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## India: Kashmir: On the Way Back?

By [Athar Parvaiz](#) and [Animesh Roul](#) / In [Asia Pacific, Society & Education](#) / October 5, 2010 at 3:17 pm



Kashmir/New Delhi | In May of this year, four Kashmiri candidates passed India's prestigious civil service examination. But what sparked celebration all across the region was the rare feat achieved by one of them, Shah Faisal, who topped the examination with the best score. This was the first time that as many as four Kashmiri youth had qualified for India's civil service – and that one of them excelled above all others was the icing on the cake.

The results in the civil service exam, one of India's most competitive exams, led to almost a month of celebrations. Faisal was driven to his native village with a fleet of cars that even a political leader with a huge following would envy. "It was an outburst of pent-up emotions as Kashmiris have witnessed nothing worthwhile happening in the last 21 years, particularly in the field of education," explained psychologist Malik Roshan Ara.

The students' success was the latest sign that the education system in Kashmir has at last started to recover since the devastation wrought by the latest conflict over the disputed territory, which started in 1989 and quickly accelerated over the following years. The violence only started to decline in 2004. During those years of intense conflict in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, which claimed tens of thousands of victims, the education sector suffered the worst fate next to tourism. Already in 1995, a four-member committee from New Delhi, headed by the social policy analyst Joseph Gathia, concluded that children were the "biggest victims of violence in Kashmir."

The Gathia committee found that more than 400 schools were gutted during the early 1990s; more than 60 percent of children between the ages of 10 and 14 were deprived of education opportunities because of the

surrounding violence; paramilitary forces occupied a large number of rural school buildings; and the presence of those soldiers in and around education institutions created a psychosis of fear among school-going children.

The academic atmosphere in the entire Kashmir valley atrophied because of the physical turmoil and psychological pressure of conflict. The abrupt large-scale migration of Pandits (Kashmiri Hindus) from the valley due to the armed conflict meant that the system lost many of its best teachers. Disruptions in the academic calendar were brought about by violent incidents and repeated strikes, not to mention dereliction of duty by education staff claiming that they were avoiding the conflict. Education standards were not enforced, leading to rampant copying of work and several cases of brazen cheating on standardized examinations.

## Teachers on the Run

It would be hard to overestimate the impact of the Pandit exodus. Until the beginning of the conflict, members of Kashmir's Pandit community had filled most of the vital positions in every sector, including education. Those in the teaching profession had usually commanded respect from their Muslim brethren owing to their zeal, commitment, dedication, and high standards of learning.

“The schools in earlier times used to be mainly manned by the Kashmiri Hindu teachers, given the fact that most of the educated people belonged to the Pandit community,” Raza Ali, a senior teacher in a government school in the frontier Kupwara district, recalled. “But right after their migration to Jammu and other areas, a sudden dearth of teachers led to further crises apart from the fallout of violent incidents and a fear psychosis.”

According to the available statistics of the education offices of several different districts in the Kashmir valley, over 1,100 Kashmiri Pandit teachers migrated from the valley.

Initially, the migration also had an impact on the education prospects of the children of the Pandit families who had left, many of whom found it difficult to enroll in new schools. The problem was especially acute in Jammu, one of the three administrative divisions within the state of Jammu and Kashmir. According to Professor Abdul Gani Madhosh, a noted educational expert, the local authorities opposed the idea of putting the new arrivals in the same classrooms with their peers, evidently fearful of generating competition for the locals. “Due to some specifically local reasons, the Jammu administration did not permit Pandit children to mix with Dogras [the majority local ethnic group] in various schools so the Pandit children had to be kept separately,” Madhosh wrote in his study *Children Under Armed Conflict in Kashmir – The Educational Scenario*.

The initial resentment from the Dogras of Jammu ultimately faded away. “One apparent reason for this acceptance of non-locals by Dogras was that they finally came to terms with the fact that the presence of Kashmiris could hardly jeopardize their prospects in their own land,” said psychologist Malik Roshan Ara. “They were also impressed by the hardworking attitude and capability of Kashmiri Pandit students.”

This change of heart allowed the Kashmiri Pandit students to continue their studies in a peaceful atmosphere in Jammu, and strive toward academic excellence.

## A Stark Contrast

Meanwhile, their counterparts back in the Kashmir valley continued to suffer because of the raging conflict. Not surprisingly, the abnormal security situation in Kashmir left a lasting impact on the performance of Kashmir-based students. While the Jammu-based students – including Kashmiri Pandit students who had migrated to Jammu – fared better in exams and evolved into qualified professionals and technocrats, the Kashmir-based students saw their prospects decline due to a lack of proper infrastructure, instructors, and more importantly, unfavorable learning conditions owing to the omnipresence of violence.

According to Bashmir Ahmad, a retired college principal, students then at middle- and secondary-school levels, as well as those graduates studying for their bachelor's degrees, were particularly affected during the initial decade of turmoil in the valley. “[They] are the worst hit since it had almost become next to impossible to hold classes and fair examinations in those years, which in turn impacted the students,” he said.

That reality is particularly well-illustrated in a comparative analysis that Professor Madhosh undertook of the pass percentage of Jammu-based students and Kashmir-based students (pass percentage represents the percentage of students who manage to continue on to the next grade). From 1990 to 1994 (later figures are not available), Jammu-based students obtained an average 60 percent pass percentage while the students in Kashmir produced only an under-40 pass percentage. Students who had migrated elsewhere, to Delhi and other states, were able to put up even more impressive numbers than those in Jammu.

According to Professor Madhosh, however, the situation in the education sphere in Kashmir has started improving over the past two to three years with the decrease in violent incidents. “We can say that our students now feel relaxed and free of the psychological burden so as to think of participating in, and clearing [passing] high-level competitions,” he said in an interview with TOL.

“Though we still need to go a long way, we should feel encouraged by the latest trends,” Madhosh added. “Kashmiri boys and girls have now started applying for international scholarships, a phenomenon which was missing when the conflict was at its peak.”

“Exams are no longer interrupted by day-in and day-out strikes, and female education is on the increase,” Madhosh continued. The improvements, he said, are not because conflict-related incidents have altogether stopped occurring. “But thankfully the education sector is now the least-hit sector, just the opposite of what it used to be during the 18 years of conflict.”

Such progress has been achieved despite the decision of Pandit teachers not to return. But over the last 10 to 12 years, many Kashmiri youth have secured higher degrees from universities in Kashmir and abroad, and a large enough number have decided to become teachers to start to replenish the teaching ranks.

But education infrastructure is another matter. Even though most of the school buildings damaged during the conflict have been rebuilt, conditions in some places remain horrendous. Some classes are still held in open fields and temporary shelters. One of the schools in a southern hamlet was found to be operating from a cowshed while another north of Srinagar was located in a storefront. According to a recent study by Kashmir’s Department of Education, more than 50 percent of schools have no drinking water facilities, and 60 percent schools lack toilets. Playing fields are available only in seven to 10 percent of schools. And in many places there are no proper seating arrangements for the students, and they are made to sit on the floor on uncomfortable and shabby mats.

## Worries Return

The last few months have, however, placed a damper on Kashmiris’ optimism. Renewed protest demonstrations, strike calls, and repeated scenes involving young boys throwing stones at security forces (as a mark of protest against the presence of Indian forces in Kashmir) are a fresh threat to the education system and led to school closures across the valley. Since June more than 60 people have been killed during anti-India protest rallies, including young people shot dead by Indian security personnel. Buoyed by public support, several political parties have launched a “quit Kashmir” movement asking India to give up its claim on Kashmir. They have said that strikes and protests will continue until India leaves Kashmir.

Teachers find themselves caught in the middle. The Indian government requires school teachers to ensure attendance even during strikes or they may be faced with dismissal, but observers say that the current situation throws up serious obstacles to obeying that order.

“During strike calls, restrictions on the movement of people are also imposed by the government in an effort to stave off protest demonstrations,” explained Bashir Ahmad Dar, a former official who has served in the education department. “And then there is also the problem of the non-availability of public transport during strikes and curfew restrictions.”

After remaining shut for 100 days, schools in Kashmir Valley reopened on 27 September with students and teachers given free passage by security forces despite curfew and restrictions in many parts.

However, attendance was thin against the backdrop of hard-line Hurriyat leader Syed Ali Shah Geelani’s call to parents not to send their children to schools and colleges.