from Kashmir particularly from conflict zone have experienced trauma, and suffer much more from those who are lived in peace, the children's living in a peaceful area enjoy their life and childhood, but unfortunately in Kashmir children are suffering from such privileges due to the conflict and tensions (Mushtaq, Z., 2017). Shehryar Ali highlights that the increase in militarism has negative impacts on children's psychological health and the quality of education in Pakistan. Militarism not only affects the quality of education but also ruins the infrastructure of schools due cross cross-firing (Ali, S., 2018). Pankaj and Pooja Sharma (2021) conducted a study in the Heranagar area of the Jammu of the region and found that cross-border shelling has negative impacts on the student's mental health and create disturbance in their final exam. Moreover, in border area Due to the cross-border shelling students drop out of school in early because they unable to concentrate on their studies lose their interest in education (Sharma, P., & Sharma, P., 2021). From 2019 to November 2021 a total of 5601 incidents of ceasefire violation by Pakistan along with the line of control in Jammu and Kashmir (India Today 21 Dec 2021).

Education is the most affected sector in this region due to the continuous ceasefire violation from both side which results from the closure of the school effect on the student's mental health also (Skinder, S., Shah, S. A., & Dar, S. N, 2021). The pervasive violence in border areas has a detrimental effect on children's education. They struggle to concentrate on their studies and encounter numerous challenges due to the cross-border shelling. This includes untimely completion of the syllabus, school closures

during shelling causing disruptions, and the onset of psychological health issues for the students (Kousar, R., & Bhadra, S., 2021). During the period between 2015 and 2019, wars, conflicts, and disasters had detrimental effects on children globally. These incidents affect the education system of 93 countries worldwide, resulting in children losing their parents and loved ones. Consequently, they also lost access to essential resources like drinking water, adequate healthcare facilities, and food. Approximately 30 million children worldwide were kept out of school due to emergencies (UNICEF, n.d.).

Gender inequality in India is a significant concern within the patriarchal fabric of Indian society. Girls bear the brunt of limited educational opportunities, with gender playing a dominant role in determining an individual's access to education. This results in a substantial disparity between male and female literacy levels (Katiyar, S. P., 2016). Girls' children especially from border areas deprived of their educational rights and they drop out of school in early stage due to fewer separate schools, sanitation facilities, security reasons, and the distance of school. In 2018 five members of a family were killed due to cross-border shelling in Mendhar tehsil (Irfan, H., 2018). After hearing about this type of incident parents always in trauma, feel insecure, and do not send their children to school.

Armed conflict in Jammu and Kashmir has a direct and indirect impact on children's education. It results in physical injuries, disabilities, and exposure to drug-related violence, causing damage to school infrastructure. This violence pushes children to live in orphanages (Zaffar, 2021). The majority of schools located in the border region are situated in rural areas, resulting in a lack of essential amenities like roads, sanitation, healthcare facilities, infrastructure, and access to clean drinking water. This situation poses an additional challenge for border children to complete their education within a reasonable time-frame.

The relationship between education and societal development cannot be overstated. Quality education not only enhances individual capabilities for economic growth but also fuels overall societal progress. However, explosive violence, particularly cross-border shelling in Poonch District, significantly disrupts the education system and hampers the mental well-being of children. The pervasive

violence in border areas hinders students' ability to concentrate, leading to school closures, untimely syllabus completion, and ensuing psychological challenges. Moreover, armed conflict exacerbates gender inequalities, with girls from border areas facing more significant obstacles to accessing education. The conflict's direct and indirect impacts encompass physical injuries, disabilities, and damage to school infrastructure, compelling children into challenging living situations. Addressing these issues is paramount for nurturing a conducive educational environment and promoting holistic societal growth in conflict-afflicted regions.

Lack of resources

Apart from the conflict education of border district face another challenge from the decade lack of subject teachers. In Jammu and Kashmir specifically if we talk about the district Poonch geographically it is rural area parents from these areas cannot afford the private school fee, and they have a limited schooling choices for their child, majority of the parents in this border district depends on the Government schools for their child schooling, but unfortunately in government schools children's are deprived from the quality education and resources of education.

Life Before and After the Ceasefire Agreement along LOC

The November 2003 ceasefire treaty was a milestone in the tense bilateral relationship between India and Pakistan this came after prolonged violence along the 725 Km line of control (LOC) that divided Jammu and Kashmir into two (POK) Pak-occupied Kashmir and Indian-Administered Kashmir. It followed the basic Military Confidence Building Measure (CBM) ceasefire not only helped maintain military confidence in the bus service and trade through the LOC but also provided great relief to the thousands of people living along the LOC. Unfortunately, this treaty has been violated several times. RTI information pursued by Pune-based activist Prafful Sarada revealed that Pakistani forces were committed to the highest number of ceasefire violations in the Jammu and Kashmir border region over the past 17 years (Jha, A., 2021). The terror attack on Mumbai in 2008, the attack on the Indian army base camp in Uri in September 2016, and

ceasefire violations have been the most prominent cause of tension, and conflict between New Delhi and Islamabad (Jacob, 2017). The incidents of ceasefire violations and conflict between India and Pakistan have increased after the 2019 Pulwama attack, the Balakote airstrike, and the abrogation of Article 370. Ceasefire violation and conflict between two nations influence citizens' lives, children's education and mental health. In Poonch, the life of residents is more vulnerable during cross-border shelling due to backward in terms of education, health, and proper infrastructure, and loses their loved ones in this bloodshed. From November 2019 to November 2021, a total of 5601 incidents of ceasefire violation were reported along the LOC in Jammu and Kashmir in the last two years (Economic Times, 2021). In this period the number of students were deprived of their education and parents lost their children.

Since February 2021 both the country decided to strengthen the 2003 agreement and choose a diplomatic solution to the conflict. The meeting was held between India and Pakistan's military operation commanders in which they reviewed the status of the LOC, and other sectors in a free atmosphere, DGMO also agreed to discuss the issues and concerns that could hamper peace in the LOC region (Hindustan Times, 2021). The year 2021 was one of the most pleasing years for the residents of the border area of Jammu and Kashmir. The residents welcomed this peace accord, and after this ceasefire agreement, there have been no incidents of cross-border shelling in the region. Before the ceasefire local people were living under a security threat, nobody knew about the upcoming episode of bloodshed due to the sudden start of cross-border shelling.

In the Poonch region, there are numerous schools situated near the Line of Control (LOC) border. The educational environment is disrupted when clashes occur at the border. However, the recent ceasefire has provided an opportunity for students to continue their studies in tranquil setting. The residents near the border possess aspirations for a promising future for their children. They understand that to receive the best education need a peaceful and conducive environment. The ongoing ceasefire holds the potential to significantly improve the lives of border residents by fostering a sense of

calm and security. The agreement on the ceasefire between India and Pakistan has been a source of immense relief for those residing in the border areas. This newfound harmony along the border in the Poonch district is anticipated to bring about a positive transformation in the lives of the people. Living in a peaceful environment will allow them to focus on their aspirations and pursue a better quality of life.

CONCLUSION

The study on the impact of cross-border shelling on the schooling of children in the border area of Poonch district, Jammu and Kashmir, sheds light on the profound and multifaceted consequences of persistent conflict between India and Pakistan. The present study highlights the adverse effects of explosive violence on the educational landscape, emphasizing disruptions in academic continuity, trauma, and the psychological challenges endured by children. Cross-border conflict and displacement have disrupted the daily lives of residents, especially the education of children, compelling them to seek safety in camps or with relatives, thereby interrupting their academic continuity.

The recent ceasefire agreement in 2021 between India and Pakistan provides hope for a peaceful and conducive environment that can positively impact the lives of the border residents, allowing them to focus on education and aspire for a better quality of life. The government needs to address the challenges posed by students due to cross-border shelling to nurture a conducive educational environment and promote holistic societal growth in conflict-afflicted regions. Provide special relief to the victim students, conduct special lecturer to complete the syllabus and provide appropriate facilities during shelling for continuity of academic performance.

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