



# CLAWS

## Education and Peace Building in Kashmir

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*Since War begins in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defence of peace must be constructed (UNESCO Constitution, 1945)*

The World Bank Development Report in 2011 declared education as the most crucial aspect in peace building. In conflict situations, security and political issues gain dominance in the development agenda and education acquires a back seat. While the above-mentioned aspects are important, education could play a vital role in fostering peace in the conflict-ridden regions. Maria Montessori, a famed educator had very rightly said in one of her public talks:

*“Those who want war prepare young people for war; but those, who want peace, have neglected young children and adolescents so that they are unable to organise them for peace.”*

Education is vital for transforming the current, dominant culture of violence. These efforts should be directed towards children and youth to give them an alternative picture to war and violence that in turn would avoid relapsing into conflict. It will equip them with the skills, which would inculcate human values, respect and tolerance towards the other sex, religion and culture. The value system in education was recognised at the World Declaration on “education for all”, which also identified the need to promote liberal approach towards life.

### Kashmir's Story

Kashmir has been scarred by nearly two decades of conflict; almost an entire generation has grown amidst violence punctuated by guns, armed men, regular frisking and curfew. Violence can have a detrimental impact on the child psychology. “Inshallah Kashmir” a documentary by Ashwin Kumar, which has been widely acclaimed for presenting various facets of insurgency in Kashmir describes this particular instance where few children from a village were replicating a curfew, the like they often witness in their environment. When probed, they had no idea why this curfew was being executed.

The stone pelting incident of 2010 signalled the brimming frustration amongst the disillusioned and restive youth who have never seen a peaceful valley before. Lack of employment opportunities, prospects of a bleak future as well as a sense of lost roots and cultural values has bred anger amongst them. A contributory factor is the flawed education system, which does not stress on children's “social, moral and humanistic” aspects.

Neerja Mattoo, a renowned academician and journalist in Jammu and Kashmir, has expressed grief over the devastated state of education in the state while citing its egalitarian and secular features in the past. Today, children have no recollection of a shared history and harmony which prevailed amongst diverse communities of

Kashmir in the past. She said, “If the children do not find it in their textbooks, neither in their associations, it's naturally going to be an insular experience of education”.

In absence of ethics and values based education in “normal schools”, teachers and trainers resort to Quranic teachings as a resource for moral values to students. In fact, the Ministry of Human Resource Development had released funds under the scheme to promote quality education for modernising 362 Madrasas in three districts of Jammu and Kashmir namely Kulgam, Pulwama and Sri Nagar. Though there have been allegations that the state government has embezzled funds, there are hardliners who have refused the funding altogether under this scheme citing it as an attack on the religious institutions and an attempt to malign the separatist movement.

This shows how the educational institutions are susceptible to the political contours of J&K. Various political groups have vested interests in disrupting the peaceful environment in Kashmir, thereby causing delay in state board examinations or suspending classes held in schools which inadvertently stifles the confidence amongst students. Later, they find themselves incapable of matching the standards for career and higher education opportunities that exist in the world outside Kashmir.

Education can also exacerbate conflict. Often the State and its ideology seep into the education curriculum. In Pakistan, the State controlled education system offers no room for critical questioning and analysis. The teachers too have no choice but to follow the curriculum to the letter. The syllabus presents history in a selective manner where India is clearly represented as the “other”, albeit different from the victim, more righteous Pakistan. A quote from the Class XI textbook in Pakistan reads, “Social equality means that there should be no discrimination and difference in society based on race, colour or region, which reduces people to second class citizenship, for example, the kind of discrimination against Muslims in India and Blacks in Europe”. This kind of a statement completely fails to acknowledge the kind of atrocities and racial profiling carried out against religious minorities in Pakistan. According to US diplomatic cables leaked by wiki leaks, British Muslims are sending their

“problem child” to madrasas and schools in POK. These children are at the risk of being recruited by various terrorist groups. Most of the suicide bombers in Afghanistan are products of highly radicalised madrasas being run in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region of Pakistan. If this religious extremism seeps into the educational infrastructure of J&K, it would prove to be a serious menace.

Saudi Arabia is already pumping money in Kashmir to promote the Wahabi ideology through university, madrasas and schools. The intelligence bureau has confirmed that money is being pumped through illegal hawala channels in the name of charity (zakat). These institutions, while offering no room for gender equality or critical questioning, tend to promote fundamentalist attitudes. Many people in the region study at these institutions due to absence of alternatives. Uneven distribution of education is also known to enhance conflict. Ladakhi, Gujjar, Bakerwal and other tribes have expressed grievances over the growing illiteracy rate amongst their communities, thus rendering the state government approach as non inclusive.

### Schools as Safe Haven

As Brock Utne points out *“It is of no help if the subject matter taught is of critical nature selected to further democratic values and the character formation of individuals if the methods used to convey the subject matter are authoritarian, do not engage students, and do not appeal to their emotions”*. Several schools have been destroyed, mostly by militants, in the 23-year long insurgency. Security Forces too had occupied a few schools when deployed to fight militants in the rural areas. This led to schools being run in camps and tents. Militarising schools has a negative psychological impact on children and is not conducive to their functioning. The dropout rates are highest amongst girls due to actual or perceived violence. Lack of higher education institutions also leads to frustration. Those who cannot afford to continue their education outside Kashmir are sucked into militancy more easily. Farooq, a local schoolteacher, had this to say: *“Here in Kashmir, it is different because the parents cannot reprimand or guide their children. We are scared they might just run off and join some terrorist groups or commit suicide.”* This is indicative of a very serious ground reality.

Kashmir is home to several tribes, each having its own set of values, culture and language. Gujjar and Bakerwal community have already expressed anguish over the state government's negligence to provide basic education. Similarly, several poor groups in Ladakh, who can only speak in Ladakhi find the language barrier very challenging since most of the classes in schools are held in Urdu or Hindi. To counter this, a model being run in schools of Assam can be replicated in Kashmir. In several backward areas of Assam, the classroom language is Bodo, atleast till the primary level. This can boost the confidence amongst children.

### A Way Forward

Various civil society groups and NGOs are already involved in imparting value and ethics based education in the classrooms. Separate training modules have been designed for teachers to equip them to engage with students through dialogues and role plays. Sports can be used as an intervention to impart life skills to students in Kashmir. This model has already been tried and tested in the naxal districts by UNICEF and has proved to be quite successful in integrating vulnerable students into the mainstream society. Yoga and meditation could indeed prove very helpful in reducing the stress levels amongst students. Local media is very important in shaping perceptions in this region; therefore flagging the issue of peace education will bring this agenda back on the mind map of the communities as well as the state government.

One of the beneficiaries of the training program for peace education run by The Global Education and Leadership Foundation says, *"The situation in Kashmir is such that it has completely closed our minds to new thoughts and solutions. This initiative has opened a new window for us and given us a space to discuss ideas, expressing our honest opinion, learning to solve problems and staying positive"*. The religious texts and their original meaning could specifically be highlighted in the curriculum. Similarly, instances of resorting to settling disputes through peaceful means in the local culture can be incorporated in the curriculum.

### Role of Women in Peace Education

The UN Resolution 1325 has recognised the importance of gender in peace and security concerns. Often textbooks tend to perpetuate gender biased stereotypes which leads to gender inequality. It consists of male perspectives and male achievements which promote the idea of female subordination while also qualifying it as unquestionable and unchangeable. The portrayal of women as passive recipients of the welfare schemes and the developmental initiatives and not active contributors in peace building leads to their lack of political participation.

More so the access to education for girls and women in Kashmir is determined by the political situation and the right to education and their bodies is determined by external forces. Various terrorist factions including Dukhtaran-e-Millat (a pro separatist women's group in Kashmir) have coerced women to stick to the dress codes as prescribed by them. In a particular instance from "A story of women's college in Kashmir" by Neerja Mattoo underlines the horror that awaited the deviants-

"A man with a stick was lying in wait outside college waiting to hit any girl whose head is not covered"

Women, especially in conflict situations, display high dropout roots due to sexual harassment in public spaces as well as within the school compounds, the situation being worse in rural areas. Therefore, only numerical growth of female teachers is not the solution, they need to be trained to be able to reflect on "concepts of freedom, responsibility, diversity, democratic participation, tolerance and respect." Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain, a renowned feminist and educator had suggested that "the ultimate purpose of education is not to find a job but realisation of the fullest developmental potential as human being, which is why women have as much right to education as men".

Dr. Susheela Bhan, a Kashmiri Pandit, runs ethics and values based education in 200 government schools in the backward areas. On my personal interaction with her, she

suggested that it is the students from the rural areas who are most prone to militancy. Therefore engaging with these strata of the Kashmiri society is the need of the hour. Literacy for women is an important key to improve health, nutrition, education in the family. Once emancipated through education, they can be active contributors in peace.

### How can Army act as a facilitator?

As mentioned above, several schools have been destroyed in the conflict, especially in the rural areas. The Indian army is already involved in re-establishing schools in such areas under Operation Sadbhavana. To propagate the idea of ethics and values, such schools can follow the revised curriculum and teacher training methods based on peace education. These schools can liaise with various civil society groups and NGOs already working on value based education in the region to establish a sustainable model. A commanding officer in the region can hold career counselling sessions for locals in the area to inform them of the opportunities that exist for them outside Kashmir with respect to their qualifications. Since Army is not a permanent constitution in Kashmir, the onus of education and development must however rest with the state government.

Peace building is a more transformational agenda than just short term measures in the aftermath of conflict; the latter can only exacerbate conflict and add to the already restive nature of the State. Therefore reconstructing the education system in Kashmir should be given the highest priority. In the areas where it is deployed, the Army could facilitate the above process.

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