Challenges for the government school teachers during COVID-19 and tribal conflicts/feuds in Shikarpur district, Sindh, Pakistan

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Abstract

COVID-19-related restrictive measures and the re-opening of educational institutions have created challenges for teachers in areas of Pakistan that are ridden by tribal conflict. Drawing from 17 qualitative interviews with 17 male teachers from the conflict-affected Shikarpur district during the COVID-19-related school closures, this paper reports on challenges teachers faced in maintaining teaching and learning. The narratives reveal that tribal feuds had a more severe impact on children's education than the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, or by the government's preventive policies. These policies included school closures, which caused a year-long loss of learning. Most of the teachers and students were struggling to recoup their losses through supplementary instructional time, but in areas that suffered from tribal conflicts, generations of villagers had long been deprived of the right to education.

Key Words

COVID-19 pandemic, challenges, school teachers, tribal feuds

Introduction

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in December 2019, every sector, including education, has been disturbed (Khoso and Noor, 2021). School closures globally impacted the education of about 1.6 billion learners (Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021). Children were deprived of normal schooling (Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021) in all parts of the world, and governments put stringent measures, such as standard operating procedures (SOPs), in place at educational institutions to prevent the spread of the virus (Daniel, 2020). A growing body of research has emerged that assesses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021; Sintema, 2020). These assessments focus broadly on government policies related to social distancing, wearing masks, and restricted physical movement. The restrictions on physical mobility and social distancing disrupted conventional educational practices.

The re-opening of educational institutions when restrictions were relaxed has created new challenges and new SOPs relating to social distancing, wearing masks, hand-washing, and sanitisation (Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021). Researchers have examined the public's awareness of the disease and required post-COVID-19 preventive measures (Nicholas *et al*., 2020), including procedures in the education sector (Zhao and Watterston, 2021; Kim, Yang and Lim, 2021). However, information on educational practices during the COVID-19 pandemic in contexts affected by tribal conflicts are scarce, especially in terms of the intersecting impact of the two crises—COVID-19 and the tribal conflicts—on teachers' practices. This is particularly significant because teachers' and students' educational experiences during conflicts are linked to overall political governance in the region (Burde *et al*., 2017).

Education is generally believed to be a source of peace and reconciliation (King, 2013), and teachers play an important role in mitigating the impact of emergencies and maintaining the provision of education. Many regions in the world are currently experiencing conflicts (Pherali, 2019) and, like Pakistan, they are simultaneously facing health crises, most recently COVID-19. This makes understanding the ways teachers cope with emergencies particularly important.

The Shikarpur district, which is located in the north of Pakistan's Sindh province, provides an opportunity to understand the relationship between education, COVID-19, and tribal conflicts, using a political economy lens. Education programmes, budgeting, and the appointment and transfer of teachers in the district are influenced by the political and economic interests (Hasan, 2020a, 2020b) of various actors. There also are broader social and political issues that impact the Shikarpur district's education system and teachers' practices (Novelli *et al.*, 2014).

Sindh province, which has 29 districts, is the second most populated province in Pakistan. The population in 2017 was 47,886,051 (Khoso and Khaskheli, 2022). In 22 of the 29 districts in Sindh, 1,566 tribal clashes were reported between 2010 and 2014, including 217 in the Shikarpur district. In these conflicts, 2,301 people were killed, including 160 women and 45 children, and 3,697 were injured (Idress, 2018). Hundreds of clashes among tribal groups have been reported in Shikarpur since 2014, but reliable current data is unavailable. These conflicts have damaged not only the local economy but also children's education and the important role teachers play. It is not yet known how COVID-19-related government measures have impacted teachers' practices.

This article investigates the challenges teachers encountered in the Shikarpur district due to tribal conflicts and COVID-19-related measures, and the ways they ensured the continuity of children's education. To gain an understanding of teachers' coping strategies and their perspectives about the difficulties faced by children and communities amid the pandemic and tribal conflicts, the researchers conducted interviews with teachers in Shikarpur district.

In 2017, Shikarpur district had a population of 1,233,760, including 598,130 females and 709,388 children and youth from ages 0 to 19. Of the total population, 75 percent lived in rural parts of the district (City Population, n.d.), including the Kacha area (the forested area on both sides of the Indus River), which lies at the centre of the tribal feuds. Shikarpur district has 1,374 public schools, including 190 only for girls; 4,205 teachers, including 899 females; and 151,821 enrolled students, including 53,649 girls. Only 546 of the schools have electricity, 808 a washroom, 760 drinking water, and 783 a protective wall (Sindh Education and Literacy Department, 2020). A 2014 survey revealed that around 21 percent of the district's children ages 6 to 16 were out of school (ASER Pakistan, 2014).

The Shikarpur district has always been a centre of tribal disputes that have impacted every sector of the economy, including education. The region also is notorious for being a haven for dacoits (bands of armed robbers), especially in the Kacha area (Hasan, 2020a). However, Ghotki, Kashmore, and Jacobabad are also caught up in intense tribal conflicts and affected by the dacoits' activities. Forests, bushes, and rough terrain provide protective cover that enables the dacoits to carry out their operations and seek refuge (Hasan, 2020b).

Government measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in schools

In February 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was reported in Sindh province. Sindh was the first province in Pakistan to impose a lockdown, which started on 23 March 2020 (Waseem, 2021), including in Shikarpur district. The lockdown meant shutting down an estimated 43,000 government-run schools, from primary to higher secondary, to prevent the spread of the virus. In August 2020, Sindh Education and Literacy Department (SELD) announced that schools would re-open by mid-September 2020. The SELD prepared safe school re-opening materials to distribute among schools across the province. The material included COVID-19 guidelines, brochures, pamphlets, and training resources for education officials and teachers (UNICEF, 2020). However, it was found that schools were not following SOPs, nor did they have the required protective materials, such as sanitisers, masks, and washbasins (Research and Training

Wing, Government of Sindh, 2021). This meant the teachers in Shikarpur district were facing serious challenges.

Methods

This study draws from data collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with 15 government school male teachers in rural Shikarpur. Interviews also were conducted with two NGO representatives. Due to the tribal nature of Pakistani society, female teachers were not allowed to participate. Some interviews were conducted by telephone because the teachers were not in their schools at the time of the researcher's visit. The researcher had a list of interview questions related to the impact of COVID-19 and tribal conflicts on education and teachers' lives, and their coping practices. The interviewees were asked further questions based on their responses. The interviews were audio-recorded, with participants' consent to use the data anonymously or under pseudonyms for publications. All respondents were selected through snowball and referral sampling (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1989). The data was transcribed from Sindhi into English and then organised under the three main themes: the impact of tribal feuds on education and teachers' practices; the impact of COVID-19 on education and teachers' practices; and teachers' coping practices to mitigate challenges created by tribal feuds and COVID-19 measures. While analysing the data, the above themes were further divided into sub-themes.

Risks and threats to teachers during tribal feuds

Most teachers vividly described the safety issues in their school surroundings. Teacher AllahDad said that, during clashes between tribes and clans, the villagers set fire to schools in the village and stole the furniture. Teachers then stopped coming to school. Most teachers were interviewed after the feud had stopped and differences were reconciled, but teachers from outside of the village feared for their lives and hesitated to return. AllahDad explained:

> The Mahar and Jatoi feud started in 1989 and resulted in the loss of hundreds of lives on both sides. Well, it ended in 2009. But after that, we [locals and teachers] have lived with extreme fear. (Teacher 1)

NGO representatives complained about the hundreds of ghost teachers and schools (nonfunctioning schools that continue to exist only on paper or even if school buildings exist, which are used for other purposes not for educational purpose) in the district, which is a serious issue throughout Sindh province. Schools are on the official record (on papers) and teachers are drawing salaries, but none of them are physically present (Khoso and Khaskheli, 2022). Jamshed described the situation:

> Teachers living in the same villages [where they teach] often do not teach because they fear for their lives, and they also receive threats from people due to their different tribal identities. (NGO Worker 1)

Most teachers reported that they had been traumatised by the tribal clashes and were unable to teach in rural areas, due to the lack of security. Punhal, a teacher in a local school, lamented that his fellow teacher was robbed twice and shot once by robbers. He survived the attack but was paralysed and homebound.

Punhal explained that a tribal feud had recently erupted in a nearby village between two groups of the Shaikh tribe. Six brothers were killed, and the school was closed down. He added that one or two people were kidnapped every second week, and many people in the district had been robbed and killed. These incidents had an adverse impact on teachers' well-being and on their ability to engage in educational activities. Nadir, also a teacher, confirmed the effects of the frequent tribal feuds in the districts.

Impact of feuds on children

One reason for the clashes between tribal groups was reportedly the claim of land. Shahid Shah shared that two groups of the Kharkani tribe had been fighting over a piece of land, which caused one death and many injuries. The conflicting groups often exchanged fire, and teachers and students took shelter in the nearby masjid (place of prayer). Children of both victims and perpetrators often refrained from attending school because they feared further attack or retaliation. For example, the 22 children of the perpetrator tribe had not attended school for around four years. Shah also noted that

> the children of the group which had killed the

man of the other group had to bear the brunt of the murder, because most of their adult male members were hiding from the police in the Kacha area or had been arrested. Therefore, the routine agriculture, livestock, and other dealings were the responsibility of their children. (Teacher 2)

It was reported that some of the families had no male members, only children and women, and children as young as 12 years old were carrying guns to ensure their and their families' safety.

The Brohi and Kakepota feud, which began in 2013, caused the deaths of more than 30 people. The feud ended in 2021, but the issues have not yet been settled. Most of the men were in hiding to avoid arrest, leaving their children with the responsibility for agricultural work and cattle-rearing, which prevented them from attending school. An NGO worker explained:

> Once a school teacher who was taking care of a local school was killed by an enemy tribe. After his death, the school turned into a donkey yard. Students stopped coming to school for the next ten years, and although another teacher was appointed, the new teacher had no interest in education. Also, children of other tribes left the village. They were hiding along with their adult family members and raising livestock for their livelihood. (NGO worker 2)

Pakistan already has a high ratio of out-of-school children, and most are engaged in child labour (Khoso and Khaskheli, 2022). Tribal conflicts have been the prime cause of out-of-school children, child labour, militancy, and social crimes, but this has not been given much attention in the research. These factors have deprived children of their childhood and basic rights, as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989). These tribal children often join their adults in the Kacha area when they become older, and thus they inherit the legacy of the tribal feuds carried on by the older members of their families.

Fear of COVID-19 or tribal feuds?

In addition to their conventional roles of improving literacy and enhancing the quality of education, teachers could play a positive part in mediating resolution of tribal conflicts, and in supporting and guiding villagers to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic (Khlaif et al., 2021). However, most teachers reported that neither they nor the villagers had any fear of the virus, although all were scared of being killed in the tribal clashes. They were always extra vigilant due to those fears, as Abdul Qayoom explained:

> This pandemic did not matter to us [teachers] and the villagers in the times of feud. We were never worried about the virus. (Teacher 3)

The tribal feuds were nerve-shattering and had caused many deaths, whereas the virus had done nothing to any villager or teacher. Most teachers disliked the government's COVID-19 measures, which had negatively impacted the already dysfunctional education system in rural areas. Most considered the closure of the schools a futile exercise and felt that the pandemic's impact on education could have been minimised if the government had not closed them. This measure was apparently taken to protect children from the virus, but the government meanwhile had failed to protect the children and their education from ongoing violence in the village. For Shah, the impact of the ongoing fighting and the pandemic could have been reduced if the government had taken the right security measures. Arbelo Shar explained:

> During COVID-19, my school was closed for one year, and…it is still closed because the one-room school building was in a dangerous area where Khoso and Shar tribes were fighting. (Teacher 4)

Akbar Indhar explained that the government announced the re-opening of schools, even though the virus was still prevalent. But the schools had been closed and education had stopped even before the COVID-19 pandemic, due to tribal feuds. NGO workers reported that COVID-19 had no impact on teachers' lives and performance; in fact, teachers already had the habit of not teaching in the schools, so they found the pandemic an opportunity to enjoy free holidays.

Interestingly, this study found that teachers did not express their frustration with the feeble education and social systems that deprived children of their right to education, nor did they complain about the government's inability to bring the tribal feuds to an end. The detrimental impact of violence on schools and communities across Sindh province is well known to the government authorities, but no

meaningful attempts have been made to address these problems. Under these conditions, the government's COVID-19 measures did nothing but further weaken the education system in tribal areas. Teachers were not overly concerned about COVID-19 but they were scared of the tribal feuds, which had hampered both their ability to provide education and the local economy (Hasan, 2020a, 2020b).

Challenges created by COVID-19 measures

The teachers' narratives highlight the intersecting challenges of the tribal conflicts and COVID-19. Due to COVID-19, all schools in Sindh Province were closed for six months starting in March 2020. Even though some teachers were present in the school on alternative days after the government announced the re-opening of schools, no teaching or learning occurred. And yet, the government announced that all students would be automatically promoted to the next grades. Altaf noted that

> teachers had nothing to do with the government's policy to promote students to the next grades and submit the reports and results to the relevant authorities. But unfortunately, students did not learn anything in their previous grades. (Teacher 4)

Despite the liberal progression policy in the aftermath of COVID-19, many parents did not send their children back to school, which resulted in a significant number of school dropouts. Some teachers noted that they tried to cover the missed syllabus once the students returned to school, but the students struggled to catch up on learning because of the year-long school closure. The majority of teachers reported that the villagers had little interest in education, even though they had no fear of the virus. School closures due to the pandemic seemed to have facilitated parents' indifference to their children's education. Arbelo explained:

> For most villagers, the closure of the school for any reason [including the virus] did not make a difference, including the loss of an educational year. (Teacher 4)

Some teachers noted that, once schools re-opened, teachers followed SOPs that were received from the district education department. The government did provide the schools with masks, but the villagers were not too concerned about the spread of COVID-19.

Challenges of educating children who were promoted without learning

During the school closures, no provisions were made for online education in rural areas. This led to a significant amount of learning loss, but teachers were not competent enough or they lacked the resources to recover the learning losses. Therefore, for two years, children were promoted without completing the prescribed syllabus. When students were promoted to higher grades, they struggled with the syllabus. Soomro described the situation:

> We even promoted grade one students to grade two; they did not know how to read and write. Without learning and examination, they were promoted to the next grades. So, in grade two they were learning things related to grade one. (Teacher 6)

Teachers reported that students had difficulty coping with the higher level syllabus and that they had to offer them extra teaching and support. They also had to be stricter and more demanding, as most children had lost interest in education after the year-long school closures. One teacher justified this, saying that they had no other option but to be strict and put pressure on students to learn more quickly. They sometimes inflicted corporal punishment, which caused students mental stress, and sometimes caused them to drop out of school.

Like teachers in the Philippines (Talidong *et al*., 2020), the respondents in Shikarpur did not say that they were anxious or under stress because of COVID-19 or the protective measures taken by the government. No teacher openly confessed to using corporal punishment after the schools re-opened, but around 85 percent of children up to age 14 were reported to have experienced corporal punishment in Sindh (Daily Parliament Times, 2022). This research demonstrates that, without appropriate measures to remedy learning losses, teachers could not handle the problem of liberal progression.

Conclusion

Tribal feuds are one outcome of the government's political policies that enable clans and tribes to dominate and control areas of Sindh province. They also prevent the government from operating schools and providing other educational facilities in rural areas. Rather than using education as a tool for peace (Pherali, 2019), it appears that internal (tribal groups) and external (tribal heads, assembly members) political forces are complicit in the failure to provide education in the district. Due to the lack of security, ongoing tribal conflicts, and unthoughtful education policies imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, communities in the district have been deprived of meaningful access to education, and the children have suffered from the loss of learning. It also appears that school closures during COVID-19 were yet another barrier to teachers' professional practice, as the government offered no alternative provision of education in rural areas. Moreover, teachers sometimes misused the policies of school closure, re-opening of schools on alternative days, and social distancing to avoid their professional responsibilities.

Overall, the study reveals that tribal feuds were more threatening and detrimental to education than the risk of contracting COVID-19. The mandatory school closures did adversely impact educational activities, but teaching and learning had long been marred by the uncontrolled tribal feuds. Fuelled by the complex dynamics of the political economy (Novelli *et al*., 2014; Hasan 2020a; Hasan, 2020b), the feuds have taken more lives and created more severe challenges for teachers than the COVID-19 virus. As envisaged by Pherali (2019), the state must protect the education system from external violence and violence within the education system (i.e., corporal punishment). However, the government in this region has failed to fulfil this positive role, and it also is missing from the teachers' narratives.

Author Bio

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