

Borderland Resilience: Disabled Lives And Post-Partition Violence In Jammu & Kashmir

Dr. Sandeep Singh

Assistant Professor, Department Of Life Long Learning, University Of Jammu, J&K, India.

Dr. Nitán Sharma

Assistant Professor, The Law School, University Of Jammu, J&K, India

Dr. Kartika Bakshi

Phd, Department Of Law, University Of Jammu, J&K, India

Abstract

The partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, which resulted in the creation of India and Pakistan, led to significant upheaval, displacement, and violence. This historical event continues to shape the socio-political landscape of the region, particularly in the state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). The narrative of partition and its aftermath often focuses on large-scale population movements, the Indo-Pakistan wars, and the ongoing insurgency within J&K. However, there are many facets of this complex history that remain underexplored, particularly the experiences of those living in the border areas of J&K. The paper will examine the multiple suffering of countless souls in the border areas which usually have been overlooked in the narrative of the conflict, partition and post-partition discourse in Jammu & Kashmir. The paper outlines exclusion of the borderlanders in the conflict of J&K with special focus on the physical disability and psychological trauma due to consistent, unavoidable cross-border violence that has characterized the post-partition era.

Methodology: The research is predominantly field-based and employs qualitative methods to gather data. This approach involves:

Field Visits: Conducting visits to various border areas in J&K to gather firsthand accounts and observations.

Interviews and Focus Groups Discussions (FGDs): Engaging with affected individuals, their families, local leaders and prominent civil society members through interviews and focus group discussions to collect diverse perspectives.

Thematic Analysis: Analyzing the collected data to identify recurring themes and patterns related to suffering, exclusion, and resilience.

Conclusion: This research seeks to address the lack of information in current literature by highlighting the challenges faced by individuals living in border areas. It prioritizes individuals who have become disabled as a result of cross-border violence and emphasizes the necessity of a comprehensive narrative that recognizes and tackles the varied experiences of all affected people in J&K. The study not only emphasizes the hardship experienced by these individuals but also acknowledges their resilience to recover and adapt, urging increased focus and assistance from both the government and civil society to enhance their well-being.

Key Words: Partition, Conflict, Trauma, Disabilities, Borderland, Exclusion and Resilience.

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I. Introduction

The studies on border have been shifting from merely highlighting the questions of border as an institution, a space, and a marker of sovereignty to a new horizon of qualitative examination of those living in proximity to it. There have been many writings focusing on issues of political marginalization and spatial exclusion in border zones (Wilson and Donnan, 1998). Such studies have greatly contributed not just to the understanding of sovereignty and border politics (Chalfin, 2010) but also to the questions of identity (Aggarwal, 2004) and class (Eilenberg, 2010). Most of these studies have portrayed the institution of 'border' in various ways, including its management (Newman, 2011), context and meaning (Dooris Wasti-Walter, 2011), national prosperity (Mau, 2012), and security (Farfan, 2009). Recently, researchers in the field of border studies have also shifted their focus to the marginalized population. Apart from viewing the borderlanders from the perspective of 'exclusion', 'statelessness', 'and state' and 'non-state spaces', these studies also refer to the plight of

‘people living on the margins of the state, with a special focus on the ‘right to life, livelihood, and movement.’ (Gill, 2012).

The borderlanders woes in J&K have not come to an end with the partition; rather, they begin with the partition. Post-partitioned cross-border violence, trauma, amputees, and political orphanages have manifested all along the border. One peculiar outcome of post-partitioned border violence is the widespread prevalence of disability throughout the border region. Furthermore, in the borderland of J&K, the trauma and exclusion associated with this phenomenon seem normal.

Around 15% of the world population suffers from some form of disability, and this ratio is uneven in various parts of the world and certainly high in war zones and zones where violence is constant (WHO, 2011). The case of the J&K border is no different, where the number of disabled has continuously increased with every war and the continuous existence of mines, cross-border firing, and shelling.

The study by Groce and Bakhshi (2019) reinstated that the social exclusion of the disabled becomes a life experience and seems as if exclusion and disability have a lifelong bond. Furthermore, they emphasize that children with a variety of disabilities face exclusion when accessing education in terms of resources, quality, access, and other associated parameters.

Mizunova, Mitra, and Yamasaki (2018) underscored this in their study, citing the Convention of the Rights for People with Disabilities (CRPD), which guarantees the disabled the same rights as individuals without disabilities. However, they also underscored the structural marginalization of their access to education, employment, healthcare, and social protection, which is not equal.

In the context of gender and disability, numerous studies have confirmed that women and girls with disabilities are particularly susceptible to various forms of abuse, including forced marriage [Clawson, R.; Fyson, R., 2017] and sexual abuse (Bretherton, K., et al., 2016). Observations reveal that borderlanders, regardless of their gender or age, endure multifaceted, unheard, severe, and numerous forms of agony.

J&K Border And Conflict

The border in the region formerly known as Jammu and Kashmir consistently makes headlines, primarily due to incidents of border violence. These include cross-border firing and shelling, border infiltration, border incursion, border mining, and violent borderland issues. J&K's uniqueness also lies in various forms of border control, such as line of control (LoC), international border (IB), and line of actual control (LAC). The borders of Jammu and Kashmir, specifically the Line of Control (LoC) and the International Border (IB) with Pakistan, are areas of significant and persistent instability. These borders frequently host intense military activity, such as border mining, cross-border firing, and shelling. Such hostile interactions are a regular occurrence, contributing to a volatile and dangerous environment for those living in close proximity. The frequent cross-border firing and shelling result in numerous injuries and fatalities, often causing long-term disabilities among the civilian population. The presence of landmines further exacerbates the risk, leading to severe injuries and amputations. Beyond the physical toll, the continuous threat of violence fosters a state of psychological instability, manifesting in chronic stress, anxiety, and other mental health issues among the affected communities.

The other peculiar feature of these borders is the demographic change that occurs due to the influx of refugees (a result of partition and subsequent wars). It has been observed that the majority of the refugees, both from erstwhile West Pakistan (now Pakistan) and Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir (POJK), are largely settled all along the IB and LoC in J&K. They have been allotted vacant and evacuee land¹ of the state in the villages largely along the IB and also along the LoC. There are other variations, which can be marked in terms of topography, accessibility, and the type of land along both sets of borders. The IB falls in the plains of Jammu, and the land is quite fertile and productive. Besides, the accessibility to the city of Jammu and other smaller towns all along the national highway with better amenities and institutional spread, along with an efficient security network and mechanism, are of significant added advantage to the residents of IB. However, the texture of the LoC is entirely different in terms of social, political, and geographical landscape.

Most of the LoC region in the Jammu region is hilly, excluding some parts of the Akhnoor sector. The physical landscape, too, is related to the complexity of conflict in the sub-region. For instance, the probability (due to landslides and snowfall) of dislocation of the landmines is quite high in the sloping terrain vis-à-vis the plains, and as a result, the number of landmine victims located in the hilly terrain along LoC is disproportionately higher than that of the plains.

Furthermore, the demographics and geography of the region also influence Pakistan's response. The incidents and interactions throughout the LoC and IB in J&K, which borders Pakistan, provide evidence of this. The discord in the Akhnoor sector in 1999² and the consequent displacement of locals, as well as the border escalations in September 2014 and January 2015, which then followed fiercely in subsequent years along the IB, were allegedly the manifestation of religion as a decisive element of the Pakistan Army's offensive operational strategy along the LoC and IB. An army officer corroborates this³ by citing the number of casualties

and displacement along the IB and LoC in the Akhnour sector (Shekhawat, Mahapatra, 2006). Barring a few surgical fidayeen attacks, the Jammu plains are largely used as routes and not as an operational area by the militants, whereas the areas along the LoC, particularly Poonch and Rajouri, and also in the Kashmir valley, are considered routes and areas of operations as well. A senior police officer based in the Poonch-Rajouri range has confirmed this. Though the situation has now changed in the region of Jammu, which has almost become free of militants, the issue of cross-border infiltration is still an issue for the security forces and the people residing all along the border. Encounters in the Rajouri-Poonch district of Jammu and Kashmir in 2023 alone resulted in the deaths of 20 security personnel and 28 terrorists. The majority of these terrorists met their demise while attempting to infiltrate across the border. These encounters are a regular occurrence, underscoring the persistent instability in the region. The impact on the civilian population is profound and tragic. The gruesome attack on seven civilians at Dangri village in Rajouri on New Year's Eve 2023 starkly reflects the dark reality faced by the people living in these border areas (Bhat, T., 2023). Such attacks are not isolated incidents but part of a continuous pattern of violence that has plagued the region for decades.

Life Consequential To Mines

After the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), the border between Cambodia and Thailand and the Iran-Iraq border⁴ the border (LoC and IB) in J&K is considered to be the fourth most dangerous border in the world in terms of land mining. In every village along the LoC, someone in the immediate or extended family of the locals has been killed or maimed. The history of landmines in the J&K dates back to the wars of 1947, 1965 and 1971, and has been furthered through the subsequent confrontations, hostilities and situations of tough posturing between the two countries. In all post-partition confrontations, the mining of 2002, in fact, was quite widespread than ever before. As earlier, only a 1km radius was mined but the radius was extended to more than 3km in 2002.⁵

As per the Human Rights Watch backgrounder report of 2002, India is one of the 14 countries in the world that still produces anti-personnel mines; it stockpiles between four to five million antipersonnel mines, the sixth-largest stockpile globally. Despite subsequent demining drives, confirmation of a reduction in mining is hard to come by. On the condition of anonymity, an army official says, "It is not feasible to completely demine the whole area, since many mines changed positions from their original place of plantation either due to inclines in hilly areas, rains or rodents etc."

As far as the damage is concerned, more than 2,000 victims of landmines had been recorded in the Rajouri-Poonch belt between 1947 and 1989 (Jamwal, 2004). Among all the districts along the IB and LoC, Poonch alone accounts for 62 percent of landmine victims in J&K (Hussain, 2013). As far as relief to landmine victims is concerned, the Pritam Spiritual Trust⁶ of Poonch has been providing artificial limbs to mine victims since 1991.

Several children are mine victims too in the Rajouri and Poonch districts. Parents of these innocent victims, especially girls, are worried about their social reintegration. Zahida's mother, Misar Jaan laments, "The blast has ruined my daughter's life. Who will marry her now? We had to borrow money for her treatment and we still owe INR 1 lakh to our relatives (Sharma, 2013). No concrete plan of action has been implemented either by the state or by the civil society organizations to address the impact of a stunted childhood, livelihood, and challenges such children's are going to face in future.

From fertile field to fertile minefield

The quantum of land demarcated and taken for mining is telling in itself. The Indian security forces took under its control an estimated 70,100 acres of land in the Jammu, Kathua, Rajouri and Poonch districts after the deployment of forces, when the operation of 2002 was initiated. According to unofficial estimates, more than 25,000 acres of land in the state were turned into minefields by the plantation of Anti-personnel Mines (APMs) and Anti-tank Mines (AT mines) with a density of 1,000 mines per sq km.⁷ In the Kathua and Jammu districts, the Army reportedly took over 31,927 hectares of land, of which 23,078 hectares became a 'literal minefield'.⁸

Ceasefire Violations (Cfvs) And Disabled

The unusual life, least to count it as life when the cross border escalation (firing and shelling) make the life worse all along the Border (both LOC and IB) and it doesn't restrict mobility of the borderlanders only but brings life to a grinding halt. In the situation of temporary normalcy, the unexploded shells further complicate matters as they explode later killing livestock and people in the area.

All along the border, the Ceasefire Violations (CFVs) in the form of cross-firing and shelling target their life and livelihood at once. "It [also] becomes difficult for us to feed the animals, the primary engine for the livelihood of an agricultural society here along the border," says an anonymous resident of village Karmara of District Poonch. In some cases, the piled/stored animal fodder has also been allegedly targeted by the Pakistan Army. A resident of Degwar Terwan says, "Once the firing from across the border burnt all the piles of

fodder in our village.” Often, the livestock are also injured or killed. Same has usually been witnessed in case of unexploded mines which maims the livestock while grazing in the common/vacant/waste/government land in their vicinity.

Trajectory Of Ceasefire Violations:

The conduct of Pakistan in terms of ceasefire and ceasefire violations has been similar towards both the LoC and IB. The calm brought on by the 2003 peace process was largely undisturbed till 2007, but there has been series of violations in recent years. However, the trajectory of CFVs got changed since 2008 (terrorist attack in Mumbai which resulted into breakdown of dialogue between India and Pakistan) onward. Thereafter, the CFVs gradually starts escalating followed by a limited flat curve of 3-4 years like it was 28, 24, 62 and 117 in the year of 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012 and then witnessed sharp escalatory curve from 2013 with 347 violations, which were increased to 533 in 2014, 405 in 2015, 449 in 2016, 971 in 2017 with further intensification in 2018 with 2140 and 3479 in the year 2019 (**2019-recorded-highest-ever-ceasefire, 2019**). Moreover, till May 2020, 1518 cases of violations has already been recorded with further complication of border issues with china in June, 2020 and china’s support to Pakistan on the issue of Kashmir. Though there is truce between India and Pakistan since 2021 and continuing in 2022 as well. However, it is difficult to predict when it will explode again in the form of CFVs.

Local villagers and farmers in several villages along the LoC in the Poonch Sector and Nowshera Sector of Poonch and Rajouri Districts of Jammu and Kashmir have been the biggest beneficiaries of the border ceasefire between the two nations. “We are now able to sow seasonal crops and vegetables in our fields and take out our animal grazing without the fear of shelling,” said Shashi Sharma of Salotri Village in Poonch district, which lies close to the zero line along the LoC.

Disability, Livelihood And Resilience

The most crucial aspect of life which one can witness all along the border is the interface of disability, resilience and livelihood. The very common routine of the villagers living along the LoC is that they are supposed to visit their fields for various agricultural purposes and also for grazing their livestock. However, fencing has cordoned off many of the fields, agricultural or grazing land, in the immediate vicinity and as a result; villagers have to often travel a long distance to reach to their fields. Moreover, the land- farmer relationship all along the border has been disturbed as a significant chunk of land has been taken over by the security forces.

According to a rough estimate, about 3.5 hundred thousand hectares of agriculture land was lying uncultivated due to tension-induced dislocation of the people on the border.

Situation Of Volatility And Self Employment

Mumtaz choudhary(name changed, preferred to be anonymous) who is amputee by one leg and couldn’t carry his study after 10th standard says, “reduction in agricultural land and livestock has also increase the unemployment and therefore, very few people have prospect here to do some work as they are left with a small patch of land and many to feed back at home” further he maintained that the self-employment initiatives like dairy, poultry, mushroom farming etc., seems far off due to the kind of volatility that the LoC fosters thus rarely encourages locals to take initiative on this front. Sometimes situation become so precarious that you have to go for your safety rather than one’s belonging around him.

Disability Beyond Disabled

The disability doesn’t make their life difficult but also makes it equally harsh to people around a disabled. Makhna aged 70 having his son (unmarried) Mushtaq aged 39 both are disabled by leg and arm respectively. Razia aged sixteen studying in tenth standard is the granddaughter of Makhna, away from her mother and other family members, compromising her childhood, education stays with her grandfather just to take care of their amputee grand maternal father and uncle in village Digwar Terwan(a fenced out village, near LoC).this one story of a family can tell us how the life must be of these poor borderlanders. It also tells us how the physically able are bound to disabled all along the LoC and struggling in their daily life.

Women, Disability And Resilience

Education of girls is also considerably affected by the process of fencing and fencing gates too in the ‘fenced out’ villages along the LoC. The number of girls in higher classes begin to dwindle, and higher education is sabotaged owing to the kind of hardship and sense of insecurity associated with the daily movement through these fencing gates (Ashutosh, 2011) “We do not like our women submitting their ID card every day at the gates,” admitted an interviewee in another fenced out village (name withheld on request) in the district of Poonch. It has further been deduced that their fragile socio-economic conditions, sense of uncertainty,

and fixed hours of movement through the fencing gates are some of the things that hold back their children in general and girls in particular from pursuing higher studies.

However, there is reasonable jump in the literacy of the area which is largely attributed to the scheme of Rehbar-e-Taleem (ReT) where the educated locals are employed as teachers at primary and middle schools. However, the poor status of higher education for women is yet to be reversed.

In 2017, over 260 students and teachers were trapped in their school in Rajouri district due to cross-border shelling. They were eventually rescued, but the events were repeated the very next year when hostilities started again. Such incidents shut down schools and health centres for weeks and keep farmland near the border inaccessible. Even when people are evacuated, farm animals are often killed or injured, causing economic distress (Deep Pal, 2022).

In this grand narrative of conflict, many crucial issues concerning women have never become part of the discourse. Here, an issue of marriage of the girls gets encountered with the institution of border. The fence denies the locals a chance to make marriage alliances easily. Hanifa Begum from a border village - Degwar Terwan in Poonch says, "People prefer not to marry their children in fenced out villages. For many of us, the custom of marrying within our relations, which our religion allows, proves to be a boon in finding a spouse for our children. Otherwise, it is also an additional burden for people living in these borderlands." Besides, the prospects of marriage are slimmer if a young woman is doubly disadvantaged as a borderlanders and a disabled person.

The interactions with the locals suggest that in the village of Degwar Terwan of district Poonch alone around 40 percent of the survivors are women. They are victims of either landmine blasts or cross-firing and shelling. Besides, compensation, if any, is unlikely to make up for the invisible, intangible losses incurred by people all along the LoC.

States, Borderland And Disabled

Instead of specific schemes to be offered to the disabled of the borderland which are doubly disadvantaged being borderlanders and disabled, the government has come up with the schemes in the forms of reservation (in professional colleges and universities and also in the state government jobs) to the resident of LoC, operation Sadhavana, community bunkers to the borderlanders and BADP programme of the government of India.

Another critical area of investigation is that the villages which are beyond 1-2 km of distance from the LoC and IB and are less affected by border disturbance have better infrastructural facilities, and are also enjoying the benefits of same 3- percent reservation (resident of actual line of control) both in terms of jobs and entry into educational and professional institutions. From 2020, this scheme has also been extended to the residents residing along the International border (IB) which generally falls in the plains of Jammu covering villages close to the border in the district of Jammu, Samba and Kathua. As has been observed, according to the statute, all designated areas and villages along the LoC, as well as the villages along the IB, have been grouped under the same category. This has further marginalized the most distressed villages in terms of reservation benefits (Sharma, 2011).

As far as the disabled of these border villages is concerns, there is no special space in the reservation policy and therefore, they have to compete with any other disabled in the state without any consideration to their special circumstances of being borderlanders of a conflict zone.

Disabled And State Outreach

Other than that the Operation Sadbhavana (Op Sadbhavana)⁹ was an attempt to win the hearts and minds of the people and to assist the civil administration in their efforts of the reconstruction and expansion of infrastructure. The intervention that locals appreciate the most is the help provided by the Indian Army during medical emergencies and the kind of infrastructure they have provided to far off areas "My village did not have a dispensary and road, and in emergency situations, the Army provides us medicines and also helps to transport patients in their vehicles either to their hospital or to the closest government hospital," said a border resident of Pukharni village in the district of Rajouri.

On the other, in response to repeated cross-border escalation, the government of India has come up with an idea of Community bunkers in villages along the LoC (Pargal, 2015). The bunker sizes have been planned taking into consideration the population, cluster of household, terrain and location of the habitations along the border. The plan will certainly provide relief to the people during intense periods of cross-border tension along the LoC and IB. however, the proposal is short on few counts and for instance, the utilization in terms of hygiene, sanitation, schooling, health, privacy has not been properly addressed in the scheme of community bunkers. The key issue which is intrinsic to the life of the borderlanders is the safety and security of their livestock seemingly been nonessential to the state. All these endeavors of the state in the forms of reservation , individual and community bunkers and other government schemes for the border dwellers have no

specific place for the disabled rather they have left to their fortune where their resilience is the only panacea for their woes in this depressed zone of world.

II. Conclusion

The previous discussion clearly demonstrates that the Jammu and Kashmir borderlands are adorned with a gloomy patchwork of mines, cross-border shelling, amputees, poverty, and marginalization. These resilient individuals face constant marginalisation, including disability, a lack of access to basic resources, poverty, unemployment, and a fragmented social fabric. The overarching conflict narratives—dominated by territorial conflicts, statistical analysis, and power struggles—make the Jammu and Kashmir borderlands nearly invisible. It additionally relegates people disabled by border violence to the periphery.

While mines can be used to prevent infiltration and safeguard borders, their prolonged presence poses significant risks to populations. Compliance with international covenants, such as the Ottawa Treaty (1997) and the Protocols to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (1980), requires balancing security concerns with the humanitarian obligation to prevent harm to civilian populations. They require the dismantling of mines when they are no longer needed for military purposes and encourage the clearance of mine-affected areas. However, in order to secure peace in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), Pakistan must follow the ceasefire accord and prohibit infiltration over the border. Compliance with the 2003 ceasefire accord, which was reaffirmed in 2021, is critical for regional stability. Strict adherence to this agreement, together with increased border security measures such as surveillance and the deployment of cutting-edge technology, can help discourage infiltration attempts. Diplomatic engagement between India and Pakistan, including regular communication via military and diplomatic channels, is critical for controlling tensions.

A compassionate and human-centered approach from all stakeholders is essential. By shining a light on their plight, we can elevate these victims of cross-border violence to the central stage they rightfully deserve, acknowledging their suffering and resilience since the partition. It is time to rewrite the narrative, placing humanity and empathy at its core.

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Endnotes:

¹Evacuee land: Due to the Partition of 1947 and resultant migration of many Muslims to Pakistan, the land left behind by them has been allotted to the refugees who either came from Pakistan(then West Pakistan) or from erstwhile J&K (now Pakistan-administered J&K) to J&K (India).

² The 1999 Kargil war has huge impact on the LoC near Akhnoor sector of Jammu Division where the displacement has manifested multiple issues like that of education, health sanitation etc. and as a result, the temporary camps were erected in the periphery of Jammu city.

³ Anonymous by request.

⁴ Yaseen, Rising Kashmir, July 27, 2014.

⁵The New York Times, January 4, 2002. The Indian Express, May 6, 2002.

⁶Pritam Spiritual Foundation (Poonch): The foundation was founded by Jagbir Singh Sudan in 1990. Since then it has provided artificial limbs free of cost to 3,122 victims of militancy, mine blasts or cross-border firing. Other aids provided include polio calipers, orthoshoes, crutches, wheel chairs, tricycles and hearing aids. Since December 2009, the Army has helped this private initiative by constructing new dormitories for the Artificial Limb Repair Centre that the Foundation supports. It also helped in organizing a camp for those visiting the rehabilitation centre.

⁷The Indian Express, May 6, 2002.

⁸The Kashmir Times, February 8, 2004.

⁹ Operation Sadbhavana was launched by Indian Army in 1998 in rural J&K to reach out to locals and help the civil administration reconstruct basic infrastructure. The Army took up a large number of welfare and development projects and spent Rs 450 crores over the last 14 years.