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Article

Parental School Choice in Kashmir: Decisions, Constraints, and Aspirations

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Abstract:

This paper examines parental school choice in Kashmir within a context marked by educational uncertainty, infrastructural unevenness, and shifting social aspirations. Moving beyond dominant rational-choice approaches to school selection, the study investigates how parental decisions are shaped through the interaction of aspirations, structural constraints, and socially embedded perceptions of schooling. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital, the paper conceptualises school choice not as an entirely autonomous decision-making process, but as a socially conditioned practice emerging from historically and contextually situated experiences. The study adopts a qualitative exploratory design and is based on semi-structured interviews with parents across selected educational zones of Kashmir. Thematic analysis was employed to examine how parents negotiate concerns related to safety, proximity, affordability, educational quality, discipline, and future mobility while choosing schools for their children. The findings suggest that parental school choice is deeply shaped by constrained agency, where educational aspirations coexist with economic limitations, uncertainty, and unequal access to institutional resources. Parents frequently perceive schooling not only as a site of academic learning but also as a mechanism for social mobility, stability, and moral formation. The paper argues that school choice in Kashmir must be understood as a socially embedded process shaped by habitus, rather than merely a rational educational preference. In doing so, the study contributes to the sociology of education by extending Bourdieusian analyses of educational decision-making into contexts characterised by prolonged instability and structural uncertainty. The paper further highlights the need for context-sensitive educational policies that recognise the unequal conditions under which parental educational decisions are made.

Keywords: Aspirations, Bourdieu, Habitus, Kashmir, Parent, School

1. INTRODUCTION

In the educational development of children and the setting up of trajectories for future life opportunities, parental school choice plays a significant role. In developed and stable Western societies, substantial research has been carried out (Erickson, 2017; Muralidharan & Sundararaman, 2015) to assess parental school choice and different social factors shaping their choices. However, relatively insufficient attention has been paid to the difficulties faced by parents in making such choices and decisions in areas affected by prolonged political and institutional uncertainty, causing severe educational disruptions. The present study aims to focus on this issue by exploring parental school choice for their children in the region of Kashmir, which has witnessed intense educational disruption over the last three decades due to insurgency and the resulting political instability.

The choice to select a particular school for one's children is not easy. It involves a complex web of considerations such as the reputation of the institution, the parental social background, the ideological framework, the safety of the wards, culture and values, affordability, and academic standards (Gurney, 2018). These choices and considerations in conflict-ridden regions like Kashmir become even more

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complicated. In the context of Kashmir, the protracted political disturbance has led to the formation of conflicting educational ideologies, severe damage to the educational infrastructure, the forced displacement of competent teachers, and the complete disruption of schooling cycles. In view of this, parental school choice in Kashmir can't be reduced to the considerations of simple educational benefits. The problem needs to be explored in the broader socio-political and historical context of Kashmir, where the parental agency itself is constrained.

By employing the French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu's ideas of habitus and capital, the study aims to show that parental school choice is not an independent, logical decision but a socially and historically conditioned, compromised practice. Bourdieu's ideas are used as evaluative instruments to present how parental choices of schools for children in Kashmir are influenced by socio-cultural capital, institutional constraints, financial disparity, and internalised dispositions.

The paper explores how parents express their uncertainty and apprehensions about quality education, affordability, prospects, proximity, and safety when choosing between schools. Based on the interviews, it was observed that the parental choice of schools is significantly influenced by restrained agency, where the aspirations for educational progress are challenged by the long-standing political and institutional uncertainties. Parents normally consider education not merely as a textbook learning exercise but also as a platform for peace, progress, mobility, safety, and moral and cultural formation (Lahoti & Mukhopadhyay, 2019). By employing a Bourdieusian theoretical framework, the study contributes to the field of sociology of education and further highlights the need for context-specific educational policies. Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital, which the researcher has used as a framework to understand the inadequate educational opportunities in Kashmir. Many parents the researcher interacted with during the course of this research shared the lack of quality schools as a barrier to upward mobility for their children, particularly in an area where access to well-developed institutions is limited. The dearth of quality education reflects disparities in institutionalised cultural capital, as access to better schools often requires substantial economic investment or social connections (Bourdieu, 1986).

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE PRESENT STUDY

The literature reviewed explores a conceptual framework in which parental school choice emerges from the interaction of three different processes. First, parents make choices using multiple criteria, including the academic quality of the institution, the reputation of the school, affordability, accessibility, discipline, and safety. Second, these decisions are constrained by unequal resources available to the parents and by the spatial and security conditions surrounding the school environment. Third, parents' aspirations give meaning to their choices, but aspirations are translated into enrollment outcomes only when families possess sufficient capacity to act on them (Mousumi & Kusakabe, 2019).

Accordingly, this study examines parental school choice in Kashmir as a negotiated process involving educational aspirations, available resources, and perceived security. This framework directs attention not only to which schools' parents choose, but also to which schools they would prefer, which alternatives they consider, what prevents them from selecting those alternatives, and how turmoil-related conditions reshape the meaning of a desirable school. It also prevents school choice from being interpreted as a neutral market transaction. Instead, choice is understood as a socially differentiated and security-sensitive process in which families attempt to pursue valued educational futures under unequal conditions.

The question of why parents selected a particular school in the context of Kashmir can be analysed through Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital, and field. Parents' choices are shaped by their own dispositions (habitus), access to economic, cultural, and social capital, and the specific dynamics of the educational field in Kashmir. For Bourdieu, the field is a social space where different interactions and various events are happening. Kurt Lewin has described a 'field' as 'the totality of coexisting facts which are conceived of as mutually interdependent' (Lewin, 1951).

"Capital can be explained in three fundamental forms: like economic capital, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalised in the form of property rights; as cultural capital, which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalised in the form of educational qualifications; and as social capital, made up of obligations ('connections'), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalised in the form of a title of nobility." (Bourdieu, 1986).

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS/AIMS

1. How do parents perceive and negotiate school-choice decisions for their children within the context of prolonged political uncertainty in Kashmir?
2. How do parents' socioeconomic backgrounds, cultural dispositions, and available forms of capital shape their access to and selection of schools?
3. How do perceptions of educational quality, safety, discipline, religious-cultural identity, and institutional accessibility influence parental school-choice decisions?
4. How does the interaction between parental aspirations and structural constraints produce differences between preferred and actual school choices?

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1. Parental School Choice in Kashmir: Decisions, Constraints, and Aspirations

This research explores the scholarship that attempts to make sense of parental school choice as a socially rooted process rather than as a purely distinct selection between competing schools. The literature shows that parents generally

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consider academic achievement, especially school results, school reputation, discipline, safety, accessibility, and the expected social and economic opportunities associated with a school (Bekele & Kenea, 2024; Erickson, 2017). These contemplations are not evaluated under identical conditions. Families across societies differ in their financial capacities, educational knowledge, social networks, mobility, and ability to interpret and use information about schools in their locality. Accordingly, the formal availability of school choice does not inevitably produce an equivalent range of meaningful options for all peoples (Jheng et al., 2022; Saltmarsh, 2025).

4.2. School choice as a multidimensional decision

The reviewed literature contests the postulation that parents choose schools according to a single criterion of academic quality. Parents may consider examination performance of students and teaching quality of a particular school, but these considerations are aligned with school reputation, discipline, religious or cultural fit, peer composition, transport, cost, and perceived safety (Bekele & Kenea, 2024; Erickson, 2017). Safety is itself dynamic. It may include protection from violence, disorder, bullying, unsafe routes to school, and hostile neighbourhood conditions, as well as the presence or absence of institutional security measures (Hailey, 2025). This broader understanding is important for Kashmir, where the meaning of a "*good school*" may include not only educational quality but also physical accessibility of the institution, continuity of instruction, and the perceived capacity of the school to protect children during periods of insecurity in the region.

The decision-making process by the parents is therefore better expressed as a process of prioritisation under conditions of uncertainty in the social environment. A parent may aspire to a school with strong academic credibility but select a nearer or less expensive school if transport is unreliable, household income is limited, or the security environment is volatile. In this sense, school choice is not simply a preference expressed in a market; it is a pragmatic decision made within a set of risks and possibilities in a particular ecosystem.

4.3. Socioeconomic constraints and unequal capacity to choose

Socioeconomic status is one of the important areas reviewed in the literature. Jheng et al. (2022) demonstrates that family socioeconomic location affects how parents exercise school choice, while the wider literature on educational space demonstrates that choice may reproduce rather than diminish social inequality. Families with better economic resources can often access schools situated farther from home, pay tuition and transportation costs, devote time to information gathering, and use social capital to seek advice about school quality. These resources expand the number of schools that are pragmatically available to them.

Ball et al. (1995) explores this process as the operation of "*circuits of schooling*", through which social class shapes the directions families take through the educational space. Reay and Ball (1997) likewise express that working-class families may experience school choice as a vague or controlled process rather than as unrestricted freedom. Although a school may be formally open to all applicants, families do not enjoy the same cultural knowledge, confidence, time, or financial means to steer admission procedures and educational space. Saltmarsh (2025) develops this argument by stressing the "*unwritten ground rules*" through which cultural, social, and economic capital control access to educational goods. From a Bourdieusian standpoint, these resources influence both the preferences families develop and their ability to convert those preferences into actual enrollment results (Yoon, 2020).

This particular perspective is predominantly relevant in the context of Kashmir. The meaningful choice set of a household may be narrowed by income, distance, transport availability, gendered mobility expectations, information asymmetries, and the location of schools relative to areas of insecurity. Thus, differences in parental choices should not automatically be interpreted as differences in educational ambition. Similar aspirations may lead to different school destinations because families possess unequal capacities to act on those aspirations.

4.4. Safety, turmoil, and the Kashmir context

The reviewed Kashmir-focused literature does not directly constitute a body of empirical research on parental school-choice decisions; rather, it provides important contextual evidence about insecurity and educational access. Brännlund et al. (2024) examine children's experiences of insecurity and conflict in Kashmir, while Ilyas (2025) discusses the effects of armed conflict on children's education and the implications for peace education. Taken together, these studies indicate that education in conflict-affected situations is shaped by risks that extend beyond conventional measures of school quality. Safety, psychological security, interruptions to schooling, and the broader effects of violence become part of the conditions under which educational decisions are made.

This contextual evidence suggests that safety should be treated as a dominant analytical dimension in the study of parental school choice in Kashmir, while avoiding the unverified assumption that all parents respond to insecurity in the exactly same way. Some families may prioritise closeness and continuity; others may seek schools perceived as more secure, better resourced, or less exposed to disturbance. Household income and social networks may determine whether such alternatives are accessible. Safety preferences may therefore interact with socioeconomic inequality; families with greater resources may be better able to relocate, arrange transportation, or pay for alternative schooling, whereas financially constrained families may have to remain with the nearest available option of the school.

4.5. Aspirations within constrained choice

The literature also indicates that parental aspirations should not be separated from the structural conditions in which they are formed and pursued. Parents may associate schooling with academic success, social mobility, respectable

employment, cultural continuity, and protection from an uncertain future. However, aspirations do not operate as independent forces. They are filtered through what families know about schools, what they can afford, how far they can travel, and how safe they believe the journey and school environment to be.

A Bourdieusian explanation helps explain this relationship. Habitus shapes what families recognise as a desirable and realistic educational pathway, while economic, cultural, and social capital influence whether that pathway can be pursued (Yoon, 2020). The result is a distinction between aspirational choice and realised choice. Parents may at times express a solid preference for a particular type of school but enroll their children elsewhere because of fees, distance, transport, admission barriers, limited information, or insecurity in the environment. The gap between desired and realised choice is therefore analytically important for understanding parental decision-making in Kashmir.

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1. Research Design

The present study adopted a qualitative exploratory research design based on semi-structured interviews with parents across selected educational zones of Kashmir. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand parents' lived experiences, perceptions, and decision-making processes concerning the schooling choices of their children in the context of political turmoil. Rather than measuring relationships between predetermined variables, the study aimed to explore how parents interpret educational choices, negotiate uncertainties, and make decisions within the particular socio-political circumstances of Kashmir. The complexity of parental schooling choices, which are influenced by personal experiences, social circumstances, and the prevailing political environment, could not be adequately understood through quantitative measures alone. Therefore, an exploratory qualitative approach provided an opportunity to examine these experiences in depth and understand the meanings parents attached to their educational decisions.

5.2. Sampling Technique and Selection of Participants

To ensure diversity in school preferences, educational backgrounds, and socio-economic circumstances, the study employed purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Initially, the researchers attempted to establish contact with parents whose children were enrolled in selected government and private schools across three geographical zones of Kashmir, representing urban, semi-urban, and rural settings. Following several attempts, the researchers were able to establish contact with 36 parents who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study at their convenience.

The selection of thirty-six participants was guided by the exploratory nature of the research, the geographical challenges involved in accessing parents across different locations, and the richness and diversity of the information obtained through the interviews. The adequacy of the sample was considered in relation to the depth of participants' accounts and the extent to which the information generated addressed the research objectives. The three geographical zones were selected because they have historically experienced political instability and disruptions in the schooling of children. Including urban, semi-urban, and rural settings helped capture parental experiences across different geographical and educational contexts.

The participants included both fathers and mothers belonging to different socio-economic and educational backgrounds. Parents whose children were enrolled in both government and private schools were included, as the schooling experiences and educational decisions associated with both categories of institutions were considered relevant to understanding the impact of political turmoil on parental schooling choices. The study did not seek to establish gender-based differences in parental responses. Instead, the perspectives of both fathers and mothers were considered important in understanding how families experienced and responded to educational uncertainty. Similarly, the educational background of parents was not treated as a basis for privileging particular opinions, as both formally educated and less formally educated parents were exposed to the broader political circumstances affecting schooling in the region.

5.3. Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with 36 parents across the selected geographical zones. Of the total participants, 20 were interviewed at their respective homes, while interactions with the remaining 16 participants took place at their workplaces. The duration of interviews varied according to the availability of participants and the circumstances in which the interactions took place. Interviews conducted at participants' homes generally lasted an hour or more, whereas those conducted at workplaces lasted approximately 15–25 minutes.

A common semi-structured interview guide was used for all participants to maintain consistency in the collection of information. The interview guide contained selected questions relating to parental schooling choices, experiences of political turmoil, educational disruptions, and the factors influencing decisions concerning their children's schooling. Follow-up questions and probes were also used whenever necessary to seek clarification and obtain a deeper understanding of participants' responses. Each participant was interviewed once, and the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed the researchers to explore relevant issues and clarify emerging perspectives during the interaction itself.

To ensure contextual clarity and encourage participants to express their experiences comfortably, interviews were conducted in the languages preferred by the participants, primarily Kashmiri, Urdu, and English. Although the researchers used the native language of participants wherever possible, the responses were subsequently recorded in English translation for the purpose of analysis

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and reporting. Particular attention was given to the appropriate selection of terminology and the preservation of the authenticity, contextual meanings, and local experiences conveyed by participants. Field notes were also maintained to document relevant contextual observations and aspects of the interactions. Audio recordings were made after obtaining informed consent from the participants.

5.4. Data Analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach was considered appropriate because it provided a systematic means of identifying, organising, and interpreting patterns of meaning within participants' accounts. The analysis incorporated both inductive and deductive reasoning. While the research objectives provided an initial direction for examining parental experiences and schooling choices, an inductive approach allowed patterns and meanings to emerge from the participants' narratives without restricting the analysis to predetermined categories.

The six phases of thematic analysis were implemented as follows:

1. **Familiarisation with the Data:** The researchers familiarised themselves with the information gathered through interviews and field notes. The interview accounts were examined repeatedly to develop an understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, and responses to the prevailing educational and political circumstances. Field notes further assisted in understanding the contextual dimensions of the participants' accounts.

2. **Generating Initial Codes:** Following familiarisation, the interview data were examined systematically, and meaningful segments of information were identified and assigned initial codes. Particular attention was given to recurring patterns, significant expressions and experiences relating to parental schooling choices, political uncertainty and disruptions in children's education.

3. **Searching for Themes:** The initial codes were subsequently examined to identify similarities, relationships, and broader patterns across participants' accounts. Related codes were organised into potential themes that reflected significant dimensions of parental experiences and decision-making processes.

4. **Reviewing Themes:** The potential themes were reviewed and refined to ensure that they were internally coherent and adequately represented the information contained in the interview data. This process also involved examining the relationship between individual codes, emerging themes, and the overall objectives of the study.

5. **Defining and Naming Themes:** At this stage, the central meaning and distinctive features of each theme were clearly articulated. The themes were defined and named in a manner that reflected their underlying content and relevance to the research questions. Particular attention was given to ensuring that the themes represented the experiences and perspectives expressed by the participating parents.

6. **Producing the Report:** In the final phase, the identified themes were systematically organised and interpreted in relation to the research objectives. Relevant extracts and accounts from participants were used to illustrate the emerging themes, and the findings were presented through an analytical narrative connecting parental experiences with the broader context of political instability and schooling choices in Kashmir.

The analytical process followed an iterative approach, allowing the researchers to move between the interview accounts, initial codes, and emerging themes. The conclusions were developed through a bottom-up analytical approach, with emphasis on understanding participants' subjective experiences within their natural social and educational settings.

5.5. Trustworthiness and Rigour

Efforts were made to maintain the credibility, consistency, and authenticity of the research process. Member checking and engagement with the collected data were considered important in ensuring that the interpretations remained closely connected to participants' experiences. The researchers also maintained field notes alongside the interview accounts to preserve relevant contextual information and support the interpretation of participants' narratives.

Attention was given to the different dimensions of qualitative trustworthiness, including credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was supported through careful examination of participants' accounts and attention to the meanings conveyed during interviews. Dependability was addressed through the use of a common interview guide and a systematic approach to data collection and analysis. Confirmability was considered through continued reflection on the researchers' assumptions and interpretations, while transferability was supported by providing contextual information about the geographical settings and the socio-educational backgrounds of the participants.

5.6. Ethical Considerations

Given the politically sensitive nature of the research setting, particular attention was given to ethical considerations and the protection of participants' identities. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before conducting interviews and making audio recordings. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and their right to withdraw from participation at any stage without adverse consequences. Confidentiality and anonymity were treated as important ethical considerations throughout the research process. Identifying information was excluded from the presentation of findings, and participants' accounts were handled with due sensitivity to the political and social circumstances

of the region. The researchers remained conscious of the potential risks associated with discussing politically sensitive experiences and sought to ensure that participants' contributions were used exclusively for academic research purposes.

5.7. Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

As researchers situated within the Department of Higher Education, Jammu and Kashmir, and working as assistant professors of education at Government Degree College Bandipora, our positionality has been shaped by our institutional affiliations and personal experiences of growing up and studying in schools in Kashmir. Our engagement with this study is guided by an academic commitment to understanding parental schooling choices within the context of political uncertainty and educational disruption. Our familiarity with the region provided an important contextual understanding of the local educational environment, cultural practices, and experiences of political instability.

At the same time, we recognise that our position as researchers familiar with the research setting may have influenced the collection, interpretation, and analysis of data. While our insider position facilitated communication with participants and helped us understand their local expressions and experiences, it could also have introduced preconceived assumptions or subjective interpretations. We therefore remained conscious of the need to distinguish our personal experiences and professional perspectives from the accounts provided by participants. Efforts were made to approach the interviews with openness, maintain reflexive awareness during data interpretation, and give due importance to the individual experiences and perspectives expressed by participating parents. Our primary concern throughout the research process was to understand parental schooling choices as experienced and interpreted by the participants themselves.

6. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

6.1. Limited Access to Quality Schooling: The Gap Between Availability and Acceptability

Educational institutions, especially schools, have been facing formidable challenges in their work for the last three decades in the region, and a lot of schools, more particularly during the nineties and more recently during 2016, have been either burnt or, at times, shifted to safer areas. Choice of schools by a parent cannot be comprehended only through geographical positions of schools. The presence of school within a particular space doesn't satisfy that parents consider these schools as eligible for meeting the needs of their children. This difference between the presence of a school in a particularly local locality and the perceived quality of the school by the parent is an important thread to understand the parental school choice in the region. This particular perspective helps us understand that the problem is not essentially the absence of school but the aspiration of a quality school in the framework of the parent. This dichotomy also underlines the constraints the parents face while exercising the school choices that are made, like financial difficulties, social tensions, etc. Ultimately, the choice of school apparent may not always reflect the parents' most preferred choice and may actually echo a tension between parental aspirations and ground realities. (Georgiadis et al., 2022; Gill et al., 2025). Analysing this relationship can shed light on how parents examine a school and therefore make their choice.

This has resulted in limited options for schools in terms of quality education for parents in the region. It has created a situation whereby parents have no choice but to send their children to nearby schools. These options for schools have, again, predominantly affected the ordinary people of Kashmir. On the other hand, the affluent families were able to send their wards to traditional elite private schools because livelihood constraints and economic circumstances influence parental decisions regarding the schooling of their wards (Dar, 2024).

In downtown Srinagar, Nasir, a mechanic, enrolled his son in a nearby government school due to affordability, but the frequent shutdowns forced him to reconsider. '*He wants to be a doctor*,' Nasir said, '*but I don't know if this school can take him there*.' Despite limited means, Nasir now dreams of sending his son outside Kashmir for higher studies, if peace holds. His hesitance reflects a painful paradox: the aspiration for upward mobility meets the stagnation caused by structural precarity. In Nasir's case, the decision to stay or shift is not just economic. It is emotional, political, and deeply hopeful.

6.2. Safety, Security, and School Choice

Safety and security constitute an important element of parents' decision regarding a school. Parents' understanding of school is also being shaped by their perception of safety and the overall climate of the school and the surroundings. In making a school choice, parents consider various dimensions of safety while considering a school choice (Hailey, 2025). This paper establishes safety as central to the school choice by the parents rather than simply a preference.

One of the most dominant factors that has significantly influenced the parental choice of school in the past in Kashmir is the unceasing atmosphere of insecurity and violence since the inception of armed militancy. During the last three decades, militants have attacked schools' umpteen times, and this has created fear among the parents in the region; this fear is deep-rooted too.

These factors have forced parents to prioritise the safety of their children even if these institutions don't provide better educational opportunities. This also reflects the dilemma that parents in Kashmir have to face while attempting to provide education to their kids. It might give one an understanding of how the initial choices of parents get affected by the turmoil, and how the quality of education in many cases is compromised as parents are left with literally no choice but to opt for a school that is located nearby, even if it lacks basic amenities and facilities. The lack of sports, digital or electronic accessibility, and the dearth of other infrastructural facilities that are integral to any well-functioning school, which give children the opportunity

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to explore and foster other aspects of their personality, may also be part of why they become susceptible to a more radical ideology. During interaction with one of the parents, and the subsequent comment he made.

Intellectual development requires that proper infrastructure and adequate space are available to students so that they have more opportunities for inculcating other skills and talents besides just taking care of their cognitive faculties. The diversity of curriculum and proper infrastructure channelises the energy of the students in different directions rather than just shrinking their cognitive pathways and making it accessible for just one stimulus or input. And this is exactly what was lacking in these schools.

The studies have shown that turmoil-affected areas are often sites of extreme disadvantage in education (UNESCO, 2011). Within these areas, the poor typically fare far worse than others. It was observed during fieldwork that the poorly educated children become even more vulnerable to a particular ideology that is quite antithetical. Since these schools more or less sought submission and commitment to their particular political orientation on emotive grounds rather than fostering critical faculties of the students, they inadvertently or by design kept the pot burning, leading to the worsening of the political situation in the region. This worsening of the situation further disrupted the education of children.

In the upper hills of Pulwama, Shabir Ahmad, a fruit vendor and father of three, chose a school for his children based not on its academic ranking, but on its physical distance from known conflict hotspots. 'I didn't care if it was far,' he explained, 'as long as they didn't have to cross any violent hotspot on the way.' Shabir's eldest daughter, Aamira, walks 3 kilometres every day to reach a school that her father believes offers 'mental peace more than lessons.' To Shabir, the school represents a negotiated space: part haven, part risk calculation, where his children can feel temporarily normal. His decision reflects a broader pattern in conflict areas where safety, rather than educational prestige, becomes the primary determinant of school choice.

The consistent worry shared by different parents was the safety of their children. The safety of the children is a universal priority for all parents. The conversation with one parent would serve as a specimen of the level of fear psychosis that permeates the parents of school-going children in Kashmir: *One usually remains worried until the child returns home safely. Any incidence of violence in and around the school is humiliating and peace-threatening. This directly impacts the education of the children, as we are forced to enroll our children in schools that are located nearby but lack proper infrastructure.*

Another parent expressed the worry that the uncertain situation in Kashmir "*not only affects the education of the children, but it gravely harms their psychological well-being, social development and ability to learn effectively.*"

This clearly gives an indication of the way the education of the children becomes a casualty in the process. Apart from depriving the children of the opportunity to learn in relatively better educational institutions, which is a huge loss in itself, it reduces their learning ability, as one parent put it. Students are denied the opportunity to develop the intellect that could enable them to think critically and not become mere passive receptors of whatever ideology or doctrine is handed down to them.

6.3. Religion, Culture, and School Ideology as Determinants of Parental School Choice in Kashmir

In Kashmir, social conservatism, along with religion and cultural norms, acts as a vital force in upholding society and resistance at the same time (Shah & Mishra, 2021). This conservatism has ebbed somewhat in the last couple of decades. However, the pervasive influence of religion on the lives of Kashmiri people is an undeniable factor. The dynamic interaction of religion and conflict in any society makes the conflict even more volatile. Conflict becomes not only more intractable but also more complicated, compounding the attendant problems that result from it. The education of children is one such attendant problem, and a casualty of the conflict that has become intimately bound up with the fusion of religion and conflict in Kashmir.

During the last three decades of violence in the region, there has been a mushrooming of religious educational institutions in the region. This has added another layer of complexity because these institutions are in high demand. The conversations with some parents highlighted this. During the course of the interaction, the parents shared the sentiment that if given an opportunity, their first choice would be the religious educational institutions in the locality. Parents think that educational institutions based on the Western model are adversely impacting the moral values of the children in these schools, and consequently, their children are losing touch with the cultural ethos of Kashmir. This perception of the parents somewhat ghettoises their children, as it cuts them off from those children who belong to a different faith or sect. The consequent blossoming of these schools, in a way, filled the gap, especially during the nineties, that was created by the almost total collapse of the public education system in Kashmir (Masood, 2019).

These schools were quite widespread across the length and breadth of Kashmir. (Masood, 2019). These schools provided education to Kashmiri children that was disrupted by the collapse of the public education system. This disruption resulted from the continued prevalence of insecurity and the burning down of many schools in Kashmir.

The Jammu & Kashmir government originally banned the Falah-e-Aam Trust on 11 May 1990, and reestablished the ban more vehemently on June 13, 2022, via Order No. 1580-Edu of 2022, directing the closure of its affiliated schools and the relocation of students to nearby government institutions (The Wire Staff, 2022). Conversations with many teachers associated with Falah-e-Aam Trust, as well as with the experts, highlighted yet another remarkable aspect of these schools, i.e. the schools affiliated with Falah-e-Aam Trust were ideologically driven (Government of Jammu and

Kashmir, 2022). These conversations revealed that, besides providing education to many downtrodden children, the ideological orientation of these institutions was deeply tethered to the counter-narrative that had already taken a militant form in the valley. Although these schools did somehow manage to fill the void in the education sector.

The government of the day tactfully tried to co-opt the teachers associated with these institutions into the government schools, thereby attempting to sabotage their ideological force. In this highly charged educational ecosystem, the absorption of teachers from the Falah-e-Aam Trust (FAT) into government schools stands as an intricate and deeply human response to prolonged violence in the region. After the 1990 ban on FAT due to its supposed ideological affiliations, the state machinery faced both a moral and practical dilemma as to what to do with the future of these teachers who had long staffed schools in some of the region's most marginalised areas.

Many of these teachers who were part of these banned schools had taught the students under difficult conditions, navigating curfews, surveillance, and meagre resources. Their absorption within government schools between 2004 and 2012 was not merely a bureaucratic act, but it was an acceptance of their long-standing commitment to education. In areas and houses where education was often the only dream left unbroken, these teachers, by the community, were seen not as ideological actors but as mentors and emotional anchors (Masood, 2019). This development also illustrates how education policy in Kashmir intersects with lived realities, where decisions are not just about governance, but about people, memory, and ideological contestation too.

This ideological force could have worsened the political situation even further. However, this strategy doesn't seem to have worked for the government as it was intended to. The proliferation of these schools was not stopped by this move. It has been observed that their expansion continued to grow even after the absorption of their teachers into government schools. This move was tactical and well-thought-out, yet not much seems to have changed on the ground. In February 2019, the government slapped a ban on these schools and outlawed the Jamat-e-Islamia as an organization (Masood & Tripathi, 2019).

6.4. The Rise of Private Schooling: Insights from Parental Preferences in Kashmir

During the last two decades, there has been a significant increase in the number of private schools in Kashmir. This phenomenon was not something unique to Kashmir. It was part of the political economy that was gaining ground in India during the early years of the nineties. However, in Kashmir, the emergence of these private schools has been deeply interlinked with the malfunctioning of public schools. The private schools, since their inception, have become an important tool for education, especially for the aspirational, middle and upper middle class in the region. A conversation with parent; *Farzana, a widow from Bandipora, sends her only son to a modest private school with limited infrastructure. 'It leaks when it rains,' she said, 'but the teacher listens to my son.' Her decision is rooted in affective trust, not facilities. For Farzana, the teacher's approachability and the school's consistent emotional support system outweigh the lack of material resources.* As a parent navigating trauma and uncertainty, her school choice centres on the interpersonal climate of learning, demonstrating that emotional safety is an underexplored axis in parental decision-making in a troubled zone like Kashmir.

And as far as enrolment in these schools is concerned, people from different segments of society have been enrolling their children in these schools. Experts have argued that the emergence of private schools in the region had various reasons like the children subject to the trauma, insecurity and displacement that come with turmoil are unlikely to achieve their learning potential. Moreover, educational institutions were increasingly under direct attack. All too often, armed groups see the destruction of schools and the targeting of school-children and teachers as a legitimate military strategy. The problem is not just that schools and school-children are getting caught in the crossfire, but that the very places that should provide a haven for learning are viewed as prime targets (O'Malley, 2010). One of the major reasons for the emergence of these schools, however, was the malfunctioning of the government school system in Kashmir. A Father in downtown Srinagar shared his experiences of choosing a school; *Between status and belonging, relatives pushed me to choose a "big" English-medium school across the river; it did feel impressive with good infrastructure, but oddly disconnected as no Kashmiri or Urdu was used during interaction. We chose a low-fee private school with Islamic studies alongside science. Morning dua, Iqbal's poetry, girls having separate seating from middle school onwards conformed precisely to what my wife wanted. What finally convinced me to select this school was how they handle uncertainty: during closures, they sent printed kits via the mosque and called weekly; no grand "online" claims when internet was patchy. Fees upset. I postponed upgrading my shop, but the trade-off feels fair. I still worry about an echo chamber, so at home we mix storybooks, museums, and news. I want her fluent in faith and in code, able to greet her grandmother in Kashmiri and pitch in English.*

Parents in the region are not simply seeing prestige in these private schools, they are negotiating a hybrid ideal, which includes global competence of their children without cultural or religious dislocation (Amatullah & Dixit, 2023). Private schools are chosen by the parents when they offer three things at once: ideological fit (Islamic studies or Rishi–Sufi-inflected ethics alongside critical inquiry), operational reliability amid disruptions and language/gender comfort (English-medium with tolerance for Kashmiri/Urdu; modesty norms like gendered seating). The better future of the children anywhere motivates the parents for greater investment in their education, private schooling paves the way and the same has been found in places also (Galab et al., 2013).

For marginalised and vulnerable households, political tensions could potentially block the path to more secure and prosperous livelihoods. Homes are destroyed, crops

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and livestock stolen, and access to markets is disrupted. The overall effect is to wipe out assets and undermine incentives for poor households to invest in raising productivity, reinforcing a vicious circle of low productivity and poverty. One symptom of that cycle is an increase in child labour. In Angola, household survey research found higher levels of child labour and lower levels of school attendance in conflict-affected provinces. In Senegal, children displaced by conflict were much more likely to be working and to drop out of school (Offenloch, 2010). Most of the families belonging to the poor section of society were either forced to keep their children away from schools or dropped out as they couldn't afford to send them to these schools. Similarly, the education of many children belonging to the poor section of Kashmir society were significantly disrupted during the turmoil period.

Economic calculation linked to poverty, so the argument runs, is part of a wider conflict trap that locks countries into cycles of violence. Because civil war slows growth, and slower growth translates into diminished opportunities for remunerative employment, armed militia leaders can call on a large reservoir of potential combatants (Collier, 2007). This was becoming more pervasive as the conflict became more intractable with the passage of time. However, the more well-off parents were able to admit their children to elite schools in urban and semi-urban areas that isolated their children from the more direct impact of the conflict to a large extent. But it would be difficult to claim that all children admitted to such schools were able to escape ideology. During the fieldwork, overwhelming evidence was found in favour of the later. The rise of private schools shows how this trend was popular throughout the valley of Kashmir.

A mother in the Tral area expressed that a school should develop in children consistency with conscience. For my son, I needed firmer routines and a positive ideological tone. The private school we chose blends Rishi–Sufi references with Quranic verses, frames festivals as ethics lessons, and allows children to question textbooks. In shutdowns, they used mohalla study circles and printed work; a counsellor calls after frightening incidents. English is the medium of instruction, but Kashmiri/Urdu aren't punished in school, which is important for conversing with grandparents back home. We negotiated a partial fee concession, and I take extra tuitions; I, as a mother, am also wary of status snobbery. To counter that, he still plays cricket with cousins, helps at the orchard, and attends madrasa on weekends. He's learning to argue with evidence, yet bow his head in prayer; both matter to us.

In this case, a parent chooses a private school to secure steady routines and an ideological fit that blends Rishi–Sufi and Quranic values with space for questioning. She values crisis-resilient practices like mohalla study circles, printed work, and counsellor check-ins that may counter disruptions to education during turmoil. An English-medium school that doesn't penalize Kashmiri/Urdu speaking children accommodates the local while imbibing the foreign educational pattern. Despite financial strain (fee concession, extra tuitions), she counters status snobbery by anchoring her son in community life, like engagement with cousins, orchard work, and madrasa. The choice symbolises "rooted mobility": cultivating evidence-based thinking and modern skills without undoing cultural and religious belonging.

6.5. Proximity to the child's home as a key factor influencing parental school selection in Kashmir

In times of tension, parents often prefer a school close to home. This proximity assumes even more importance when the safety of children seems at stake, and educational needs take a backseat. An excerpt of a conversation with a parent is as follows:

You know things are not always calm, and when I had the opportunity to admit my children to school, I simply chose the nearest school. It was because the security of the children is of the utmost importance to me. Our children can get an education only when they continue to remain alive.

Around two dozen parents out of 36 participating in the conversations, by and large, expressed the same concern and apprehensions about the security of their kids and thought that the safety and security of children is the most important priority for them as far as selection of the school is concerned. This is a far-reaching observation on the impact of the turmoil during last three decades on the schooling of children in Kashmir. The findings of this paper echo an intricate interplay of social, cultural, and economic factors responsible for parental choice of schools in the context of Kashmir.

7. CONCLUSIONS

These narratives expose the complex milieu of considerations that guide parental school choice in the context of turmoil in Kashmir. Safety, emotional stability, and aspirations often outweigh conventional educational metrics. Parents make deeply situated decisions, shaped not only by the educational needs of their children, but also by the contours of militarised geography, affective relationships, and visions of dignity and progress. The voices of the parents collectively illustrate that school choice in conflict zones is less about options and more about making meaningful compromises within constrained possibilities.

These interactions with the parents also reveal a sad tale of the impact of the political tensions on the parents' choice of a school for their children. An overwhelming number of parents clearly expressed their worries when they were literally forced to alter their choices owing to the prevailing uncertainty. It just shows the depth of the predicament of the parents in Kashmir vis-à-vis the choice of their schools for their kids: their choices are compromised in more ways than one. Security and safety become a concern of paramount importance, and the notion of quality education and preference for a specific school take a back seat. This makes it abundantly clear that the choices of parents are deeply constrained. Apart from the pragmatic parental approach while choosing schools, the conversations also revealed a pervasive sadness, as many parents expressed their helplessness and a sense of tiredness. The study also

sheds light on the affairs of education and the mutilation of parents' ideal preferences for schools in Kashmir. It is also a sad story that is not getting the recognition that it deserves. Such recognition is important to understand how parents' choices are deeply affected by the political uncertainty.

The paper sets out to explore the parental decision-making regarding the selection of schools and the educational future of their wards in the politically unstable region of Kashmir. The study, therefore, doesn't remain confined to the parental choices of schools but reveals a complex pattern of the socio-cultural, ideological and institutional structuration of the very Kashmiri society. First, the paper demonstrates that parental choices are neither completely independent nor merely based on individual rational assessment. The whole process, instead, is a complex model that is slowly shaped by the place, its broader historical reality, normalised practices, religion and the condition of the present.

Second, the study explores the role of the protracted Kashmir conflict on parental decision-making regarding the choice of schools that, due to persistent psychological duress, fails to recognise the independent rational assessment and, therefore, less attention is given to the quality of education or the reputation of schools in comparison to the safety and proximity of schools. This reflects the fundamental 'constrained agency' whereby the parents' choices of schools are severely constrained by the structural reality of an administrative system. As one parent poignantly expressed, "Our children can get an education only when they continue to remain alive," encapsulating the fundamental tension between educational aspirations and survival imperatives.

Third, the paper highlights how ideological and religio-cultural factors play a solid role in influencing parental school choices. Given the widespread regional practice of Islam and its assimilation into political identity formation, there is a growing parental preference for schools that integrate Islamic education. The strict state interventions to check such ideological propagation by Falah-e-Aam Trust schools show how educational preferences get entangled with the structural barriers of the state administration.

Fourth, the research investigates economic inequality and its role in creating different educational opportunities for children coming from different economic backgrounds. While economically stable families afford better schools, poor families are challenged with constrained choices and, therefore, prefer the under-resourced government schools. The study, in this way, documents the implications of economic inequality on intergenerational mobility and social reproduction in a conflict-ridden space.

Fifth, the research fieldwork explores how determined parents tactfully handle situations pregnant with chaos and political uncertainty. The resilient adaptive practices like fee concessions, opening of mohalla study centres, and home-based activities during prolonged school closures reflect what can safely be related to the "pedagogies of survival", the persistent expression of the collective spirit of resilience in the face of suppressing systemic disruptions.

8. IMPLICATIONS

The findings of the research could help shape the educational policy of the conflict-ridden region. It offers crucial insight into the framing of policies for context-sensitive spaces where changing ground situations adversely influence parental decision-making regarding their children's education. The findings also place special emphasis on the broader recognition of the social and religio-cultural dimensions of schools, while promoting critical thinking and preventing educational sites from becoming ideologically divisive platforms.

9. LIMITATIONS

The research has certain limitations too which need to be acknowledged. Despite the strong contextual data, the small sample size and the qualitative nature of the study may limit its generalizability. The preference for only parental observations about the choice of schools and the non-inclusion of the school-level perspectives of children could be another limitation.

10. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This research area could be explored in future research through broader quantitative studies that could help broaden the contextual dimensions and encourage comparative studies across different turmoil-affected regions and among parents worldwide.

DECLARATIONS

Author(s) Contribution

Conceptualization: Dr. Manzoor Parey; Data curation: Dr. Manzoor Parey; Formal analysis: Dr. Manzoor Parey; Investigation: Dr. Manzoor Parey; Methodology: Dr. Ghulam Khan; Supervision: Dr. Manzoor Parey; Writing – review & editing: Dr. Ghulam Khan. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Human Ethics and Consent to Participate

Not Applicable

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