

## **Disabled children struggle to study amid pandemic in Kashmir**

*Mudassir Kuloo, Jammu & Kashmir UT*

Mohammad Saeed Bhat, a resident of South Kashmir's Dialgam area in the newly announced Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir, had enrolled his daughter, Iflah Saeed, in one of the schools in Srinagar's Solina area meant for disabled children. After passing Class 8 examination, 15-year-old Iflah was looking forward to continuing her education. However, a week later, nationwide lockdown was imposed in the wake of global pandemic Covid-19 and all her hopes were dashed.



**Pic 1:** Iflah Saeed who is speech and hearing impaired

7 months have passed and Iflah has been sitting idle at her home in Anantnag district. Unlike other students who can study online, Iflah is hearing and speech impaired. She is the eldest among three siblings. Her 14-year-old brother Mehran Saeed, who is studying in class 8th, is also hearing and speech impaired. Only their 12-year-old sister is without any disability.

“My two children are not able to learn through online classes because they can't hear what their teachers are saying. They understand sign language but there is no sign language interpreter for such students in schools,” rued Saeed who is extremely worried as his children have nothing to do. Since March, they have neither been to school nor attended online classes.

Saeed, a farmer and a responsible father, always wanted to give good education to his children. In March this year, he had rented an accommodation in Srinagar so his children could study. “After few days, the COVID pandemic began. Since then my children feel irritated as they have nothing to do at home. I tried hard to ensure good education for them, but they have started feeling detached from studies,” shared Saeed.



**Pic 2:** Mehran Saeed who is speech and hearing impaired

Explaining the role school has played in the last few months, Saeed said, “The school authorities had sent us a few topics to study that my children were unable to study. My son who has always been quite efficient in studies, now feels anxious and irritated sitting idle at home.”

Mohammad believes mass promotion was not good for the growth of children. “When they have not read a single word how can we expect them to grow in their life. I have made hard efforts to teach my children, but it seems all my efforts are going waste,” he regretted.

Iflah and Mehran are not alone. There are thousands of children with disabilities in J&K alone whose education has been badly affected by two consecutive lockdowns – first, after the abrogation of Article 370 and then, the outbreak of COVID-19.

Hikmat Syed, a resident of Verinag, is a visually impaired student studying in Class 9. Before August 5 last year, she would record lectures of teachers on her mobile phone to listen it later and study at her own pace at home. However, this pandemic has hit her hard. "I could not study since COVID-19 broke out. Education of children with disabilities has been badly hit. We can't study online," she regretted.

Her father is equally worried. "She used to have classes in Braille language. Even if schools are open after the lockdown, it will be a real challenge for the children with disabilities. They don't know how to prevent infection," shared her father, Mohammad Yaseen, who works at a private medical shop and has worked hard towards providing his daughter a quality education. "I even sold some land for her treatment, but doctors said she has least chances to see through her eyes," Mohammad said. He has two more children, who are not disabled.

Similarly, 15-year-old Zehra Manzoor of Kanderpora in Anantnag has visual impairment. After passing her Class 8 examination, she could not take admission due to coronavirus. "Zehra is an intelligent child but her education has been severely affected due to this pandemic," her uncle said. "When children without disabilities are unable to study online then how can one expect children with disabilities to study efficiently through this virtual medium?" he asked.

A recent survey conducted by Swabhiman, a community-based organization working for the rights of persons with disabilities, revealed that about 43% of children with disabilities in various states including Jammu and Kashmir are planning to drop out of studies due to difficulties faced by them in online education.

44-year-old physically disabled Javaid Ahmad Tak, the chairperson of Humanity Welfare Organization Helpline, an organization working for disabled students in Kashmir, said that children who are blind and deaf have detached from studies since COVID-19 broke out.



**Pic 3:** An NGO led by Javid Tak organises painting competition

“These children can’t even download the online applications and they are unable to study via online mood as there is no sign language. This has severely affected their mental health,” shared Javed. He added that although the school authorities have reduced syllabus by 30 percent for students, but this doesn’t take into consideration the needs of disabled children. As per him, there are 1 lakh 20 thousand children with disabilities in J&K of which more than 40,000 children are enrolled in schools in Kashmir. A large proportion of this number belongs to low-income families who are unable to afford a smart phone for online studies of their children.

Government had earlier appointed 58 resource persons in J&K under a centrally sponsored scheme who were responsible for teaching disabled children in schools. “Most among them left as they were paid meager salary and preferred to work in other departments,” said Javed who believes that the society is doing no justice to such children.



**Pic 4:** Disabled Javid Ahmad Tak lying on bed at his home

Javed runs his own school for disabled children in South Kashmir. “Our school has been holding classes for students of Class 9th and 10th on alternate days to complete the syllabus. However, the students of other classes have detached themselves from studies,” he lamented. He said there should be special schools in every district for disabled children.

Javed, despite his physical limitations, has taken up a task to bring back the smile on the faces of disabled people. Recently, his NGO in collaboration with a Bangalore-based Philanthropic Initiative, organized an inclusive drawing competition at Government Degree College, Anantnag. A cricket match was also played between cricketers facing visual disabilities to reduce their mental stress.

Dr Asgar Samoon, Principal Secretary, who was recently transferred from Education Department to Skill Development Department, J&K, admitted that education of children with disabilities has been badly hit in the valley and agreed that to cater to the needs of disabled children, special schools should be built.

### **(Charkha Features)**