

NOTES AND COMMENTS

GUJJARS OF JAMMU AND KASHMIR (J&K): INSIGHTS INTO THE EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES IN SCHOOLS IN J&K

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to identify challenges faced by Gujjars, a tribal community of Jammu & Kashmir in accessing educational facilities. Gujjars are known for their pastoral habits and have often remained on the margins of the society in the state. This paper intends to present an outlook of the educational and infrastructural scenario in the government schools attended by the children of the Gujjar Community. Gujjars unlike nomadic Bakarwals of Kashmir valley live in settled communities. However, despite their permanent dwellings at certain areas in the state of Jammu & Kashmir, Gujjars are struggling to progress in the educational domain.

Introduction

Gujjars in Jammu & Kashmir live a sedentary life style. They are based mostly in the hilly areas and rear buffalo, cow, horse, sheep or goat. Some have taken to farming as their occupation. Gujjars unlike the Bakarwals (who constitute a nomadic group migrating from one province to another with their cattle) migrate from their dwelling habitats to green pastures in summers for rearing their cattle and with the start of winter, get back to their dwelling places.

Insofar as their origin is concerned, it remains largely unanswered (Singh, 2003). There are many opinions about their origin but there is no consensus on any. There is no single theory that most of the theorists support. Some mention their origin as outsiders; and some believe them to be of Indian origin. In most of the writings, it is mentioned that they came to India in the wake of invading Huns in the 5th Century. Huns

were believed to be a nomadic group who largely migrated to Europe, but some among them migrated to Central Asia [including the Gujjars in India] (Singh, 2003).

Rahi (2007) mentions that Prof. Abdul Gani Shashi after doing a detailed review of the Arabic and Persian history found that Gujjars share common culture with the Baduo tribe of Arab. He further mentions that Gujjar tribe along with the Baduo tribe is associated with the Khizir tribe. The word Khizir changed into Garz, then to Garzar and finally to Gujjar.

Warikoo (2000) mentions that the most prevalent theory about the origin of Gujjars is that they were inhabitants of Gurjistan a territory that lies between the Black Sea, Caspian Sea and Caucasian mountain range. Because of factors mainly demographic, social, economic and political, a section of these inhabitants migrated towards east through Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia. They crossed over to Sulaiman Pass and entered into the Plains of the Indus Valley. From there, they migrated southward and finally occupied the areas of Gujarat and Kathiawar.

Dress, Language and Economic Status of Gujjars of J&K

Gujjars of Jammu and Kashmir have a distinct dressing style for both men and women. Gujjars mostly wear traditional costumes and jewellery (Din, 2015). The men wear turban with unique style of wrapping which has become an exclusive mark. The young women wear plain suits or suits with bright floral prints. The aged women wear plain suits. They also wear 'Topi'. Gujjar women are fond of wearing jewellery.

In Kashmir Administrative Division, Gujjars speak Gojri or Pahari. Gojri is also known as Gujari and the language belongs to the Rajasthan group of Languages (Gupta & Beg, 2012). With their presence in other parts of the country and interaction with other communities, the people of this community have also developed fluency in other languages such as Urdu, Hindi, Pastho, Kangri, Dogri and Pahari.

Gujjars of Jammu & Kashmir were socially and economically deprived people who were not integrated in the mainstream regional culture and social status (Shahbaz, 2015). Gujjars in Jammu & Kashmir live in abject poverty. The disadvantaged group lacks most of the basic facilities like proper sanitation, balanced food, health facilities, etc. The problem arises because of their abject poverty, where their focus is on earning daily bread. In this process they do not maintain a hygienic way of living. According to Rafiq (2014), they have low levels of standard of life as they cannot afford to have basic facilities of life to maintain minimum standards of

modern existence. She further writes, because of low income, they cannot afford to have good food, good education and better health facilities.

A study conducted by Handu (1977) revealed that Gujjars continued to live under the most unhygienic conditions. Their houses are not yet on scientific lines due to their mental backwardness. They use their houses for their own accommodation as well for the accommodation of their cattle. It is an indicator of health deterioration and they also suffer from Asthma, Cold and Bronchitis. A similar study conducted by Lidhoo (1987) reveals that Gujjars are living in most unhygienic conditions.

Educational Status of Gujjars of J&K

Education plays a vital role in the development of a nation or the development of community. Education functions as a key to the human/community progress and can aid social change. However, in India there are certain communities that are deprived of educational access. They face discrimination at various educational levels too. These deprived and marginalized communities that form a major portion of population are Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes. Although several programmes, schemes and incentives have been directed for their upliftment, still these communities lag behind in education. Among the Scheduled Tribes, one such community is Gujjars residing in Jammu & Kashmir.

Out of the twelve Scheduled Tribes (STs) in Jammu & Kashmir, Gujjars form the most populous tribe with a population of 763,806, forming 69.1 per cent of the total ST population (Census, 2001). The overall literacy rate of the STs in Jammu & Kashmir is 37.5 per cent as per 2001 Census. This is much lower than the national average of 47.1 per cent aggregated for all Scheduled Tribes. Male and female literacy rates in Jammu & Kashmir (48.2 per cent and 25.5 per cent respectively) are much below as compared to those recorded by all Scheduled Tribes at the national level (59.2 per cent and 34.8 per cent). Further disaggregation of data shows that the literacy rate of Gujjar males and females represent 31.3 per cent and 20.4 per cent respectively (Census, 2001).

The literacy rate in the State of Jammu & Kashmir has massively increased in the past three decades. But from the above data, it is seen that Gujjars continue to be the most educationally backward community of Jammu & Kashmir.

Literature Review

There is a dearth of literature regarding educational backwardness of Gujjars in Jammu & Kashmir. There are some studies which though not

directly focus on the education of Gujjars, draw a link with the conditions of other Scheduled Tribes in India and the similarity of conditions therein. Thus the literature survey includes both the studies: one focusing on the Scheduled Tribes in general and the other studies focusing on the Gujjar tribe of Jammu & Kashmir.

Sujatha (1987) while focusing in her study on the enrolment pattern, existing facilities, extent of absenteeism, parental attitude, aspirations towards educating their children, found that in spite of the efforts of both Central and State Governments, progress in tribal education is slow when compared to others.

Sharma (1977) while discussing the educational scenario of the tribal areas in the country has rightly commented that the tribal areas stand at a much lower level in terms of literacy and enrolment of school-going children as compared to the other areas. In a similar way, Gujjars of Jammu & Kashmir are no exception.

Ganai (1981) conducted a comparative study of educational development and social awakening on Gujjars and non-Gujjars. The study reveals that non-Gujjars are better in literacy level than Gujjars. The study also reveals that in almost all districts of the valley where Gujjar population exists, the participation of Gujjar boys and girls at the elementary and primary school stage is almost insignificant.

Various reasons are attributed for the educational backwardness of Gujjars in Jammu & Kashmir. Shah (1970) attributed educational backwardness to poor economic conditions, seasonal migration and long distance from schools. He found that it is the poor economic condition that pushes them to the fringes. A similar view has been put forward by Abrol (1988) as he mentioned that inadequate incentives was one of the reasons responsible for educational backwardness of Gujjars. The other reasons are economic backwardness, migratory habits, illiteracy among parents, less mobile schools and communication gap.

Lidhoo (1987) attributed their educational backwardness to their ignorance and under-valuing education. Further, he mentions that they are so ignorant that they avail least benefits from government in terms of concession and incentives like interest-free loans, subsidized agricultural equipments and free educational access etc.

Report of Socio-Economic Surveys of Gujjars and Bakarwals of Jammu & Kashmir (1969) is based on the survey conducted in Jammu province but its findings have been generalized in the case of Kashmir Province. In this report, the educational backwardness of Gujjars has been

attributed to their economic backwardness and their living in inaccessible areas.

Wani (1992) in his study tried to find out the causes of low literacy/educability among Gujjars and found that 98 per cent of teachers and 78 per cent of Gujjar parents are of the opinion that poor economic conditions of Gujjar is the root cause for educational backwardness in particular and overall backwardness of Gujjar community.

In most of the cases the blame of being educationally backward is laid on parents and their children. In schools, the administration blames the students and their parents for not sending their children to schools. However, very less is reported about the weaknesses and imperfections that are present at administration level. At the same time, not much has been written about the facilities provided in these schools that lie on papers only. The administration fails to accept the imperfections on their part.

The study reveals that only a few incentives and facilities are provided in Government schools. It looks into how these facilities play a vital role in retention of potential drop-outs and/ or how this helps in increasing enrolment of children belonging to the disadvantaged groups. Although incentives to individuals or schools are not sufficient in themselves, they do enhance children's access to quality education. Moreover, it could be necessary and useful in some situations like the first generation learners (Ramachandran et al., 2007). However, if these facilities are provided in the true spirit to disadvantaged classes or a group who are not able to bear the cost of education, it would be a big help though not sufficient. Their struggle and focus would not be divided between providing food and clothing or to educate their children.

Objectives of the Study

The broader aim of this paper is to identify problems that Gujjars come across in availing educational facilities particularly uniforms, books, separate toilets for boys and girls, drinking water, scholarships, etc. in schools.

In government run schools, except for separate toilets and drinking water facilities which are common to every school, whether these facilities are provided to children who belong to economically weaker families is studied and a comparative assessment has been made.

Since lack of educational facilities puts them at risk of leaving schools, whether the existing conditions are increasing dropouts and further lowering their already vulnerable socio-economic status is also investigated.

Data Source and Research Methodology

The research was done in Kashmir Administrative Division because of the reason that Kashmir Administrative Division has low literacy rate as compared to the other two Administrative Divisions i.e. Jammu and Ladakh. In Kashmir, District Kulgam was selected. The reason for selecting this District lies in the fact that this district has been recently carved out from District Anantnag in 2007 and very few studies have been conducted there. In district Kulgam, block D.H. Pora was selected for the study because the block consists of the highest Gujjar population in the district. Four villages that were Gujjar dominated were selected from D.H. Pora through purposive sampling. This technique of sampling was chosen because of the difficult terrain of the research area. Lastly, one school was selected from each village, to know the educational facilities provided to Gujjar students. Fifteen families were selected from each village. The total number of families visited was 60. The selection of families was again based on purposive sampling. The reason for selecting these families was to know the responses of parents regarding the facilities provided in these schools.

Various tools were administered for collection of data through primary sources. This included Questionnaires, Interview Schedule, Observation and Case Study. Data were collected from in-depth interviews in order to get the view points and perceptions of heads of the schools, teachers, parents and community leaders/influential persons. To supplement the research with more information, participants' observation and indirect informal conversation techniques were also used in the research area. Secondary data were also collected from school records regarding enrolment, school facilities, absenteeism, teacher-student ratio, infrastructure, etc. Three types of Questionnaires were used, these are:-

- Questionnaires for Principals
- Questionnaires for Family Heads
- Questionnaire for Local Leaders

Limitations of the Study

Accessing the School

As the research was undertaken during the month of October, a month when the exams are over and the teachers are busy with preparing results and children were taking a small unofficial break, initially the principals were not able to give much time because of their busy schedule. And

only a few children were seen to be present in the school in the initial days. However, after discussing with them the time limitation of the study, most of them cooperated. Moreover, meeting regularly with teachers, community leaders and parents played a vital role in building trust among them.

Accessing the Parents/Family Heads

In many cases, the parents were not ready to talk with the researcher because they thought that providing information to anyone who comes into their locality does not result in any kind of benefit in their lives. At many places, the family heads were not willing to provide any information because they thought the researcher was from government organization and will take legal action against them for not sending their children to schools.

Time

Due to the paucity of time the research was not carried out extensively in all of the blocks of the district Kulgam.

Difficult Terrain

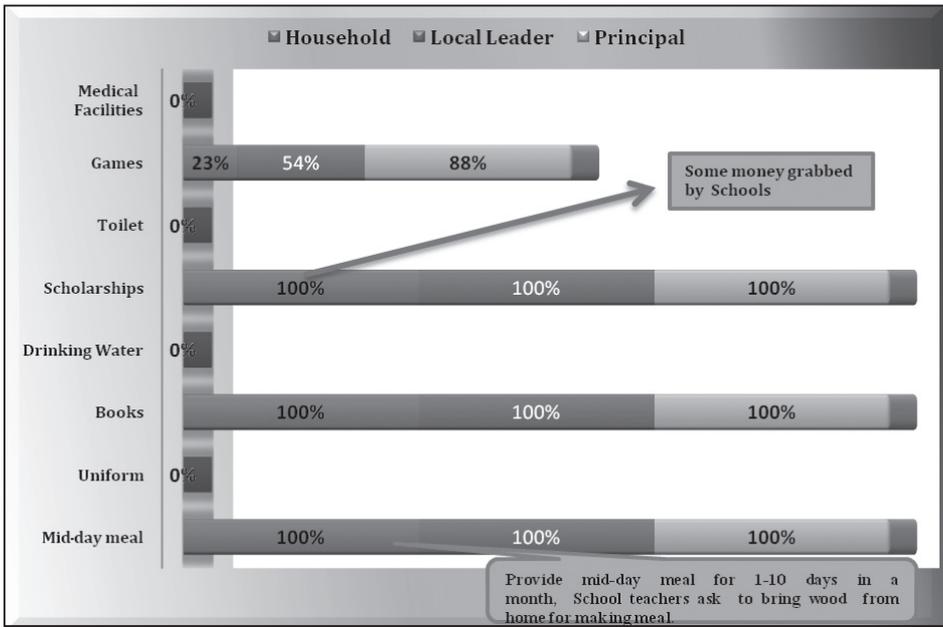
The research area was located in the hilly region and because of this reason there were difficulties in visiting every family in a particular period of time. The other associated problem was ‘scattered houses’ in each village and the terrain between them had difficult contours.

Major Findings during Field Survey

The issue of incentives and facilities was discussed with the stakeholders and their responses were collected. The stakeholders included parents of children (enrolled in these schools), teachers and the local leaders, mainly Sarpanch or influential persons of the locality. The responses towards these incentives and facilities were captured in the form of graph as seen below:

From the graph it can be seen that at the ground the reality is different. Most of the basic facilities provided in government schools do not reach the students who are economically disadvantaged. The graph reveals that most of the facilities mentioned are missing in the schools. Only a few facilities are provided in these schools at elementary level. The facilities that are present and those missing are briefly discussed below.

Figure 1: Facilities Available in Four Schools of D.H Pora Block of District Kulgam



Source: Field Work, 2013

With regard to the first-aid facility, the interviewed respondents, constituting parents, local leaders and principals (mentioned above already) told that there is a complete absence of medical facilities in schools. There is no first-aid facility in these schools. Other medical facilities in the form of medicines too are not available. It was also seen that there is no health centre in these villages where the Gujjars reside.

Like medical facilities, drinking water and toilet facilities are also not present in these schools. All the respondents i.e. parents, teachers and local leaders reported that these facilities are not available in these schools. There are no toilets in these schools; the ones which are present are not functional. Separate toilets for boys and girls even non-functional ones were not seen in any school.

With respect to games, 23 per cent of parents reported that the facility is available in schools; however, at the same time, parents reported that teachers hardly teach their wards any game. In most of the schools children play games (like cricket and volley ball) on their own. The local leaders (54 per cent) reported that games are played at schools. About 88 per cent of the principals mentioned that sufficient amount of time is provided to children for playing games in schools. However, among all the schools

that were visited, it was seen that the schools neither had any provision of Physical Education Teacher nor specified hours for physical activity such as playing games. The games were played by the children during their lunch break. The teachers were seen to enjoy their lunch break rather than teaching them any game. This shows a disjuncture between the awareness of the importance of the games among teachers and local leaders and the children's intrinsic interest in games that need to be cared for.

On Scholarship and Mid-Day Meal, all the respondents i.e. parents, teachers and local leaders reported that these schemes prevail in the schools. However, there are varied opinions of parents, teachers and local leaders about the Scholarships and Mid-Day Meal facilities. There is difference in opinion about what prevails in reality and what is in paper. It was reported by all the parents that only a part of the actual amount of scholarship is given to each child. Children never receive their full share. A good amount of this scholarship is taken by persons who handle scholarship matters. The respondents reported that it is either teachers of the schools or the administrative personnel that squander or misuse the money.

Regarding the Mid-Day Meal, objectivity seemed lost. The objective of enhancing the enrolment, retention and increased attendance through this scheme seems to be obscured. The reason lies in the fact that the scheme of Mid-day Meal does not serve the needy. Panda (2010) in his study shows that there is a correlation between the Mid-Day meal served in schools and enrolment in the schools. The study finds that the catalytic role of the Mid-Day meal cannot be undermined in overcoming the problem of enrolment and regularity in attendance.

However, all the respondents (parents) reported that the Mid-Day Meal is served only for a few days in a month which extends to a maximum of ten days. The parents blamed teachers and school staff for making money out of it. The parents reported that the quality of the food is not good too. One more issue reported by all parents was that the students were asked to bring wood from home or collect it from nearest forests for cooking meals (Mid-Day Meal).

Teachers blamed the administration for untimely supply. The teachers mentioned that there is always a late supply of material for Mid-Day meal. Even if the purchase was made by the teachers from their own money, there is delay in the release of money by the administration.

In the case of uniforms, all the respondents (parents) told that this facility is a paid facility and is not free in schools. In order to avail this facility,

the students were asked to pay the cost of uniform. The teachers denied this allegation. The local leader had no idea of it.

However, in the case of books, all the respondents (parents) mentioned that this facility is provided free of cost in school. Though some of the family heads reported untimely distribution of books, all of them reported that other than untimely distribution, there was no other issue.

Recommendations and Conclusion

It has been found from the survey that lacuna exists in the system that needs to be addressed. These flaws need to be redressed both at administrative level as well as at ground level. Accountability on the part of administration, teachers and parents would help to overcome the existing flaws. Unless the importance of delegating one's responsibilities is not understood properly by administrators, teachers and parents, a solution to the above problems would not be met.

A shift in focus i.e. from teachers to administration is needed in relation to accountability. When any question was raised on the issue of administrative incompetence, the teachers were considered the culprits. The higher authorities were never questioned. Their incompetency too passes on to teachers.

Involvement of local leaders and parents in supervision process is another way to improve educational facilities. A democratic form of supervision will help to upgrade school practices in the context of local needs. The local leaders or influential persons can help in supervising the administration too. Press, especially the national press, should take initiative in reporting these issues.

Frequent parent-teacher meetings on regular basis in schools would help in improving the educational services too. This would help in gauging the progress of students as well as the schools. More importantly, it would help in demarcating the main problems and outlining the solutions. However, for organizing parent-teacher meeting, the availability of parents needs to be emphasized over the availability of teachers.

With regards to squandering of the incentives/facilities, a separate monitoring committee needs to be constituted in each school. The members of this committee should include parents and teachers only. The authority should be vested equally in the hands of both stakeholders.

The above-laid suggestions are envisaged to lessen the challenges that Gujjar children face in availing the facilities/incentives in these schools.

These suggestions are also seen as a way to reduce the burden of parents in educating their children and helping this community as a whole in making progress in educational domain.

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