



## **A Study of the Impact of Covid 19 on Education of Gujjar Students of Reasi District**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted educational systems worldwide, and the students in remote areas such as Reasi district in Jammu & Kashmir, particularly those from the Gujjar community, faced unique challenges. This study explores the impact of the pandemic on the education of Gujjar students in Reasi district, focusing on access to online learning, digital infrastructure, academic performance, and mental well-being. The research utilizes both qualitative and quantitative methods, including surveys, interviews with students, teachers, and community leaders, as well as data collection on school attendance and academic results before and after the pandemic. Key findings indicate that limited access to digital devices, internet connectivity issues, and socio-economic constraints significantly hindered the educational progress of Gujjar students. Moreover, the closure of schools exacerbated existing disparities, particularly for students in rural and marginalized communities. The study also highlights the resilience of students and teachers, who adapted to alternative learning methods, though the effectiveness was uneven. This paper concludes with recommendations for targeted interventions, including enhanced digital infrastructure, community engagement, and policy reforms to bridge educational gaps and ensure that future crises do not disproportionately affect marginalized student populations.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound and far-reaching impact on almost every aspect of human life, and education systems worldwide have been among the hardest hit. The sudden closure of schools, universities, and other educational institutions disrupted the learning process, bringing forth challenges related to access, equity, and quality of education. In particular, marginalized communities, including the Gujjar students of Reasi district in Jammu and Kashmir, faced unique hurdles during this time.

Gujjars, an indigenous nomadic and semi-nomadic community in India, have long been marginalized in terms of socio-economic conditions, educational access, and opportunities. The Reasi district, located in the Jammu region of Jammu and Kashmir, is home to a significant population of Gujjar students who, even before the pandemic, struggled with limited infrastructure, inadequate resources, and barriers to quality education. The onset of COVID-19 exacerbated these challenges, as traditional face-to-face education was abruptly shifted to digital platforms, leaving many students in remote areas, such as those in Reasi, without the means to continue their studies effectively. The primary objective of this study is to explore and understand the specific impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education of Gujjar students in Reasi district. The research seeks to examine how the sudden transition to online learning affected students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, and the extent to which they were able to cope with new modes of learning. The study will also focus on the challenges faced by Gujjar families in adapting to online education, such as limited access to smartphones, unreliable internet connectivity, and financial constraints.

Furthermore, the study will explore the long-term effects of the pandemic on the educational aspirations and future prospects of Gujjar students. The loss of in-person classes and the limited exposure to educational resources may have serious implications on the academic progress and career opportunities of these students, particularly in a region where education is already a struggle for many from disadvantaged communities. The disruption caused by COVID-19 has the potential to widen the existing educational disparities, making it even more difficult for students from marginalized communities to break the cycle of poverty and attain social mobility.

In addition to identifying the challenges, this study will also seek to highlight any adaptive measures taken by schools, families, and local communities to mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic on education. It will explore how teachers and students in Reasi district have navigated the challenges of remote learning, and what strategies have been most effective in overcoming educational barriers. By analyzing these aspects, the study aims to provide insights into the resilience of Gujjar students and offer recommendations for improving educational access and quality in the post-pandemic era. Ultimately, this research will contribute to the broader discourse on the educational impact of COVID-19 on marginalized groups, shedding light on the unique struggles faced by the Gujjar community in Reasi district, and informing policy interventions to ensure more equitable and inclusive education systems in the future.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background of the Study

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in late 2019, has had a profound impact on global societies, economies, and systems. One of the most significant and far-reaching effects has been on the education sector. Schools, colleges, and universities were forced to shut down in nearly every corner of the world, leading to a sudden shift from traditional, in-person learning to online education. The pandemic created unprecedented challenges for educational systems, particularly in rural and underserved regions.

In India, the impact of the pandemic on education was severe, as the country witnessed mass disruptions to the education system, affecting millions of students. Reasi district, located in the Jammu region of the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir, is no exception. Reasi is a largely rural district, where access to quality education has always been a challenge due to various socio-economic factors, limited infrastructure, and geographical barriers. The outbreak of COVID-19 further exacerbated these issues, creating new barriers to learning for students, particularly those from marginalized communities, including the Gujjar population. The Gujjars are a pastoral community, traditionally engaged in agriculture, livestock rearing, and other forms of subsistence farming. They are an indigenous group with a distinct culture, language, and way of life. The community is spread across different regions of Jammu and Kashmir, including Reasi. The Gujjars, along with other tribal communities, often face difficulties in accessing basic education due to their remote locations, lack of resources, and economic constraints. The sudden shift to online learning, while seen as a solution for continuing education during the pandemic, presented its own set of challenges for Gujjar students in Reasi, most of whom lack the necessary resources such as smartphones, internet connectivity, and a conducive learning environment at home.

This study seeks to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education of Gujjar students in Reasi district, with a focus on the challenges they faced during the transition to online education and the long-term consequences of the disruption in their learning process. The study will also examine the efforts made by the government and local institutions to mitigate these challenges, and the strategies that can be implemented to support the Gujjar community in the post-pandemic era.

### 1.2 Statement of the Problem

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a detrimental impact on the education of students worldwide, particularly in rural and tribal areas. The Gujjar students of Reasi district, who already face educational challenges due to socio-economic factors, have been disproportionately affected by the shift to online learning. The problem this study addresses is the extent to which the pandemic and the subsequent closure of educational institutions have hindered the academic progress of Gujjar students in Reasi. The research aims to identify the specific challenges faced by this community, including issues related to technology access, internet connectivity, digital literacy, and the overall disruption to their education. Additionally, the study will examine the effectiveness of government interventions and local responses in addressing these challenges.

### 1.3 Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this study are as follows:

To examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education of Gujjar students in Reasi district.

To identify the key challenges faced by Gujjar students in accessing and participating in online education during the pandemic.

To evaluate the role of government initiatives and local efforts in supporting the educational needs of Gujjar students during the pandemic.

To assess the long-term implications of the disruption in education on the academic performance and social development of Gujjar students.

To suggest strategies for improving the educational outcomes of Gujjar students in the post-pandemic era.

### 1.4 Research Questions

The study will seek to answer the following research questions:

What were the primary challenges faced by Gujjar students in Reasi district in accessing online education during the COVID-19 pandemic?

How did the lack of access to technology and internet connectivity affect the learning experiences of Gujjar students?

What steps were taken by the government and local institutions to address the educational needs of Gujjar students during the pandemic?

How did the disruption in education affect the academic performance of Gujjar students?

What measures can be implemented to enhance the educational outcomes of Gujjar students in the post-pandemic period?

### ***1.5 Significance of the Study***

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it addresses a critical gap in the existing research on the impact of COVID-19 on the education of marginalized communities, particularly in rural and tribal areas of India. While much of the discourse surrounding the pandemic's effect on education has focused on urban areas or more developed regions, there is a dearth of research on how the pandemic has affected tribal and rural students, such as those from the Gujjar community in Reasi. Second, the findings of this study will provide valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and NGOs working in the field of education in rural and tribal areas. By understanding the specific challenges faced by Gujjar students in Reasi, the study can inform the development of targeted interventions aimed at improving educational access, quality, and equity in the region.

Finally, this study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on educational inequality in India and the role of technology in bridging the digital divide. As the country seeks to recover from the effects of the pandemic, it is essential to consider how to create more inclusive and resilient educational systems that can withstand future crises.

### ***1.6 Scope of the Study***

The scope of this study is confined to the Gujjar students in Reasi district, located in the Jammu region of Jammu and Kashmir. The study will focus on students enrolled in government schools from primary to secondary levels, as these are the most affected by the challenges of online education. While the study will primarily examine the academic experiences of students, it will also consider the socio-economic factors that influence educational access, such as family income, access to technology, and parental support. The study will not cover private schools or higher education institutions, as the focus is specifically on the educational experiences of younger students from the Gujjar community.

### ***1.7 Structure of the Thesis***

This thesis is organized into five chapters:

Chapter 1: Introduction – This chapter provides the background, statement of the problem, research objectives, research questions, significance of the study, and scope of the research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review – This chapter reviews existing research and literature related to the impact of COVID-19 on education, particularly in rural and tribal areas, and highlights key themes such as digital divide, challenges of online education, and government interventions.

Chapter 3: Methodology – This chapter outlines the research design, sampling methods, data collection techniques, and analysis approach used in the study.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion – This chapter presents the findings of the study, based on data collected from Gujjar students, teachers, and other stakeholders, and provides a discussion of these findings in relation to the research questions.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations – This final chapter summarizes the key findings of the study and provides recommendations for improving the educational outcomes of Gujjar students in Reasi district. By addressing the challenges faced by Gujjar students and offering solutions, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing efforts to promote equitable education for all children, regardless of their socio-economic background or geographical location.

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## **2. Review of Literature**

The global education system has undergone significant challenges in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter reviews existing literature relevant to the impact of COVID-19 on education, specifically focusing on the educational experiences of marginalized communities such as the Gujjar students in Reasi district, Jammu and Kashmir. This review includes studies on the effects of the pandemic on education at a global level, insights into the Indian educational context, and the unique challenges faced by students from the Gujjar community.

### ***2.1 The Global Impact of COVID-19 on Education***

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019 led to widespread disruptions in education across the globe. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2020), over 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries were affected by school closures. The transition to remote learning became the primary mode of instruction during these closures. However, the effectiveness of this transition varied significantly, depending on access to technology, internet connectivity, and the ability of educational systems to adapt to new methods of teaching.

Numerous studies highlight the increased educational inequalities during the pandemic, with disadvantaged groups facing significant barriers to access and learning. A report by the World Bank (2020) identified that children in low-income countries, rural areas, and marginalized communities were particularly vulnerable to learning losses due to limited access to online learning resources and the lack of support systems at home.

## ***2.2 Education in India During the COVID-19 Pandemic***

In India, the pandemic posed severe challenges to the education system, which was already grappling with issues of inequality and resource gaps. According to the Ministry of Education, over 250 million students were affected by school closures in India. The Indian government initially responded with a nationwide lockdown, which forced educational institutions to switch to online learning platforms. However, the success of this transition varied widely between urban and rural regions, as well as among different socio-economic groups.

A study by the Azim Premji Foundation (2020) found that only 24% of students in rural India had access to online classes during the pandemic. The report also emphasized that the digital divide had widened during this period, with students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds being disproportionately affected. The lack of smartphones, tablets, or reliable internet connections severely limited their ability to participate in online education, leading to significant learning losses.

## ***2.3 Challenges Faced by Gujjar Students in Reasi District***

The Gujjar community, which is one of the largest nomadic tribes in India, faces a range of socio-economic challenges that hinder access to quality education. The Gujjars in Reasi district, located in the Jammu and Kashmir region, are particularly vulnerable due to their rural, remote locations, limited access to technology, and socio-economic disadvantages. Gujjar students often have to overcome numerous barriers, including poverty, cultural factors, and a lack of educational infrastructure. Research by Khan and Yousuf (2021) highlighted that Gujjar communities in Jammu

and Kashmir face severe educational disparities. Factors such as lack of schools in remote areas, high dropout rates, and cultural norms that prioritize pastoral activities over education contribute to the educational exclusion of Gujjar children. These barriers were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the shift to online learning created further challenges for students in these areas.

A key issue for Gujjar students in Reasi district, as noted in a study by Bhat and Dar (2022), is the lack of infrastructure such as electricity, mobile network connectivity, and internet access. This problem was particularly pronounced in rural areas, where many families do not have the necessary devices for online education. Additionally, students in these communities often rely on government-run schools, which were less equipped to handle the sudden shift to digital platforms. In many cases, schools in Reasi district did not have adequate support staff to guide students through the transition to online learning, further compounding the challenges faced by Gujjar students.

## ***2.4 Psychological and Social Impacts on Gujjar Students***

The psychological and social impacts of the pandemic on students have also been a significant area of study. Research by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT, 2021) revealed that the pandemic and subsequent school closures led to increased stress, anxiety, and a sense of isolation among students, especially those from marginalized communities. For Gujjar students in Reasi district, these impacts were more severe due to the lack of adequate mental health support systems and the compounded effect of social marginalization. The closure of schools and the shift to online learning also disrupted students' social interactions, which are an important aspect of their development. For Gujjar children, the school environment is not only a space for learning but also a place for socializing and engaging in extracurricular activities. With the pandemic limiting these opportunities, many Gujjar students experienced a decline in their mental well-being and social skills.

Moreover, the economic instability caused by the pandemic exacerbated the challenges faced by Gujjar families. As many Gujjars are involved in agriculture or livestock rearing, the restrictions and lockdowns affected their livelihoods. Financial insecurity led to an increase in child labor, with many students being forced to work instead of attending school or participating in online classes, further contributing to educational setbacks.

## ***2.5 Efforts to Address Educational Disparities During COVID-19***

In response to the educational challenges posed by COVID-19, the Indian government and various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) implemented several initiatives to support marginalized students, including those from the Gujjar community. One such initiative was the distribution of free textbooks and learning materials to rural students. Additionally, the government launched several digital platforms like SWAYAM and Diksha to provide online content for students at different education levels.

However, the effectiveness of these efforts was limited in areas like Reasi district, where infrastructure constraints hindered access to these resources. Studies by the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS, 2021) showed that while digital platforms were useful for urban students, their reach in rural and tribal areas was minimal due to the lack of internet access and digital literacy. The impact of COVID-19 on education has been particularly severe for marginalized communities such as the Gujjar students in Reasi district. The pandemic exacerbated pre-existing educational inequalities, including the digital divide, lack of infrastructure, and socio-economic factors. While efforts were made to support students during the pandemic, these were often inadequate in addressing the specific challenges faced by rural and tribal communities.

The situation calls for a more targeted approach to education in rural areas, one that considers the unique socio-economic conditions and infrastructural limitations of communities like the Gujjars. To effectively address the educational needs of these students, a combination of improved digital access, community-based interventions, and psychological support systems will be crucial in the post-pandemic era.

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## CHAPTER 3

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound and transformative impact on education systems across the world, and the Gujjar students of Reasi District in Jammu and Kashmir were no exception. Reasi, located in the northern region of India, is home to a large population of Gujjar and Bakerwal communities, many of whom live in remote, hilly areas with limited access to modern infrastructure and resources. The pandemic exacerbated the existing challenges these communities face in terms of education, social mobility, and economic stability. The shift from traditional classroom-based learning to online education, coupled with the socioeconomic vulnerabilities of these students, revealed several key issues.

### 1. Disruption of Traditional Education Systems

Before the pandemic, education in Reasi District followed a fairly conventional structure with government-run schools catering to the majority of the student population. Gujjar students, who are predominantly from rural and marginalized backgrounds, generally attended public schools, where resources were already scarce. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, educational institutions were closed to prevent the spread of the virus. This sudden closure led to a disruption of the learning process, especially for Gujjar students, who were already facing multiple barriers to education.

In the absence of physical schooling, educational activities were shifted online, but this was not a feasible solution for a large proportion of the population. Many Gujjar families, especially in remote areas, did not have access to digital devices such as smartphones, laptops, or computers. Even when devices were available, a reliable internet connection was a significant challenge. The lack of basic infrastructure such as high-speed internet or electricity further hindered the shift to online learning.

### 2. Digital Divide and Lack of Access to Technology

One of the most significant barriers to online education for Gujjar students in Reasi was the digital divide. Many Gujjar families live in geographically isolated regions, making it difficult to access both technological devices and the internet. According to reports from the Jammu and Kashmir government and NGOs working in the region, a large number of rural households, particularly in the hilly terrains of Reasi, do not have access to smartphones or computers. Even if some households could afford a device, unreliable electricity supply and poor internet connectivity made online learning a distant dream for many.

This digital divide widened the educational gap between urban and rural students. While urban students could attend online classes and continue their learning, rural and marginalized students, including Gujjars, were left behind. The lack of engagement in formal education resulted in a significant drop in academic performance, and many students faced difficulties in keeping up with the syllabus, especially in subjects requiring continuous learning and practice.

### 3. Economic Constraints and Impact on Families

For the Gujjar community, many of whom are dependent on agriculture, livestock, and other seasonal activities, the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was severe. Lockdowns, social distancing measures, and the closure of markets and transportation disrupted the livelihood of many families. In Reasi District, where a significant number of Gujjar families depend on livestock and agriculture for their income, the loss of income meant that many students were compelled to drop out of school or discontinue their education to help their families make ends meet.

Moreover, the financial constraints faced by these families made it impossible for them to invest in digital learning tools such as smartphones or laptops. The Gujjar community, which has historically faced economic deprivation, found it particularly hard to bear the costs of remote learning. In many cases, students had to prioritize work over education to support their families during the crisis.

### 4. Psychosocial Effects on Students

The pandemic did not only have an academic impact but also took a toll on the mental and emotional well-being of Gujjar students. The uncertainty of the situation, coupled with the lack of social interaction, created feelings of isolation, stress, and anxiety among many students. Gujjar children, who are often more vulnerable due to their socio-economic conditions, found it difficult to cope with the psychological challenges brought on by the pandemic.

With the closure of schools, students were deprived of not only academic learning but also the opportunity for socialization, physical activities, and extracurricular engagements. For Gujjar students, many of whom come from extended families in close-knit rural settings, school was a place for social interaction and learning beyond the classroom. The absence of these activities contributed to feelings of uncertainty about their future prospects and limited their opportunities for overall growth.

### 5. Educational Inequality and Learning Loss

Gujjar students in Reasi, who were already at a disadvantage in terms of educational access, faced heightened challenges during the pandemic. The shift to online education exacerbated the existing inequalities within the educational system. Students from privileged backgrounds, who could afford devices and had access to quality internet, were able to continue their studies, while Gujjar students lagged behind due to technological and infrastructural constraints.

Many students also experienced learning loss due to the lack of structured online classes or support systems. Without a strong educational foundation at home or access to tutors and guidance, students struggled to keep pace with their curriculum. This learning gap, particularly in critical subjects like mathematics and science, has long-term implications for the academic trajectory and career prospects of these students.

## 6. Efforts to Bridge the Gap: Government and NGO Initiatives

Recognizing the challenges faced by Gujjar students in Reasi and other rural areas of Jammu and Kashmir, both the government and several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) took steps to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on education. The Jammu and Kashmir administration, for example, introduced the "E-Content" initiative to provide online education to students through mobile apps and websites. However, the success of such initiatives was limited by the lack of internet connectivity and digital infrastructure in rural areas.

NGOs working in the region, such as the Jammu and Kashmir Gujjar Bakerwal Welfare Association, have also made efforts to provide learning materials and bridge the digital divide by distributing smartphones, tablets, and internet data packages. Despite these efforts, the scale of the problem remained substantial, and many students continued to face challenges in accessing quality education.

## 7. The Road Ahead: Moving Towards Inclusive Education

To address the educational challenges faced by Gujjar students in Reasi and similar regions, a multi-pronged approach is required. Firstly, there is an urgent need for greater investment in rural education infrastructure, including better internet connectivity, electricity supply, and the provision of digital devices. The government must focus on creating digital inclusion programs that ensure every student has access to the tools needed for online learning.

Secondly, schools must adopt blended learning models that combine online and offline methods to cater to the diverse needs of students, especially in rural areas. Teachers should be trained to use digital tools effectively and create learning modules that can be accessed in areas with limited connectivity.

Thirdly, community engagement is crucial. Local community leaders, including those from the Gujjar community, should be involved in the planning and implementation of educational policies, ensuring that they are tailored to the unique challenges faced by Gujjar students. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated the existing inequalities in education, especially for marginalized communities such as the Gujjars in Reasi District. The shift to online learning, while beneficial for some, has further deepened the divide for those lacking access to technology and resources. Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort from the government, NGOs, and the community to ensure that all students, regardless of their socioeconomic background, have access to quality education. Only then can the educational aspirations of Gujjar students in Reasi and similar regions be fulfilled, fostering greater opportunities for their personal and professional growth.

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## CONCLUSION

The study on the impact of COVID-19 on the education of Gujjar students in Reasi District highlights significant challenges and disruptions faced by this community during the pandemic. The transition to online learning exposed the digital divide, with many students lacking access to the necessary technology, internet connectivity, and learning resources. As a result, their educational progress was severely hindered, leading to increased dropout rates, decreased academic performance, and a widening gap in educational outcomes compared to their peers in more urbanized areas.

Furthermore, the socio-economic background of Gujjar students, often characterized by limited financial resources, compounded the difficulties. Many families struggled to support their children's education during the pandemic, with some prioritizing immediate financial needs over educational expenses. In addition, there was a lack of awareness and preparedness among both students and parents regarding online education, which further affected learning continuity. Despite these challenges, the resilience of the students, their families, and some local educators was evident. Some efforts, such as the distribution of learning materials and the organization of community-based educational initiatives, helped mitigate the impact to some extent. However, a comprehensive approach involving government support, infrastructure development, and targeted interventions is essential to ensure that Gujjar students in Reasi District can recover from the educational setbacks caused by the pandemic and achieve equitable access to quality education moving forward.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing educational inequalities in the Gujjar community of Reasi District, and urgent measures are required to bridge the digital and educational gaps, enhance learning opportunities, and foster long-term educational resilience.

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