

**Contested Border and Division of
Families in Kashmir:
Contextualizing the Ordeal
of the Kargil Women**

**Seema Shekhawat
Debidatta Aurobinda Mahapatra**

Contested Border and Division of Families in Kashmir: Contextualizing the Ordeal of the Kargil Women

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Contents

Preface	5
Acknowledgements	8
Chapter I	9
Introduction	
Chapter II	17
Drawing and Redrawing of Borders	
Chapter III	28
Softening of the Borders	
Chapter IV	38
The Forbidden Route	
Chapter V	49
Chronicling Women’s Woes	
Chapter VI	57
Mapping Gendered Hurdles	
Chapter VII	63
Conclusion	
Bibliography	68

Preface

WISCOMP *Scholar of Peace* Fellowships are designed to encourage innovative work by academics, policymakers, defense and foreign affairs practitioners, journalists, NGO workers, creative artists and others. Awarded for academic research, media projects and special projects, the fellowships are seen as an important step to encourage work at the interface of gender and security; conflict resolution and peace. These studies are expected to provide new insights about problems pertaining to security, promote understanding of structural causes of conflict, suggest alternatives and encourage peace initiatives and interventions. The work of the Fellows is showcased in the form of the *WISCOMP Perspectives* and *Discussion Papers* series.

Contested Border and Division of Families in Kashmir: Contextualizing the Ordeal of the Kargil Women questions the state-centred focus of previous studies on the Kashmir conflict by centrally engaging with the issue of its humanitarian costs. By retelling the narratives of families divided by the contested border that carves Kashmir into parts, the authors – Seema Shekhawat and Debidatta Aurobinda Mahapatra, do two things. One, they document the suffering that ordinary people, especially women, have endured as a consequence of the six decade conflict between India and Pakistan. Two, and importantly, they reclaim the geographic space that has been alienated from the population living in the area under the so called realist paradigm, and in so doing seek a recasting of the theoretical and policy debate on security and nationalism in the two countries.

The findings are largely based on a field study in the Kargil and Poonch districts of Jammu and Kashmir using unstructured narrative interviews with people living in the villages bordering the Line of Control (LoC). The sample of interviewees composed primarily of women and men who have managed to, or aspired to, visit family and relatives across the border. In addition to the empirical data, a variety of historical and theoretical sources are used to connect the lived experiences with the history of the region and the current political and economic conditions.

The conflict over Kashmir between India and Pakistan has persisted since October 1947, when after independence both countries staked claim to the area. Since then the conflict has taken a protracted form

between the two neighbors leading to war on three occasions, in 1947-1949, 1965, and 1971 (not including the Kargil incursion and the war-like situation in 1999-2000). The Princely State of Jammu and Kashmir, as it was previously called, was in 1947 divided by the Indo-Pakistani ceasefire line, that with modifications, was institutionalized as the LoC through the Shimla Agreement of 1972. The focus of investigation is the contested border dividing the Kargil district and its impact on the local population living along the border. These impacts are multilayered – from division of families to repeated displacement, shelling and land mines to the presence of security personnel. Hence, the humanitarian impact in Kargil is immense and this work painfully highlights the human suffering that has resulted from the protracted conflict.

While the fact that borderlanders have to confront the realities of state control in a much more rigorous fashion when nation and state borders are not co-terminus, has been established in the literature, the unique condition of the Kargilis has not been thus far the focus of academic research. An emotionally loaded issue in the region is the tragedy of the divided families. When the borders were drawn and redrawn after the wars in 1947-1949, 1965 and 1971, men and women who happened to be on the other side of the border were forced to remain there. Thus families were split – women lost their husbands; mothers lost daughters and sons. Sisters and brothers were separated from each other. The authors have compiled fascinating first-hand accounts of journeys across the LoC and of family reunifications, as well as of failed excursions and disappointments. Shekhawat and Mahapatra bring specific attention to the importance of intra-Kashmir routes across the LoC. They point out how the Srinagar-Muzzaffarabad and Poonch-Rawalakote routes have made possible the reunification of families and facilitated trade. They argue that the opening of the Kargil-Skardu route would have similar benefits.

Previously, not much research has been undertaken on the gendered experiences of the division of Kashmir (although research on the impact of Partition on women in Punjab has been undertaken), thus Shekhawat and Mahapatra's work is also significant from this standpoint. Highlighting the gendered dimensions of borders and life in the borderland, they investigate the implications for women separated from their husbands or family members. They found that even though economic, social and emotional hardships sometimes compelled women to remarry, whilst others chose to remain single and raise their children

alone, the emotional toll on all separated women was widespread. Women, who had never before considered working, had to take up vocation in order to provide for their children. Clearly, also the trauma of losing loved ones had immense effect on the psyche of both men and women. In these circumstances, the borderlanders have used several strategies to organize reunions. Apart from applying for visa and going through circuitous routes to reach their destinations, they sometimes arrange meetings abroad during travels or religious pilgrimages. However, even here women experience several gendered hurdles to meet their relatives again. Low social status, illiteracy and lack of economic resources, are some explanations offered for their inability to apply for passport and visa, arrange for tickets and travel alone to a foreign country. Sometimes also permission from the husband or extended family is denied. Hence, authors are apprehensive that even if the Kargil-Skardu route is opened, these gender structures would make it difficult for women to reunite with their families.

As little work has previously highlighted the gendered experiences of borderland life in Jammu and Kashmir, Shekhawat and Mahapatra are opening up a new field for future research. The specific dynamics of a contested border brings out complex and vibrant experiences not only from a geopolitical perspective, but also from that of the people on the ground. The LoC has divided families and stalled all forms of interaction between the two parts of Kashmir. The opening of the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad route and the symbolic bus ride flagged off by the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on May 7, 2005, as well as the subsequent opening of the Poonch-Rawalakote route in 2006, had, to some extent, accorded fluidity to the india-Kashmir border. The Mumbai attack in November 2008 has severely restricted movement again. Whilst this research has painted the contours of the human costs of the rigid india-Kashmir border, much needs to be accomplished in terms of documenting the positive impact of cross-LoC contact on securing human needs and well-being.

The WISCOMP Research Team

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We are grateful to Shafiq Mughal, his wife Tabassum and other members of their family for facilitating our survey in Poonch and Rajouri. Above all, we would like to extend our thanks to all those who shared their experiences with us. We hope this study will resonate in the concerned circles and make a positive difference by highlighting the plight of the divided people.

We dedicate this work to all those suffering the pangs of separation in divided Kashmir.

We thank our families and friends for their encouragement and support.

Seema Shekhawat
Debidatta Aurobinda Mahapatra

Chapter I

Introduction

Wo waqt bhi dekha hai taarikh ki gahraaiion ne, lamho ne khata ki thi
sadiyon ne sazaa payi hai.

(History has witnessed moments when centuries have borne punishment
for the mistake of a few moments.)

O scientists! O rulers! Before you make bullets, guns and atom bombs,
do read this letter. Come back and tell me where, exactly where the
boundaries of nations lie. Then measure the boundaries again. The
boundaries of love, the boundaries of learning ... And tell me, if you
can see which one ends where.

– *Amrita Pritam*

The time has not come true, the words have not been rightly set; only
there is the agony of wishing in my heart. The blossom has not opened;
only the wind is sighing by. I have not seen his face, nor have I listened
to his voice; only I have heard his gentle footsteps from the road before
my house. The livelong day has passed in spreading his seat on the
floor; but the lamp has not been lit and I cannot ask him into my house.
I live in the hope of meeting with him; but this meeting is not yet.

– *Rabindranath Tagore*

*Panchhi Nadiyaan Pawan ke Jhoke, koi sarhad na inhe roke.
Sarhad insaanon ke liye hai, socho tumne aur maine kya paya
insaan hoke.*

(No border stops birds, rivers and air. Borders are for humans.
What have you and I achieved by being humans.)

– Excerpts from a song in Hindi movie *Refugee*.

Composed in different contexts, these expressions are applicable to
Kashmir and evoke many of the narrative themes of this study, which
explores the pangs of separation that the people of Kashmir are afflicted
with after being separated by the borders drawn and redrawn at the
behest of the states.

A signboard on the side of the Poonch-Rawalakote road carrying the slogan *sarhad zameen baant sakti hain par dil nahin* (boundaries can divide land but not hearts) speaks volumes about the human tragedy befalling the borderlanders. The message was deep and clear. It is this spirit with which people long for reunification with relatives across the divide.

Literature on the Kashmir conflict abounds but most either neglects the humanitarian aspect or makes it secondary or incidental to realist analysis of inter-state relations, while the political dimensions of the conflict are often highlighted at various levels. India and Pakistan, the states among which the major part of princely state of Kashmir is divided, continue to address the concept of security and borders primarily from a narrow perspective.¹ The borders drawn and redrawn in Kashmir during the wars of 1947-1948, 1965 and 1971 get maximum attention at the cost of those who live in that territory. Borderlanders in Kashmir continue to face a range of problems including displacement, occasional cross border firing and shelling, landmines and permanent presence of security personnel in and around their habitations. A least academically researched theme is the suffering of the borderlanders in Kashmir who have faced division of their families due to repeated drawing and redrawing of borders. Thus, one of the major humanitarian tragedies befalling on the families residing on both sides of the arbitrarily drawn borders is the denial of the right to live as a single unit since decades. Though the exact number of families affected by the repeated divisions is difficult to ascertain, majority of the respondents during the course of this study noted that thousands of such families are spread across the divide.

After decades of separation, the opening of Srinagar-Muzaffarabad route in 2005 rekindled hopes of reunion for divided families. The fall of Kashmir's Berlin Wall, so to speak, was only partial. Opening a single route in a region where thousands of divided families have been waiting for decades to reunite was 'too little and too late.' Considering the fact that more divided families reside in Jammu and Ladakh regions, the second intra-Kashmir route from Poonch to Rawalakote was opened in June 2006 in the Jammu region. But the third, much-awaited route in the Ladakh region remains closed despite several official

¹ A part of the Jammu and Kashmir state is under the control of China which India claims rightfully belongs to it.

pronouncements. The closed Kargil-Skardu route has kept hundreds of Shia families of the Kargil district separated from their relatives living in Baltistan. Their reunion continues to remain hostage to the hostility between the two neighbouring countries.

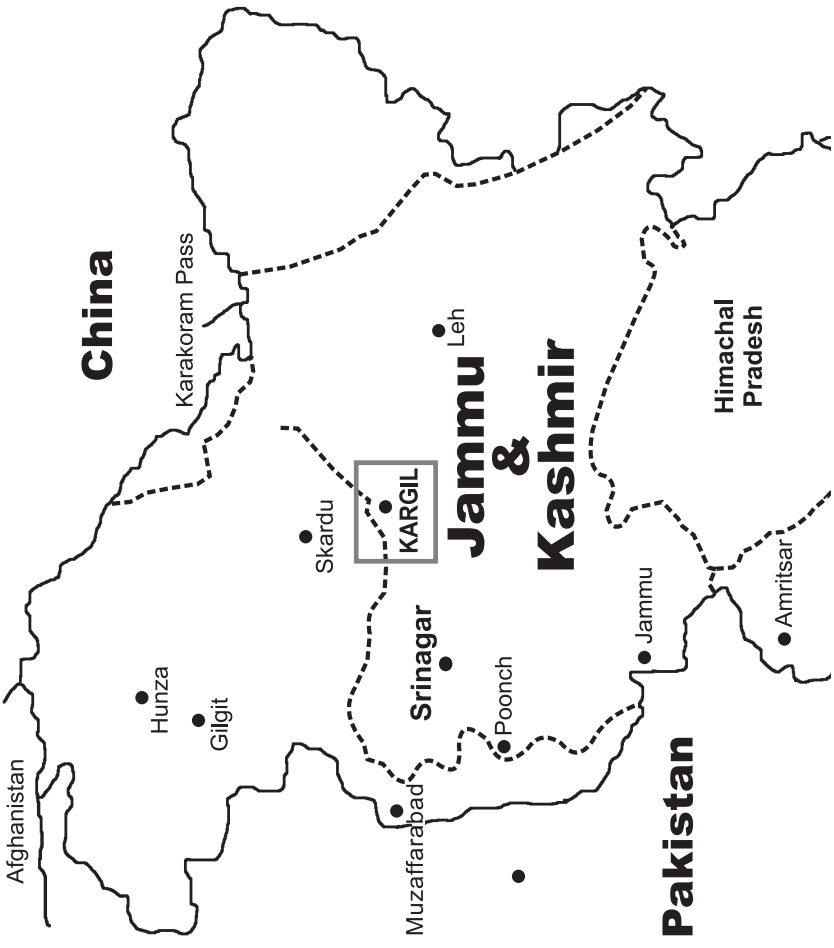
The ceasefires that followed India-Pakistan wars led to repeated drawing of lines of division in Kashmir. Consequently, the Kargil region witnessed recurring changes in its geographic contours with humanitarian consequences. This study, an attempt to understand the Kashmir conflict in its humane aspect, transcends the geopolitical dimensions of inter-state conflict. It focuses not only on the division of Kashmir but also its humanitarian consequences on the people residing on both sides of the dividing line in terms of separation of families. The study focuses on the Kargil region after providing an overview of the division of families all over the state. Women form the core of analysis as they share the burden of division with their male counterparts in general and also suffer in ways specific to their gender. Hence, the study factors gender as an integral part of understanding the human suffering and gives a central emphasis to the experiences of women.

Locating Kargil

Undivided Kashmir, strategically located in the northwestern part of the Indian subcontinent, is currently divided into Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), the Pakistan-controlled 'Azad' J&K (AJK) and Gilgit-Baltistan and the Chinese-controlled territory that includes Aksai Chin. The total area of the region, situated between 32.17° and 36.58° north latitude and 73.26° and 80.30° east longitude, is about 22,22,236 sq. km. 78114 sq. km. is under the control of Pakistan; 42,685 sq. km. under the control of China; and the remaining part is with India.²

As per the 2001 Census, the total population of J&K is 10,143,700. It comprises of three distinct regions – Kashmir, Jammu and Ladakh – with wide variations in climate, topography, demographic and religious compositions, language and socio-cultural practices. Dogras, Chibalis and Paharis mainly live in the Jammu region. Mongolians, Ladakhis and Baltis reside in the Ladakh region. Herdsmen, shepherds, Galawans, Dums, boatmen, minstrels and Watalis are the main groups in the

² "Jammu & Kashmir: A Profile," <http://jammukashmir.nic.in/profile/welcome.html>, (Accessed September 25, 2008).



Kashmir region.³ Besides the ethnic diversity, there is also religious diversity in all the three regions. Both Hindus and Muslims inhabit the Jammu region, where the former outnumber the latter. In the Kashmir region, Muslims form the majority, with a miniscule minority of Kashmiri Pandits and Sikhs (most of them having left valley due to militancy). In the Ladakh region, the number of Buddhists and that of Muslims is almost equal.

J&K is a Muslim-majority state. About 67% of the population practises Islam, 30%, Hinduism, Sikhs constitute 2% and Buddhists and others constitute 1.36%. In Ladakh, the focus area of the study, Buddhists constitute about 46% of the population, and Shia Muslims constitute 47.40%.

Table No. 1
Religious Configuration of Population in J&K

Division	Population	Muslim (Percentage)	Hindu (Percentage)	Sikh (Percentage)	Buddhist/ Other (Percentage)
Kashmir	5,476,970	97.16	1.84	0.88	0.11
Jammu	4,430,191	30.69	65.23	3.57	0.51
Ladakh	236,539	47.40	6.22	–	45.87
J&K	10,143,700	66.97	29.63	2.03	1.36

Source: 2001 Census India District Profiles

Ladakh, the highest plateau of J&K, spans the Himalayan and Karakoram mountain ranges and the upper Indus River valley. Historically Ladakh was a Buddhist kingdom that included Baltistan and Aksai Chin, now controlled by Pakistan and China respectively. Kargil became a separate district in Ladakh in 1979, when it was bifurcated from the Leh district. The Ladakh region of J&K is divided into two districts – Leh and Kargil.

The name Kargil is derived from the words Khar (castle) and Kil (centre). The word Kargil, hence, implies a place located between castles. History corroborates this as it is replete with stories of Kargil being located between many kingdoms. This region, close to the LoC,

³ Frederic Drew, *The Jummoo and Kashmir Territories: A Geographical Account* (Delhi: Cosmo Publication, 1976); Walter R. Lawrence, *The Valley of Kashmir* (Jammu: Kashmir Kitab Ghar, 1966).

is centrally located as it is almost equidistant from Srinagar, Leh and Skardu (the main town in Baltistan). It is situated at a distance of 205 km from Srinagar, 230 km from Leh and 180 km from Skardu. National Highway 1D connects Srinagar to Leh via Kargil. The highway traverses through one of the most difficult mountain passes in the world, called Zoji La, before approaching Kargil. This highway is open for traffic only between June and November every year, due to heavy snowfall at the Zoji La pass. The remaining seven months, Kargil remains inaccessible by road. Proximity to the LoC and being a transit point between Srinagar and Leh has made this region strategically important.

The Kargil district, spread over an area of 14,036 sq. km., comprises Kargil town, seven blocks, 127 inhabited villages and two uninhabited villages. As per the 2001 Census, Kargil has a population of 1,19,307 which includes 64,955 males and 54,352 females. The density of population is only eight persons per sq. km. Many racial stocks, including Dard, Aryan, Balti and Mongoloid, inhabit the district. There is great diversity in the languages spoken in the area. People of Drass speak Shina; those residing in Kirkit, Hardass and surrounding areas speak Balti; those in Zaskar speak Zanskari and those in the rest of the area speak Purkhi. People of Darchiks-Garkone in the Batalik area speak Brokpa.

Racial and linguistic diversities apart, the majority of the people in Kargil belong to the Shia sect of Islam, in contrast to the Kashmir region, where Sunni Muslims are the majority. The Shia Muslims of Kargil do not share much with their counterparts in the Kashmir valley of J&K in terms of history, traditions, food habits, language or even political aspirations.

Methodology

Keeping in view the complexity and the scope of the study, various methods of analysis have been used to understand and document one of the most neglected dimensions of the conflict over Kashmir. Besides looking at the historical roots of the problem of divided families, primary data for the research was collected through field surveys. Keeping in view the continuing turmoil and lack of relevant statistical data, the method of convenience sampling was used to interact with 110 respondents residing in the Kargil region. The respondents mainly included separated wives, mothers, daughters and sisters. Some of the prominent people in this area were also interviewed. Informal

conversations and observations were also used to ascertain views of borderlanders on different issues. A narrative format was used to highlight the pain of women separated from their families. 80% of the respondents responded in their local dialect and the rest spoke in Hindustani (a mixture of Hindi and Urdu languages).⁴

The universe for this survey comprised of women living in the eight border villages on the Indian side of LoC in Kargil. Though many villages were affected during the course of repeated divisions of Kashmir, for this study eight villages where divided families reside were identified. They include Hunderman, Hunderman Brok, Kirkit Badgam, Kirkit Majdass, Kirkit Khunda, Kirkit Haral, Latoo and Kaksar. All these villages are situated in the mountains and most of them are inaccessible by vehicle. One has to walk sometimes for hours to reach the destination. To give one example, one has to trek for about four hours to reach the village of Hunderman Brok that is situated on a mountaintop. Located on the volatile LoC, these villages are inaccessible to outsiders owing to security reasons. Researchers have to obtain special permission from the Senior Superintendent of Police in Kargil to access these sensitive areas.⁵

Both Jammu and Ladakh regions of the state witnessed division of families on a large scale. The authors visited the twin districts of Poonch and Rajouri in Jammu region in April 2007 to understand the perspective of the local people regarding the opening of the Poonch-Rawalakote road in the Poonch district in 2006 and interacted with fifty-two people who had either visited their relatives via the opened road or were aspiring to cross the divide. The comparison of two places (Poonch and Kargil) assumed significance in terms of views and experiences of those who have been able to meet their separated loved ones or at least now have an opportunity to visit and those based in Kargil who are still waiting for the opening of the Kargil-Skardu route. It brought out the

⁴ Mohammad Afzal and Ghulam Dar, natives of Kargil, accompanied the authors throughout the survey and worked as interpreters to translate Balti and Shina languages.

⁵ We would like to note here that the field surveys carried out in J&K while pursuing our respective doctoral researches provided the required background knowledge of the overall scenario in the state. Our association with a project on Kashmir across the LOC and editorship of the quarterly newsletter *Across LOC*, published by the University of Jammu from 2005 to 2007 provided an opportunity to understand the situation in its varied dimensions including the humanitarian one. Since we were based in J&K we could comprehend the situation in the field and our contacts in the region helped in smooth conduct of the survey.

commonalities and specificities of the experiences and demands of the divided people in these two places.

Ethics of Research

While conducting the survey, the ethics of research involving human subjects, including the principles of prior consent, respect of persons and security, were observed. Being aware of the sensitivity of the prevailing situation, utmost care was taken to make the subjects comfortable. The area of the research being violence-prone, prior consent of all the subjects was taken before conducting the interviews. All the apprehensions of the respondents, ranging from doubts about identity of the authors to questions about the purpose of this research, were clarified. The subjects were also assured that the information given by them would not be used for any other purpose except research. Some of the respondents had the impression that the authors could facilitate the opening of the Kargil-Skardu route and could get them passports and permits for their visits across the LoC. It was made clear to them that the study had no policy mandate and was being undertaken to bring their plight to the notice of concerned circles.

Some of the interviews were recorded and later translated and transcribed in English. Many respondents did not feel comfortable recording their voices, so their responses were noted down with simultaneous translation being done by the interpreters. The respondents had the option to skip the questions they were not comfortable with, or to walk out of the interview if they felt uncomfortable. Adherence to these principles helped substantially in carrying out the field survey. Most of the respondents answered all the questions. Only two respondents walked out of the interview. Due to the sensitivity of the prevailing situation, the names of the subjects and their villages have been changed.

Drawing and Redrawing of Borders

“No borders existed in Kargil. The artificial line divided Kargil and consequently our families... We borderlanders continue to suffer unlike other people of the Kashmir region... Hell broke loose on us with the erection of artificial borders...”

Sabina, Hunderman Brok, Kargil

This chapter focuses on the Kashmir conflict from a micro perspective. It brings to the forefront the Kargil version that in some ways is similar, but is also different from the versions one comes across in Kashmir valley and Jammu region. Though there is copious literature on the Kashmir conflict, four factors bring into forefront the urgency to highlight this particular version. First, it is imperative to widen the discourse on the Kashmir conflict by focusing on the unheard accounts. Second, though there is some research on the humanitarian dimension of the Kashmir conflict, on Kargil, it is negligible. Third, it is urgent to understand the conflict through the prism of the victims, who experienced the conflict directly and went through its horrendous consequences. Fourth and most importantly, it appears essential to study the origin of the Kashmir issue, the course of Indo-Pak relations in subsequent periods and their impact from the Kargil perspective, to locate and contextualize the issue of divided families in the broader framework of the conflict.

Despite diverse interpretations of the conflict, its genesis and later developments, the generally accepted notion about Kashmir is that it is the conflict waged between two sovereign nation states in terms of territory. The conflict has led to the division of the region, with the major chunk remaining with India, and rest being divided between Pakistan and China. The bilateral animosities, which were manifested in four wars and numerous war scares between India and Pakistan, impacted the people of the region in both general as well as specific ways. People living in border areas have been the worst victims of Indo-Pak clashes in various ways, ranging from recurring displacement to an uncertain future. Militancy has added to the woes of these people since tension on the border after its inception increased drastically.

One of the most tragic fallouts of the division of Kashmir is the division of the families.

The recent developments that have indicated the process of transformation of the conflict from violent animosity to peaceful deliberation and dialogue have impacted the discourse in Kargil. The opening of two intra-Kashmir routes, meetings of civil society members and members of divided families across the LoC are developments that have generated lot of debate and discussion among Kargil borderlanders about their location in the peace process.

Borders and Borderlanders

Since the emergence of modern states, a definition of security implying defence of the state from external threats by keeping borders inviolable has been in vogue. As markers of the territorial sovereignty of states, borders continue to receive greater attention at the cost of the borderlanders. Without going deep into the diverse interpretations of the concept, it can be safely argued that a border, an essential component of a modern state, indicates the limits of its sovereign jurisdiction by defining geographic boundaries. Borders are signs of the sovereignty and domain of the state. They are both structures and symbols of a state's sovereignty.⁶ They provide a unique political space that makes the state's control over those living within its territorial frontiers absolute.

Unlike the past, when many borders were not clearly defined, in modern times, borders are clearly defined and demarcated, forbidden to be crossed without the consent of the state. Contemporary border studies have focused on the various dynamics of borders, including nation-state building and related themes of sovereignty and security.⁷ While sovereignty is a central motif of most studies on borders, it is certainly not the only one. Though theories like critical geopolitics emphasize the fragile nature of borders and notion of territoriality, largely the border

⁶ For a thematic exploration of the concept of border see, Hastings Donnan and Thomas M. Wilson, *Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State* (Oxford: Berg, 2001).

⁷ See Liam O'Dowd and Thomas M. Wilson, ed., *Borders, Nations and States: Frontiers of Sovereignty in the New Europe* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1996); Michael Anderson, *Frontiers: Territory and State Formation in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996); Barbara Bender and Margot Winer, ed., *Contested Landscapes: Movement, Exile and Place* (Oxford: Berg, 2001); and Pamela Ballinger, *History in Exile: Memory and Identity at the Borders of the Balkans* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

studies have concentrated on the formal arrangements between states overlooking the concerns of borderlanders.

Almost all that occurs in the everyday lives of mainlanders also transpires in the lives of borderlanders of a state. But borders have characteristics that differentiate them from other places in states. Thus, there are things that can only occur at borders, determined by the functions borders play in relations between states, their origin and development.⁸ The sacrosanct nature of the border is one of the dominant themes that affects the lives of borderlanders. They, thus, are part of unique social and political systems.⁹ An examination of borders through the prism of borderlanders, hence, can widen the discourse on borders.

Borders are the places where states meet but people part. Borders have created many of the modern states with no attention paid to the identity, blood relations and shared culture of the people inhabiting the areas. This has led to many inter-state conflicts. There are numerous such examples in Africa and Asia.¹⁰ Many borders have therefore, not only become permanent sources of conflict between neighbouring states, but have also created havoc in the lives of borderlanders by dividing them. When links such as kinship, common residence, common traditions and common interests transcend the physical limits of the state and the people residing across those borders share an integrated identity unrecognized by state, there develops a friction between the rigid borders and the contrary aspirations of the people. They share an identity with their counterparts on the other side of the border but not with mainlanders of their own state. It is also in such situations when nation and state borders are not co-terminus that borderlanders have to confront the realities of state control in a much more rigorous way.

Concepts of border and sovereignty seem to have undergone a change after the end of the Cold War. The waves of globalization have led to the opening up of borders and the relaxation of state controls that limit the movement of people. There is also pressure on states to give due importance to the humane aspect of border conflicts while devising

⁸ Donnan and Wilson, n. 6, p. 4.

⁹ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁰ Some of these conflicts have been dealt in Seema Shekhawat and Debidatta Aurobinda Mahapatra, ed., *Afro-Asian Conflict: Changing Contours, Costs and Consequences* (New Delhi: New Century Publications, 2008).

mechanisms for national security. With ideas of borders becoming humane and sovereignty inclusive, discourse about a world without frontiers has become fashionable. Debates on the extent and depth of this change in the concept of borders have gained ground since many borders have become even more rigid. The notion of a borderless world, advanced as part of globalization theory, thus remains challenged. Borders, despite being extreme examples of the markers of sovereignty and symbols of power, are not going to be endangered entities at least in the near future, notwithstanding all the rhetoric of globalization and borderless world. Most borders remain stiff and continue to make life difficult for those who live around them. This is highly evident in South Asia where rigid borders continue to be markers of sovereignty and independence. Stringent immigration laws, electrified fencing and strict border surveillance all indicate the impregnable nature of borders in this whole geographical matrix despite the fact that diverse ethnic groups and communities are spread across the borders within the region.

The haphazardly drawn border in Kashmir is a unique example in the broader border discourse. The dominant security apparatus on the border continues to thrive in Kashmir despite talk of its softening in recent years. Observation towers, armed security personnel, landmines and electrified fencing remain testament to stiff borders. Despite border transformations in various parts of the world, of which the collapse of the Berlin Wall is an ideal example, the realistic paradigm of inter-state relations in terms of sacrosanct borders and absolute sovereignty remains in Kashmir, at the cost of the borderlanders. The parties not directly affected by border conflicts remain in focus, and those directly affected, in common parlance those caught in the maze of hostile borders, are often relegated to background. The situation of Kargil borderlanders areas is no exception.

Drawing of Borders

Undivided Kashmir, the diverse and beautiful northern part of the Indian subcontinent, with sobriquets like ‘Switzerland of the East’ and ‘Paradise on Earth,’ became a source of contention between the two newly independent states of India and Pakistan in 1947. While the ruler of the princely state, Hari Singh was toying with the idea of remaining independent, both India and Pakistan staked their claim over Kashmir. Hari Singh requested a standstill agreement with both states that was accepted by Pakistan while India asked for further negotiation. Much

remains disputed about the events that followed. According to one argument, Pakistan, which, under the agreement, was entitled to take care of supply and communication, stopped regular supply to the state as a pressure tactic. The uprising in Poonch and later infiltration of armed groups from Pakistan in undivided Kashmir complicated the situation. The invaders occupied the Muzaffarabad region of undivided Kashmir on October 22, 1947 and then advanced towards Srinagar in the Kashmir valley. Hari Singh signed the instrument of accession with India on October 26, 1947. The legality of accession was contested by Pakistan. India on the other hand contended that it had legal rights to the entire pre-1947 Kashmir. On October 27, 1947, Indian troops were sent to Kashmir and a full-scale war started between India and Pakistan.

On January 1, 1949, the ceasefire negotiated by the United Nations created the line of division in Kashmir based on factual positions of the security forces of both India and Pakistan. The ceasefire line was delineated on maps during the Karachi Agreement of July 27, 1949, formally known as the Agreement Between Military Representatives of India and Pakistan Regarding the Establishment of a Ceasefire Line in the State of Jammu and Kashmir. By November 3, 1949, with the help of United Nations military observers, the borders on the map were demarcated on the ground. These developments led to the drawing of the first artificial divide in Kashmir. It also laid the ground for further drawing of borders with overwhelmingly negative consequences for the people of the region.

The artificial division led to a major portion of the princely state remaining with India, leaving a considerable portion in the possession of Pakistan. Pakistan divided the area under its control into two parts. One part called AJK has all the decorations of a modern state such as legislature, executive and judiciary but is not recognized by the United Nations or any state as an independent entity. The other part, comprising Gilgit and Baltistan of undivided Kashmir, is called Northern Areas. Initially Pakistan placed it under the administration of AJK but later took over its direct administration.¹¹

Before the partition of the Indian subcontinent, Kargil was part of Baltistan of the Ladakh region. The people of Kargil shared linguistic, ethnic and religious commonalities with the people of Baltistan.

¹¹ For details on AJK and Gilgit-Baltistan see, Debidatta Aurobinda Mahapatra and Seema Shekhawat, *Kashmir Across LoC* (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2008).

The first Indo-Pak war of 1947-48 bisected the Baltistan region between India and Pakistan, thus leaving the town and district of Kargil on the Indian side while the rest of Baltistan went under the control of Pakistan.

Redrawing of Borders

The division of Kashmir including Kargil in the late 1940s did not settle the issue. In the following decades, the borders were redrawn in the aftermath of the 1965 and 1971 wars. The ceasefires that followed these wars led to redrawing of borders in Kashmir, with the Kargil region witnessing repeated changes in its geographic contours with consequent humanitarian implications.

Though most of the Kargil region had been with India since the first Indo-Pak war, the Kargil heights were under the control of Pakistan. These heights were taken over by India in the war of 1965 but later, under the Tashkent Agreement, they were handed over to Pakistan. In the 1971 war, the Kargil heights were recaptured by India. Following the ceasefire, each side retained their respective gains. India retained the Kargil heights in line with the Shimla Agreement of 1972. The Agreement stipulated that the border would be delineated based on actual control of the region by the two armies on the day of ceasefire. The contested border in Kashmir that was earlier known as Ceasefire Line was rechristened as the LoC, with some alterations based on actual possession of territory at the time of the ceasefire in December 1971. The LoC, of which Kargil shares about 150 km, has been the *de facto* border in Kashmir since 1972.

The redrawn borders in Kashmir following the 1971 war remained sacrosanct until the Pakistani intrusion in Kargil in 1999 with the ostensible objective to take control of the territory, thereby cutting the line of communication to Ladakh and Siachen from the Indian mainland. The limited war fought between India and Pakistan shot Kargil into the spotlight. India retained the Kargil region and thwarted the attempt of Pakistan to occupy the area. Hence, another attempt to redraw the borders in Kashmir, particularly Kargil, failed.

Stiff Borders

Modern day conflicts have lessened the distinction between combatants and civilians as violent wars are fought amidst civilian population. The situation becomes complicated when the battlefields are brought to the

people, making them pawns in the hands of the states involved. This is exactly the case of borderlanders of Kargil. Though they were not participants in India-Pakistan hostilities, they bore the costs of the conflict in multiple ways. The erection of artificial divisions has constructed for them the identity of border residents. Due to the unsettled legacy of division, the violent border remains disturbed and consequently, the people living there lead an unusual life. They have suffered disproportionately due to four wars, several border skirmishes and constant tension.

Border residents get displaced whenever disturbances on the border increase. Wars, war scares, heavy firing, shelling and the mobilization of security forces on the border all lead to their displacement. Borderlanders have been displaced several times – sometimes for few days, sometimes for months and at times, even for years. The peculiarity of the border displacement is that it is temporary but recurring. Displacement, thus, has become a part of life of the borderlanders, wherein they keep shuttling between their native places and the camps, leading a nomadic life. Many of the border people have decamped nearly six times since independence i.e. in 1947-48, 1965, 1971, 1987, 1999 and 2001.

The displaced people live in impoverished circumstances, often herded together in camps. Their problems range from homelessness to lack of basic facilities; from deprivation of traditional livelihood sources to a decrease in the income; from an adverse impact on socio-cultural life to an increase in health problems; from lack of educational facilities and essential services like communication and transport to loss of identity and prospects of leading a dignified life. Termed ‘migrants,’ (this is the term used by the Government of India and of J&K for all those uprooted due to Kashmir conflict) despite being forcefully ousted from their native places, they live at the mercy of the government for relief that is inadequate and irregular.

The end of border hostility enables the return of the displaced to their native places though their sufferings do not end with the end of displacement. They return to their homes to find another set of problems waiting. The border people, living within the distance of 5-7 km of LoC, have to face frequent firing and shelling from across the border. Even a small trigger, for instance a statement from a political leader from either side, instantly leads to firing and shelling. Many times,

even without any apparent reason, exchange of fire takes place. This intermittent violence adds to the suffering of border people.

Non-combatants often become victims of conflicts, not accidentally, but as intended targets.¹² As Skjelsbaek and Smith argue, “They (civilians) are no longer... part of the ‘collateral damage’ consigned to the margins as the perhaps regrettable and probably unintended, but unfortunately, inevitable casualties of military exigencies... in many wars, the civilians are the targets.”¹³ There is increasing toll of civilians in the conflicts, including in Kashmir. No reliable data is available but it is commonly agreed that many people have lost their lives to wars and border skirmishes in this area. All the villages that the authors visited have witnessed severe casualties in terms of human lives, habitation and livestock.

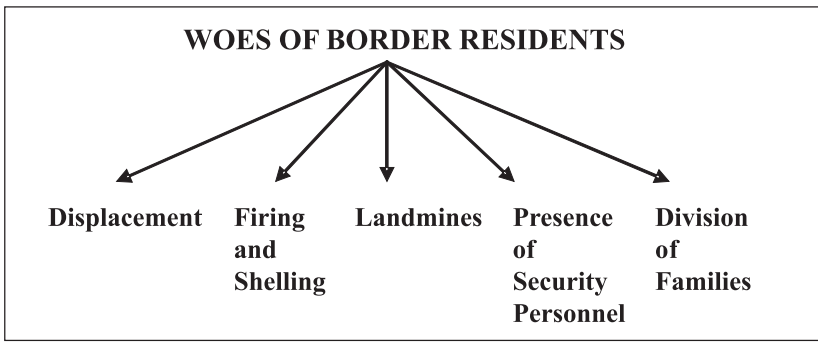
Landmines planted in border areas have added to the woes of the people. During the time of actual hostilities in 1965 and 1971, as well as war scares in 2001 and 2002, mines were planted all along the border, in cultivated land and pastures, around infrastructure and even houses, to obstruct movement from across the border. The end of hostilities leads to removal of landmines from habited areas, but many mines remain undetected. In almost all the border villages, deaths and injuries due to mine explosions are common. But, the assessment of the extent of loss in tangible terms due to landmines, just like firing and shelling, is not feasible due to non-availability of concrete statistics.

As with many other conflicts, conflict over Kashmir has continued for decades and hence, has grave, long-term socio-economic implications. The conflict situation makes normal life problematic and survival difficult for the non-combatants caught in between. The permanent presence of defence personnel in and around the border villages in Kargil has restricted the mobility, and thus, the lifestyle of the people. Their socio-cultural life is hampered as they cannot celebrate social functions the way they might wish to. The relatives living away from the border areas prefer not to visit. Residents find it difficult to find suitable marital prospects for their children, especially boys, since

¹² Secretary-General, United Nations, *Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict*, UN Doc., S/1999/957 (New York: Security Council, 1999), <http://www.un.int/canada/html/s1999957.htm> (Accessed April 6, 2008).

¹³ Inger Skjelsbaek and Dan Smith, *Gender, Peace and Conflict* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001).

people from other areas would rather not send their daughters to live on the tense border. Education and health services and other essential facilities like communication and transport too have taken a backseat as the atmosphere discourages development activities and is not conducive to the private sector investing in these areas. The extent of problem can be gauged from the fact that many border residents want to sell their immovable property, including houses and land, and settle in places far away from the border. However, there are not many buyers for property on the border. Leading a peaceful life amidst the turbulence has become a distant dream for border residents.¹⁴



Militancy as Ordeal Accelerator

The study of divided families brings into focus the correlation between militancy and the sufferings of the border people in Kargil. Though the people of Kargil were neither active nor passive participants in the militancy, their sufferings increased after the onset of militancy in the Kashmir valley.

The militancy or struggle for *azadi* (freedom) started in the Kashmir valley in the late 1980s. A series of violent demonstrations had erupted on various issues in 1988, such as the hike in power tariff and the demand for a ban on Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*. Pakistan’s Independence Day was celebrated with fanfare on August 14, where as India’s Independence Day on August 15 was marked by protests. October 26, the day of the accession of Kashmir to India, was denounced

¹⁴ For a detailed account of ordeal of border residents see, Seema Shekhawat and Debidatta Aurobinda Mahapatra, *Kargil Displaced of Akhnoor in Jammu and Kashmir: Enduring Ordeal and Bleak Future* (Geneva: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2006). Also see Seema Shekhawat, *Conflict and Displacement in Jammu and Kashmir: The Gender Dimension* (Jammu: Saksham International, 2006).

as the day of occupation. The death anniversary of J&K Liberation Front leader Maqbul Butt was commemorated while Sheikh Abdullah's death anniversary was termed *Yom-e-Nijat* (day of deliverance). By 1989, a number of significant armed groups began to operate throughout the valley to fight for *azadi*. There were violent incidents in the valley which later spread to the Muslim-majority hilly areas of Jammu, including Poonch and Rajouri.

Interestingly, Kargil was not engulfed by militant violence despite being a Muslim-majority region. Though located merely at a distance of 205 km from Srinagar, no substantial militancy-related activities were ever traced to Kargil. There are several reasons for this. First, the people of Kargil rejected the arguments put forward by the Kashmiri separatists for independence and for accession to Pakistan.¹⁵ Second, the people of Kargil never had any historical, socio-cultural, linguistic or even emotional linkage with their counterparts in the Kashmir valley despite their common religion. The third and related reason is sectarian difference. The valley people are Sunni Muslims, hence, find affinities with Pakistan, while the Kargil Muslims are Shias and have affinities with Baltistan and Iran (one can notice photographs of both the Ayatollah Khomeinis hanging on the walls of the houses and the shops of the Kargil residents). The majority of Kargil residents want to be reunited with Baltistan but interestingly, they do not want to be separated from India. It is suggested that the 1999 incursion in Kargil by Pakistan was done in the belief that the locals would support the intruders on religious grounds. The people of Kargil not only withheld support but also foiled this machination by helping India instead to checkmate the intrusion.

The sufferings of the Kargil residents increased manifold owing to various reasons, ranging from increased tension and rigidity at the border to a substantial increase in the presence of security personnel; from mining and fencing on the borders to increased cross-border firing and shelling. The interaction with residents in border villages revealed that in the pre-militancy era, the border was relatively porous. Some people recalled sneaking across the border, escaping the gaze of the security personnel. They recounted how their journeys were not smooth and safe. Severe punishment was meted out to those captured by security forces. But with the rise of militancy, this avenue, however risky, has

¹⁵ For the various reasons behind the growth of militancy in Kashmir see, Debidatta Aurobinda Mahapatra and Seema Shekhawat, *Conflict in Kashmir and Chechnya: Political and Humanitarian Dimensions* (New Delhi: Lancers Books, 2007).

closed. There are many other issues as well. Border residents now have to carry identity cards while travelling to and from their villages. Heavy mining to check cross-border infiltration has restricted their movement drastically. During the survey, while travelling to the border villages, the authors noticed landmines planted on both sides of the narrow walkway on the mountain terrain. People remain cautious about these mines but occasional strays can be fatal. Domestic animals often become victims of these mines.

The initiation of the peace process in 2000, despite all the hype, could not address the grievances of the border people in Kargil. Under the peace initiatives, various confidence building measures were launched, including the softening of borders in the Kashmir and Jammu regions; but these people could not get their share of the pie. The peace process witnessed the opening of the two intra-Kashmir routes in the valley and in the Jammu region, the regions that witnessed militancy, but not in Kargil. The people of Kargil never endorsed militancy. Now many of them ponder over the idea of adopting violent methods that their counterparts in the valley and Jammu practised, to highlight their grievances. Many lament their peace-loving culture as a weakness as it could not adequately prod the policy-makers to address their grievances.

The issue of the softening of borders has brought into focus another quite perceptible, but unaddressed, dimension of the suffering of border people, i.e. the forced division of families due to abrupt, haphazard and artificial division.

Softening of the Borders

The LoC runs over 700 km and in Kargil it is about 150 km. A line drawn on maps by two sovereign countries, without consultation with the people living in the region, became an inviolable border. The division of the princely state led to the haphazard division of villages, houses and families. The people wonder how a line drawn in their area without their consent could become a border they could never cross though their families, houses and fields remained on the other side of the line. The divided families are, thus, the worst-affected victims of division of a human habitation. The widest possible protection and assistance should be accorded to the family, which is the natural and fundamental group unit of society, says Article 10 (1) of International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Thousands of families living on either side of the LoC are denied this right following the division of Kashmir. They find it difficult to come to terms with this arbitrary division and consequent impromptu separation. The story of Rashida can be considered a prototype in this context. Eighty-three year old Rashida Begum, living in the village of Kirkit Majdass could not reconcile with this tragedy even after many decades. She attempted several times to cross the divide but was prevented on each occasion by the Indian security forces. Once she succeeded in crossing but was caught by the Pakistani security forces and handed over to the Indian forces. Rashida is desperate to return to her family living in Skardu. She was in Kirkit Majdass to meet her parents but remained stranded after the ceasefire of 1949. While representing the voice of the divided families, she questions the very basis on which this division was done. The humanitarian dimension of the conflict, however, was overshadowed by the political dimension, thus focusing on the geo-strategic aspects of the issue at the cost of the sufferings of the people. Of late, under Indo-Pak peace initiatives, the border was softened by opening two intra-Kashmir routes. But, the softening of the border was confined to some regions, thereby only partially addressing the plight of the divided families.

Peace Process and Dividends

The trauma of divided families only worsens with the passage of time. Their dream of the disappearance of borders to enable family reunion

remains subject to political gambits as time stretches over decades. With every Indo-Pak war and later, with the onset of militancy in the Kashmir valley, the division became sturdier and more sacrosanct. Many ceasefires, negotiations, agreements notwithstanding, the softening of borders became an issue for deliberation only after the commencement of the peace process in 2003.

India and Pakistan agreed on a series of confidence building measures since 2003 to build good relations and eventually resolve the contentious issue of Kashmir. The first major initiative was an agreement for ceasefire on the border that, in most of its history, remained tense. For the first time India and Pakistan agreed to completely halt hostilities on the border, including cessation of occasional firing and shelling. This ceasefire, in effect till date, with occasional allegations of violations, paved the way for many historic developments. The succeeding years witnessed the building of trust between India and Pakistan and historic people-to-people contact in Kashmir. The leadership of both countries appeared to realize the importance of involving the people in the peace process. As a substantial step in this direction, the border in Kashmir was partially reopened to allow divided families to meet.

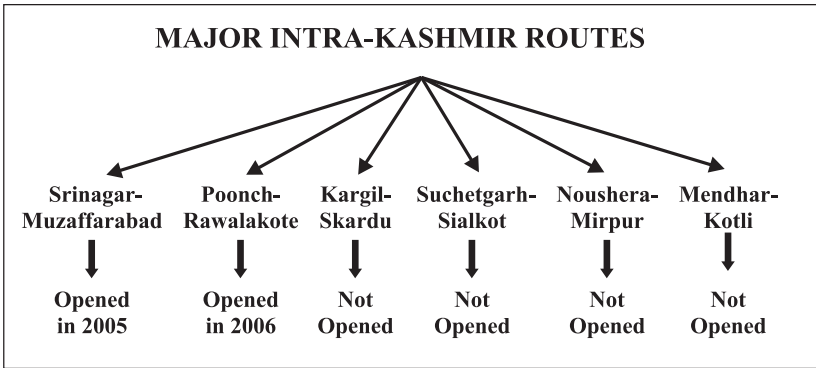
The advocacy for softening the border in Kashmir to build confidence and to engage the people in conflict resolution process was not new. Since the inception of the conflict, leaders like Sheikh Abdullah had advocated the opening of intra-Kashmir routes. In recent years, some separatist leaders with moderate ideology, too, have supported the idea of intra-Kashmir interactions. However, the idea to open the routes seemed not to have crept into the rigid mindset of establishments at New Delhi and Islamabad. The aftermath of the Indo-Pak standoff in 2001-2002 witnessed a perceptible melting down of both countries' rigid positions as they deliberated in 2003 on the prospects of opening of intra-Kashmir routes. The atmosphere appeared conducive for such an initiative as militants of different hues abided by the ceasefire. The official agreement was announced on February 16, 2005, when then Indian External Affairs Minister K. Natwar Singh visited Pakistan and met the then Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf at Rawalpindi. The contents of the agreement included: commencing the Thar Express train service; opening respective consulates in the cities of Mumbai and Karachi; and most importantly, starting an intra-Kashmir bus service between Srinagar in J&K and Muzaffarabad in AJK. The bus service

was termed the ‘mother of all confidence building measures’ and pronounced ‘a step towards bridging the divide in Kashmir.’ It was heralded as a ‘humanitarian measure,’ which did not affect positions of India and Pakistan on the conflict.

Despite the radical position of leaders like the Hurriyat’s Syed Ali Shah Geelani who called the bus service, ‘a clever ploy by the Centre (New Delhi) to sideline the real issues,’ the fact remains that the development beckoned a new era in the region as the earlier state-centric approach to resolve the conflict was sidelined by the people-centric approach. Who could predict that borders built in late 1940s would become flexible in 2005 just six years after the latest Indo-Pak war in Kargil?

The softening of the border helped in myriad ways to address the grievances of the people. It helped bridge the divide between the people. The years from 2005 to 2007 witnessed the visit of five civil society delegations from Pakistan-controlled Kashmir to J&K, by intra-Kashmir bus services. The mutual interactions of these people from both sides of the divide provided an opportunity for them to think independently, separately from the standpoint of their respective governments. The talks in Jammu (September 2005, which the authors also attended) and New Delhi (September 2005 and May 2007) provided the occasion for several leaders and activists from J&K, AJK and Gilgit-Baltistan to express themselves on a single platform. The interactions also provided an opportunity to people from both sides of the LoC to know each other and revive old sentiments of belongingness and fraternity. The optimism generated by these interactions becomes highly significant as the resolution of Kashmir issue, with the momentum set by the involvement of the people, appeared feasible after long years of turmoil and frustration. The atmosphere became congenial as the people spoke from their hearts and debated openly about their future, without any inhibition or restriction. The global powers, too, recognized the opening of cross-border routes as an effective step in reducing tensions between states.

The economic dimension is quite significant, as it has opened up prospects of intra-Kashmir trade as well as prospects of development in a region that possesses the characteristics of an integrated economic unit. More importantly, the softening of the border has immense significance in alleviating the trauma of separated families.



Rolling of the Historic Bus

The Srinagar-Muzaffarabad road was the first intra-Kashmir route to open on May 7, 2005. Thirty members of divided families from either side of the LoC were allowed to take the fortnightly bus service. The cumbersome process to facilitate travel started in March. With regard to procedural norms, Indian citizens have to apply at the Regional Passport Office – the designated authority to evaluate applications, verify identities and issue entry permits after getting clearance from Pakistan. On March 14, the distribution of travel forms started. Over 5000 hopefuls queued up for 3000 travel forms to board the bus. Forty applicants were selected, of which Pakistan cleared twenty-nine names. These passengers, who were eagerly waiting to board the bus, had a close shave on April 6, less than eighteen hours before the scheduled departure, when *fidayeen* (suicide bombers) attacked the Tourist Reception Centre at Srinagar where the passengers were lodging. Eight of them pulled out from the travel out of fear. Twenty-one passengers finally boarded the 35-seater deluxe bus flagged off by the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Chairperson Sonia Gandhi at Sher-e-Kashmir Stadium. The vehicle, christened Caravan of Peace, carrying ‘soldiers of peace’ set off on a 170-km journey to reunite passengers with their families after nearly six decades. Manmohan Singh, on this occasion, said, ‘the caravan of peace is on its way, nothing can stop it now,’ thus renewing the hopes of thousands of divided families across LoC to meet their separated relatives.

Nasiruddin was one of the first lucky ones to board the bus. He was eighteen months old when he travelled on the same road with his mother to meet his aunt residing in Bijhama, a village of the district of Baramulla

in the Kashmir valley. Neither Nasiruddin nor his mother could make the trip back to their hometown due to the abrupt closure of roads following the division of Kashmir, though they could catch a glimpse at the other side of Kashmir. “My mother’s last wish was to be buried in Muzaffarabad ... it could not happen,” recalled Nasiruddin. “When I went on the Hajj, my one and only prayer was that I should be able to travel back to Muzaffarabad on this road before I die and meet cousins, nephews, aunts and uncles, some of whom I never met,” he said. Many of his co-villagers who could not get the permit to board the bus, gave him things to carry with him – a letter, a parcel or merely a message of a few words for their separated relatives. All the passengers on board had similar stories to narrate.

Poonch-Rawalakote Bus

On June 20, 2006, another intra-Kashmir route, between Poonch in J&K and Rawalakote in AJK, was opened. Poonch, partitioned during the first war in Kashmir, also witnessed large-scale division of families. The decision to open the route, the first one south of the Pir Panjal mountain range, was taken after deliberations between India and Pakistan in New Delhi in May 2006.

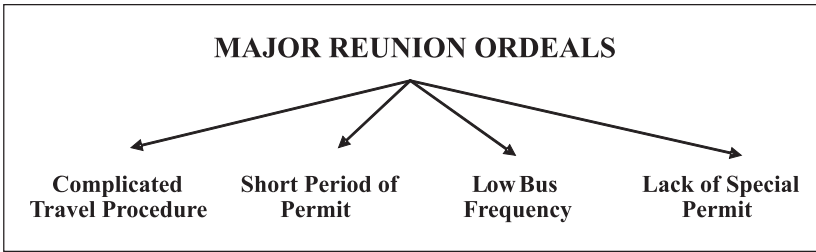
The stories of separation narrated by the people in Poonch are heart-rending. Mohammad Banu, a resident of Surankote, was highly nostalgic while narrating the story of separation from her brothers and their families who are currently settled in Muzaffarabad. Tears, for many separated family members, were the only way of expressing their pain. For many, tears also became a way of welcoming their separated relatives. Veena Devi, as a sixteen years old, had gone to Kotli, then part of undivided Kashmir but now in AJK, to meet relatives in 1947. She could not return due to war. She converted to Islam after marriage. Her elder brother, Surya Prakash, visited her via the Poonch-Rawalakote bus after painstakingly tracing her whereabouts. Their meeting was extremely moving, according to Loknath, an advocate in Rajouri District Court who accompanied Surya Prakash. “Tears were telling both – the pangs of separation as well as the happiness of reunion,” recalled Loknath.

During the course of field survey, unlike other border areas in Kashmir, a new dimension in the context of divided families in Poonch appeared. Just like Veena, all the Hindus and Sikhs of Poonch who were stranded in AJK following division of Kashmir have converted to Islam, while

the Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims who were left behind on the Indian side of Poonch retained their religious identities. The socio-cultural dynamics of this conversion are the subject of in depth study that is beyond the scope of current research. Religious differences among the members of divided families, however, have not been able to obliterate familial ties and thereby, longing for reunion. In February 2007, about two hundred people from the Sikh community in Poonch gathered to receive one of their separated relative from AJK who happened to be a Maulvi. The divided families of Poonch, irrespective of religious differences, are quite eager to maintain familial ties through various ways, including marriage. Eighty year old Bansilal Saigal, a resident of Poonch originally from Kotli in AJK, narrated how his heartrending experience of division was transformed into joy during his trip to his native place in March 2007. Saigal met his deceased brother's son Maqbool and his family for the first time. To make this family reunion strong and enduring, Maqbool expressed a desire to marry Saigal's granddaughter with his son Farooq. The establishment of marital ties among the members of divided families is another subject of discourse as different religions prescribe different codes for marriage. The point the study intends to highlight is that after the opening of the route, the desire for reunion and maintaining familial ties has become stronger.

Not a Smooth Journey

Hundreds of people have travelled through the two opened intra-Kashmir routes. The survey in the Poonch and Rajouri districts, where the authors interviewed fifty-two people, including those who have already travelled through the open route and those who are still waiting, has brought into focus the ordeal in crossing the newly flexible border. "The road has been levelled to make the bus roll efficiently, but the journey is not smooth for those who intend to travel in the bus," grumbled thirty-four year old Meena Devi, whose attempts to board the Poonch-Rawalakote bus to carry the ashes of her mother to her native place in Rawalakote has not yielded any result. Interaction with the borderlanders of Poonch has brought to light scores of hurdles that have kept their dreams of reunification unfulfilled. These range from complicated travel procedure to the short period of permit, from the low frequency of the bus to the lack of provisions for special permits in case of emergencies. Many people could not apply for a permit since the procedure is quite complicated, involving not only filling up forms, but also verification by the Criminal Investigation Department, counter-



verification and clearance from Pakistan. Most aspirants need professional assistance to fill up the form that is neither readily available nor cost-effective.

There is a fear that the peace process can be reversed at any time because Indo-Pak relations are hardly amenable to predictions. The experience of the past sixty years makes it difficult for borderlanders to believe in the durability of the peace process. Hence, everyone is desperately trying to visit their relatives before the window of opportunity closes. The patience of many runs out as the complicated permit procedure usually takes one year and at times beyond that if a single formality is left out. After getting the permit, people have to wait for their turn to board the bus. For many, the entire ordeal and the long wait proved too much and too long, and their last wish for a reunion with their separated relatives or to visit their birthplace remained unfulfilled. Seventy-eight year old Nafisa Bi died in March 2007 while waiting for the clearance after having applied for a bus permit eight months earlier. Eighty-two year old Sabeena Begum received her permit seven months after applying but could not cross the LoC to meet her brothers. She died waiting for her turn to board the fortnightly bus. “My frail mother had the spirit to wait for boarding the bus ... but her mortal body could not confront the time. She died while waiting for her turn to board the bus,” said Sabeena’s daughter.

The chance to meet relatives after decades of separation raised expectations on part of the divided families. People like Rabiya argued that the length of the permit time, 15 days, extendable to 28 days maximum, was very short. She calculated, “Two days are usually lost in travel and travel-related activities, which leaves very little time to meet all the family members.” Others complained about lack of a special permit system in case of emergencies like death or marriage. It had become more difficult for people to restrain themselves from participating in familial events after the routes have opened. “Earlier

we were dying to see our relatives across the LoC but knew it was almost impossible. The time has changed. We now want to be part of all the familial activities across the LoC ... Marriage can be planned but what about death? ... I went to AJK in November 2006 but had to come back when the permit ended. Later, my mother got ill. My brothers sent me a message about her illness and her desire to see me once again. But I could not go... it is almost impossible to get a permit again.... My mother died in February 2007,” lamented fifty-six year old Ameena Begum.

There are members of divided families who want more than a temporary reunion. They want to live and die in their native places. A resident of J&K, who remained stranded in AJK for sixty years, could fulfil his wish to die in his native place. The opening of the Poonch-Rawalakote road enabled eighty year old Ghulam Mohammad to visit his ancestral village of Loran on July 16, 2007 to meet his brother and his family. Ghulam wanted to stay permanently in J&K. On being refused a permanent stay, he approached the J&K High Court. The High Court, on August 25, 2007 allowed him to stay in J&K till further orders. Waiting for ‘further orders,’ Ghulam breathed his last on January 12, 2008. His body was laid to rest in his ancestral village beside the graves of his parents after certain official formalities. Not all are as fortunate as Ghulam.

Moving Beyond Symbols

In January 2008, Taj Moiuddin, then Minister for Consumer Affairs and Public Distribution in the J&K government, stated that 5786 people from divided families travelled along the opened Srinagar-Muzaffarabad road from April 2005 to December 12, 2007. Of these, 3165 passengers from AJK travelled to J&K while 2621 passengers crossed over to AJK from J&K.¹⁶ Comparing these figures of the passengers with the figures of divided families that run into thousands leads to the conclusion that the benefit of the soft borders has not permeated to all the needy.

In its meeting on July 18, 2008, the bilateral Working Group on Cross-LoC Measures agreed upon various steps to make the drive smooth. These included an increase in the frequency of the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad and Poonch-Rawalakote bus services from fortnightly

¹⁶ “786 members crossed over via Uri-Muzaffarabad border road,” <http://www.indopia.in/India-usa-uk-news/latest-news/67107/National/1/20/1>, (Accessed March 15, 2008).

to weekly, introducing triple entry travel permits, expedited processing of travel requests in emergency cases and transfer of application forms through e-mail for expedited clearance.¹⁷ These proposed steps were approved by the foreign secretaries of India and Pakistan in their meeting in New Delhi on July 21, 2008. It would be interesting to see how far the implementation of these policies facilitates across border travel.

On the Poonch-Rawalakote road, the rush of people is still evident but the initial interest shown in the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad route has gone down as this particular region has very few divided families. The Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus service largely had a symbolic value. This can be argued since the bus services were started mainly for the reunion of divided families and, as already mentioned, the Kashmir valley did not have large number of divided families. The culture and practices in the Kashmir valley are different from those prevailing in other parts of the J&K as well as across the LoC. Before 1947, only the Muzaffarabad district of present-day AJK was in the Kashmir region. The rest of the areas of Pakistan-controlled Kashmir were either in Jammu or in the region of Ladakh. Even Muzaffarabad, in linguistic and cultural terms, was closer to the Jammu region. Most divided families are in the districts of Rajouri and Poonch in the Jammu region, and Kargil and Leh in the Ladakh region. The population in Pakistan-side Kashmir is not 'Kashmiri' in the same sense as the term is ascribed to the people of the Kashmir valley on the Indian side. Largely the people of Poonch-Rajouri in Jammu and those of Kargil and Leh in Ladakh share ethnic, emotional, linguistic, cultural and familial ties with the people living across the LoC. Half of the passengers who came from AJK on April 7, 2005 via the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad route had relatives in the Poonch district of Jammu. They had to travel 170 km from Muzaffarabad to Srinagar, another 300 km from Srinagar to Jammu and again, 250 km from Jammu to Poonch to meet their relatives. They could have reached their destination within hours if the Poonch-Rawalakote route were open by that time, as through this route, they would have been required to travel less than 200 km.

The Srinagar-Muzaffarabad route was the first one to be opened for the diplomatic capital it held and it was hyped to demonstrate the friendly

¹⁷ "India, Pakistan discuss measures to boost trade, transport," http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/south-asia/india-pakistan-discuss-measures-to-boost-trade-transport_10073228.html, (Accessed August 14, 2008).

relations between the two countries. This route acquired hype at the cost of other intra-Kashmir routes with greater utility and appeal. The ‘mother of all confidence-building measures,’ brought smiles to the faces of the thousands of divided families across the LoC since they hoped that this symbolic gesture would pave the way for the opening of other intra-Kashmir routes in their regions.

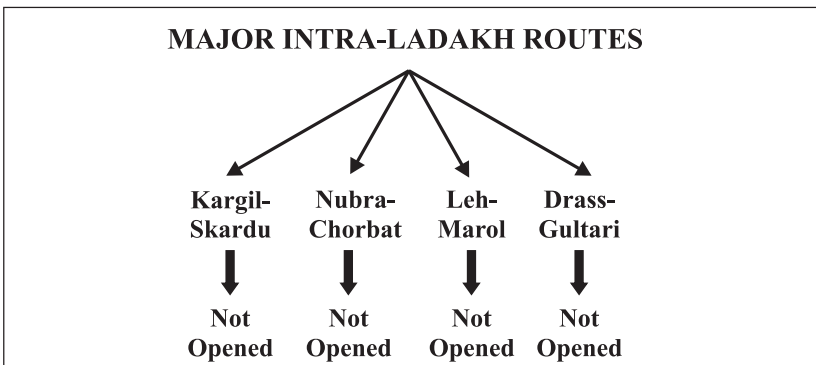
The need to move beyond symbolic gestures and look at the prospects of bringing further flexibility into the border by opening other intra-Kashmir routes, including Poonch-Rawalakote, Kargil-Skardu, Suchetgarh-Sialkot, Noushera-Mirpur and Mendhar-Kotli, was increasingly felt in policy circles, with the demand of the local people to open these routes. The first two of these routes are quite significant as far as addressing the issue of divided families is concerned. The Poonch-Rawalakote road opened in 2006. Ladakh, where the opening of the Kargil-Skardu route could have led to the reunion of divided families residing in the hilly and mountainous areas, remained closed.

The Forbidden Route

The route from Kargil to Skardu that once was full of life and activities became a forbidden route in the post-partition era, with the division of families and their culture and economic life. The division of Kargil and the Shia families living in it, particularly in the border areas, did not halt in 1947-48, but continued afterwards during the Indo-Pak wars in 1965 and 1971. The forbidden route in Kargil entered into the discourse as the humanitarian dimension of the Kashmir conflict came to the forefront with the launch of the peace process.

The launch of the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad and Poonch-Rawalakote bus services rekindled the hopes of the divided families in Kargil. The route has immense humanitarian significance as the Kargil region has a large number of divided families in villages perched in difficult mountain terrains. Despite the fact that India and Pakistan have agreed to open the Kargil-Skardu route, the route remains closed, adding to the trauma of separated families. Even as Kargil was imprinted on the national consciousness after 1999 India-Pakistan LoC conflict, the dividends of the Indo-Pak peace process have failed to reach here. The tragic stories of separation, urge for reunion and a peace bus to fulfil this dream remain significant part of the local discourse, which has failed to find audience at the national and international level.

The traditional routes in the Ladakh region were Kargil-Skardu, Nubra-Chorbat, Leh-Marol and Drass-Gultari, among which the Kargil-Skardu road was most frequently used. Its closure doomed the life of the local



people and fractured their syncretic culture as well as livelihood. This chapter analyzes the route, the benefits of its opening and the reasons behind its forbidden nature.

Importance of the Route

The importance of the Kargil-Skardu route can be gauged from a few key points. First, the utility of the road lies in its durability in the winter months. Kargil, which was once the hub of Central Asian trade, was cut off geographically from the rest of the world in the later half of the 20th century due to border tensions. It was only in 1974 that the region was opened by India to foreigners, but it could no longer become an economic hub due to the closure of traditional routes. Currently, the only window to this region is from Indian mainland. The region remains largely cut off even from India, including J&K, for about seven months every year due to inclement weather and resulting heavy snowfall on the Srinagar-Leh national highway. The Zoji La pass on this national highway remains intractable during these months (October-April). The Kargil-Skardu route that lies in a cold but arid region remains in pliable condition even in these harsh months. The local people argue for this route to be opened as it can be used in winters to go to Skardu and other areas of Baltistan.

The local people express optimism that the opportunity provided by the peace process can transform Kashmir from a region of ‘cross-border terrorism’ into a region of ‘cross-border tourism’. The reopened road can turn the world’s highest mountain region into an even larger theatre of mountain tourism. From the foothills of Mount Everest in Nepal to Karakoram in Gilgit-Baltistan, the road connection may encourage adventure tourism in the region. Thousands of international tourists visit Ladakh and Baltistan every year. These tourists can enjoy the beauty of the region as a whole if the road link is opened.

This traditional all-weather route can bring prosperity to the region by promoting trade across the divide. The border has not only stifled socio-cultural ambience of the people but also hampered their economic development. The local people argue that the route would bring economic benefits. From Skardu, apricot (it is said the Skardu variety of apricot is of best quality),¹⁸ raisins and medicinal herbs can be brought

¹⁸ The authors spotted the apricot fields on the Pakistan side of the LoC, visible from the last Indian security post, have become barren, ostensibly due to the planting of mines, non-cultivation as well as negligence due to fear of war and military intervention.

to Kargil, while from Kargil, sugar, tea, garments and vegetables can be sent to Skardu. Tourist resorts and stalls can be constructed on the roadside, in which local people can sell their products.

On a wider scale, the opening of the route can lead to the revival of the traditional silk route. The Ladakh region, including Kargil, as already mentioned, was a traditional trade route between India, West Asia, Central Asia and China. The whole region was a reliable trade route and was traversed by caravans carrying textiles, spices, raw silk, carpets, dyes and other goods. The Munshi Aziz Bhat museum situated in Kargil town is evidence of this trade history. The museum, a rich storehouse of silk route trade artefacts including shoes, caps and headgear, machetes, guns, overcoats, utensils and cottons, stands witness to the trade via this route. The silk route played a seminal role in transporting not only commodities for trade, but also knowledge and ideas. Notwithstanding the rugged terrain and apparent remoteness, merchants, explorers, spies, soldiers as well as preachers traversed the region. The flow of Buddhism from India through Central Asia to China and the flow of Sufism from Central Asia to India are two major examples of this phenomenon.¹⁹

The opening of the road can bring the spotlight back on the belt that has for centuries remained a confluence of civilizations. It may also lead to the formation of a regional silk route economic cooperation organization, which can look at prospects of exploring energy resources and build pipelines from Central Asia; and establish a separate independent communication corridor and free trade area. It can also be used to check terrorist activities and drug trafficking in the region. The opening of the route, and consequent trade and people-to-people interactions may reduce tensions and work as a bulwark for peace and stability in the region.²⁰

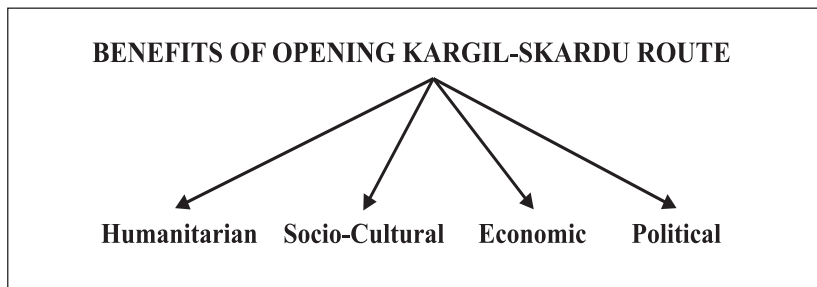
The cultural significance of the route will be immense. As mentioned earlier, before 1947, Baltistan and Ladakh were parts of a single entity, sharing a common geography, language, culture and history. There is a palpable excitement among Balti-speaking families that the opening of the route will enable them to revive their common culture.

¹⁹ For India's Central Asian connections through the famed silk route see Debidatta Aurobinda Mahapatra, *Central Eurasia: Geopolitics, Compulsions and Connections, Factoring India* (New Delhi: Lancers Books, 2008), 149-155.

²⁰ Ibid.

Balti culture, which binds the Kargil and Skardu belt, is already undergoing a process of revival. Many Kargil-based poets, musicians and artists are popular in Baltistan. Good quality music cassettes produced in the Balti language in Kargil are in great demand in Baltistan. Khadim Hussain, a popular singer of Kargil, has become a rage across the LoC as hundreds of his cassettes have made their way to Baltistan. Radio Pakistan Skardu is a popular means of information and entertainment for thousands of Balti-speaking people living in Kargil. The road will provide impetus to cultural exchange across the divide.

One of the main arguments behind the opening of the route is that it can facilitate the reunion of divided families. This aspect of the route will be dealt in detail in later pages.



Faltered Promises

After the opening of two other intra-Kashmir routes, followed by assurances from leaders of both India and Pakistan of opening the Kargil-Skardu route, the people of the region thought their life long dream was about to be realized. They hoped they too would benefit from what General Pervez Musharraf called the ‘fleeting moment’ of history which needed to be capitalized as those moments would not recur. On January 26, 2005, underlining the need for reopening of the Kargil-Skardu road as crucial, then Governor of J&K Lt Gen (Retd.) S.K. Sinha said a new era of goodwill and friendship would be established between two countries as ‘strong winds of peace are sweeping our sub-continent.’ The opening of the Kargil-Skardu road would give impetus to the ongoing peace process, besides helping divided families to meet, said the Governor.²¹ While interacting with a group of people from the border areas of Kargil, Sinha said he had

²¹ *The Daily Excelsior* (Jammu), January 26, 2005.

taken up the issue of this vital link road with the Indian prime minister. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, during his visit to Kargil in June 2005 to lay the foundation stone for a hydroelectric project, said, "I have been told that the people of Kargil are keen on having the traditional links restored with Gilgit and Baltistan. I am aware that this is a traditional route through which trade was conducted between Ladakh and Kashmir for ages... We are examining a proposal to start talks with Pakistan to open the Kargil-Skardu road."²² Civil society members from both sides of Kashmir too showed keen interest in opening this route. The former Chief Justice of AJK, Abdul Majeed Mallick, said, "There are important traditional routes which should be opened to make the peace process inclusive and also to address the humanitarian issue of divided families... The opening of the Skardu-Kargil road link is important. Ladakh and Gilgit-Baltistan comprise a major portion of the total area of the undivided state of Kashmir and this region cannot be excluded from this process."²³

In order to access the route from the Indian mainland, one has to travel from Srinagar towards Kargil town situated at a distance of 205 km. About six kilometer before reaching Kargil town one has to turn north by crossing the Singo river on a route closed for public except the local borderlanders with identity cards. Then alongside the river one has to travel about six kilometer to the last post of Indian army, an indication of end of Indian side of the state of Kashmir. Though the movement of people is restricted ahead of this, the route moves onward to Baltistan. From the last post of the Indian army Skardu is about 169 km and can be reached within six hours. Despite long years of negligence and non-use, the route is still intact and clearly demarcated and with minor expenditure, the route can be readied for opening. At the last Indian army post, one can see the route is blocked by a stonewall. All that needs to be done is remove the stone wall. When that historic event will take place remains to be seen.

The Hurdles

Notwithstanding analyses about the route and its benefits and the assurances, the route remains closed thus leading to the central question: what are the obstacles against the opening of the route? The readiness

²² Shujaat Bukhari, "Talks for Opening Kargil, Skardu Road: Manmohan," *The Hindu* (Delhi), June 12, 2005.

²³ Personal interview, August 6, 2005, Jammu.

shown in opening the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad and Poonch-Rawalakote roads is lacking regarding the opening of the Kargil-Skardu route that could prove equally or even more beneficial from a humanitarian as well as economic point of view. The Kargil residents' observations in this regard point towards intransigence on part of Pakistan due to varied reasons. Some of them stated that Pakistan is apprehensive that route opening may add to the Shia-Sunni tension in the Gilgit-Baltistan region which has lost hundreds of lives due to the ethnic strife. Pakistan apprehends, they argue, linking peaceful Kargil region to troubled Gilgit-Baltistan may stoke the fire of dissent in its controlled territory.²⁴

The Vice President of Islamia School, Sheikh Ahmed Mohammadi, a highly venerated Shia leader in the region, pointed out that people in Skardu and other parts of Baltistan live in a poorer condition than their fellow beings in Kargil. The kind of freedom enjoyed by people on the Indian side has not been granted to the people in Baltistan.²⁵ The Gilgit-Baltistan people have no representation in the Pakistani Parliament or the AJK assembly. The political status of the region remains in limbo. It is administered through an executive council, fully controlled by the Islamabad-based Ministry of Kashmir Affairs and Northern Areas.²⁶ On the other hand, the Ladakh region has representation in the Indian Parliament and the state assembly. All development processes in the areas have been devolved to the local level, like hill development councils in Ladakh. According to Mohammadi, Pakistan fears the opening of the route might open a Pandora's Box in the Gilgit-Baltistan area, leading to an explosion of years of pent up popular dissatisfaction and anger.

Related to this, if a journalist²⁷ from Skardu is to be believed, is the reason of fear among the Pakistan authorities of losing control over the strategically located Gilgit-Baltistan. Pakistan fears the opening of route may embolden the people on its side of the divide to intensify the ongoing demand for independence after interacting with their counterparts in the democratic Kargil region. The AJK government

²⁴ For details on sectarian turbulence in Gilgit-Baltistan see Mahapatra and Shekhawat, n. 11, 115-141.

²⁵ Personal Interview, July 25, 2006, Kargil.

²⁶ Recently in August 2009 the government of Pakistan proposed 'autonomous' status to this area which has been contested by the local leaders on the ground of its dubious nature.

²⁷ Bashir Khan, Personal Interview, July 6, 2006, Jammu.

works under the guidelines given by Islamabad, thus Pakistan did not object in approving the bus services in this area linking its city Muzaffarabad to Srinagar and Rawalakote to Poonch. An anti-Pakistan movement is going on in Gilgit-Baltistan, hence the Pakistani reservations against opening of the route.

The location of the Karakoram Highway in the Gilgit-Baltistan region, which links China with Pakistan's Gwader port, is another area of concern for Pakistan. Opening the road that is linked to the strategic highway, Pakistan apprehends, will provide India an opportunity to monitor the developments in the region.

Trauma of Separation

The LoC in Kargil, as in most other border areas of Kashmir, cuts through villages and houses, leaving behind a long history of pain, suffering and tragedy. Sixty-seven year old Mariam, living in the village of Kirkit Badgam situated on a hilltop at about five km from LoC, expressed grief as she has been unable to meet her husband for the last thirty-eight years. Her village came to the Indian side after the 1971 war and her husband, away on work, remained stranded on the other side of the border. Mariam exchanges occasional letters with him, but this is obviously not enough. Eighty seven year old Naziya Bi has been waiting to meet her son living in Skardu for more than five decades. A trader by occupation, her son Ghulam Rasool found himself on the wrong side at the time of 1965 ceasefire. He remained stranded in Skardu. The mother-son duo has not been able to meet even once since then. There has been no exchange of letters since 1989. Nazia is not sure whether she was able to inform Ghulam Rasool about his father's death in 1994 as she did not get any reply to her letter. Hundreds of such stories are scattered throughout the landscape of Kargil. Though they form part of the same narrative associated with the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad road and Poonch-Rawalakote roads, the main difference is that amidst the political euphoria of the peace process and bus diplomacy, these voices from Kargil remain unheard and consequently, their grievances, unaddressed.

Most of the respondents were quite disillusioned with the developments of the last few years, during which two intra-Kashmir routes were opened whereas the crucial Kargil-Skardu road in their region remains closed, thus further adding to their suffering. As already mentioned, there is a growing resentment among the people of Kargil that the

dividends of the India-Pakistan peace engagement have been shared by the influential people of both the countries and later by those of Kashmir and the Jammu region. To quote forty-two year old Aziza Ahmed living in Latoov village, “Any peace dividend so far has been gobbled up by the Indian and Pakistani influential people. We find it astonishing that powerful people and social activists are allowed to visit the other country but nobody seems to be bothered about our plight... What is more important, their meeting with each other and some resolutions or our meeting with our separated relatives?... Of late the morsels of peace dividends that reached Kashmir went to the people of the Kashmir valley and later to Jammu... Our distress continues to remain hostage to the hostility between India and Pakistan.”

The young people like thirty-six year old Sakina Begum believe the peaceful nature of the Kargil people probably worked as an obstacle on the path of opening the route and argued that the government ‘listens to those who resort to violence,’ thus pointing to the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad route in the Kashmir valley. Sakina, who is waiting to meet her uncle in Skardu, said “India and Pakistan fought three wars and divided us by erecting artificial borders... Kashmiris resorted to violence and eventually forced the governments to open the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad route that had the least humanitarian value as compared to the Kargil-Skardu route... our silence is our weakness... if we would have resorted to violence, the Kargil-Skardu route would have been the first one to open.” Her words may sound emotional and even cynical to many but the echoes of her sentiments can be found in the narratives of many of the borderlanders of Kargil.

Skardu, where most of the divided families reside, is less than 200 km from Kargil and can be reached in a few hours. At present, the divided families living in Kargil have to travel thousands of kilometers via the Punjab-based international border to reach Gilgit-Baltistan. The opened intra-Kashmir routes cannot reduce this distance much. A person making the journey from Kargil has to travel at least 1500 km to reach their respective destinations in Gilgit-Baltistan via either of the two routes. It needs to be mentioned here that despite being parts of erstwhile princely state of Kashmir the two parts of Kashmir that are under the control of Pakistan – AJK and the Gilgit-Baltistan are not directly connected. To reach Gilgit-Baltistan, one has to reach Islamabad and then travel through the Karakoram Highway. To reach Gilgit-Baltistan from the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad road, one needs to travel from Kargil

to Srinagar, from Srinagar to Muzaffarabad, from there to Islamabad and then travel about 1000 km on Karakoram highway to reach one's destination. It thus takes about four days and 1500 km of road travel to reach Baltistan from Kargil. The Kargil-Skardu road would reduce the travel distance to less than 200 km and require only about six hours.

The long distance and the economic costs involved for a person from Kargil to visit Skardu through these circuitous routes are quite painstaking. The travel formalities of passport and visa too are a major problem for these poor and mostly illiterate people. These factors, coupled with the prevailing political environment, have ensured that most of the divided families of Kargil seldom get a chance to reunite even temporarily.

The old people pine to see the route open, as they, unlike the young, are nostalgic about their past when the whole region was one and there was no territorial division. Besides, age makes them more anxious as many fear they might die waiting for reunion. The young people, though not having directly experienced the division or being too young to understand the separation, also are keen to reunite with their relatives whom they have never met or do not remember. They crave for visiting those places which are part of the stories narrated to them in childhood.

Reunion Attempts

When the first division of Kashmir occurred, many people in Kargil thought it was temporary. The subsequent wars in 1965 and 1971 not only made these divisions almost permanent but also led to the division of many more families. Six decades have gone by and these families are still separated. They are living with hope but it has steadily diminished over the years. In this context, it would be of immense importance to discuss people's reunification attempts to understand their despair. It might even make a greater case for the urgent need to open the route.

The LoC remained porous for quite some time after the division of the region. As the region comprises creeks, mountains and passes, people, particularly the young, found it comparatively easier to avoid the gaze of security forces and cross the divide. There are instances when people crossed the divide and returned to their native places after meeting their relatives. There are also stories of people crossing the divide permanently to reunite with families. The majority, however, remained

separated. The situation changed after the 1971 war. People recall the hardening of the dividing line after the war, and crossing over or even catching a glimpse of the dividing line became impossible with the onset of militancy in the Kashmir valley.

People tried to remain in contact through letters and telephone calls but communication was not easy. Letters could not be despatched directly to the relatives and friends living at a distance even less than five km across LoC. The letters had to travel to Kargil's head post office, then to New Delhi, from New Delhi to Islamabad and from Islamabad to Gilgit-Baltistan to the intended recipients. The whole detour takes two to three months, sometimes six months and sometimes the letters 'just disappear'. There are numerous narrations of delayed communication. Ahmed, father of Rubia, died in Skardu in April 2005, but the news reached her at Hunderman after six months. The news of Zubaida Bano's death in Skardu reached her husband in Kaksar after eight months.

The tightening of the border after 1971 restricted the physical movement of the people but the post-1989 era witnessed stringent restrictions even on the limited communication facilities. With the advent of militancy in the Kashmir valley, the lines of communication along the border were cut off completely. The restrictions are still operative in the region. No phone calls are allowed from J&K to Kashmir across LoC. Militancy has also affected emotional connections as it raised the suspicion of the authorities of the possible involvement of the local people in violent activities. Many people refrain from being in contact with their relatives. Some do not even initially acknowledge their cross-LoC connections, but after interactions they do confess their longing for reunion.

Since visiting across the LoC through opened routes is complicated, some people have devised novel avenues for reunion. They have started meeting at places outside both India and Pakistan. Many people from both sides meet in Iran where they go for religious education or work. Another such avenue is the meeting at Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca. Those who have been able to take advantage of this pilgrimage narrate their stories with enthusiasm. Fifty-two year old Mohammad Fida, who went on the pilgrimage in 2004, was delighted to meet his maternal uncle from Brachel village. For twenty-six year old Mohammad Ayub, the distance of thousands of kilometres was immaterial in comparison to the immense happiness the meeting with his uncle brought to him.

Like a divine messenger, he could fulfil partially the dreams of many of his co-villagers by bringing news as well as gifts given by their relatives at Hajj. These novel ways to fulfil the dream of reunion are affordable for very few; hence cannot be alternatives to the reunion of divided families in their native place.

Chronicling Women's Woes

Gender needs to be brought to the centre of the discourse of the divided families due to its significance in a patriarchal society. Bringing gender into the discourse will ensure that the peace and reunification gestures of the parties involved are inclusive and gender-sensitive. Women, the embodiment of compassion and love, have suffered in various ways in Kargil due to the division. The field survey in Kargil brings to the forefront the tragic life these women live. The impromptu creation of the border and consequent separation brought upon them the experiences of separation as sisters, daughters, mothers and wives. The division of families resulted in wide-ranging sufferings for them, ranging from social and cultural to economic to emotional. This is more specifically applicable to those who got separated from their husbands due to patriarchal nature of the society. This chapter chronicles some of these tragic stories.

Engendering Separation

The peace process between India and Pakistan and the bilateral talks to open cross-LoC routes signalled new hopes for the suffering people in Kargil. Their delight at the news of opening of Kargil-Skardu road announced in 2005 gradually gave way to frustration as almost four years have lapsed without any concrete result. For many, the pain of separation runs so deep it is difficult even to discuss the issue without becoming overwrought with emotion.

In many cases, the women are unable to bear the trauma, which has affected their health and consequently, life span. Some of them have died prematurely as they could not bear the separation trauma. Thirty-eight year old Ameena Begum became emotional while narrating the story of her mother who died waiting to meet her father. In her words, "My mother died last year waiting for my father who lives in Skardu. She got married at the age of fourteen and I was one year old when we were separated from my father during 1971 war. My mother was only fifty-four when she died but she looked very old. ...She was not suffering from any ailment... The separation had taken its toll on her health and eventually her life."

Forty year old Rubina Bi from Hunderman Brok narrated how her father could not attend her mother's funeral despite living just a few kilometres across the LoC in the village of Brolmo, where he was stranded in 1971. Despite repeated attempts, her parents could not be reunited. In 1984, Rubina's father informed her mother of his remarriage through a letter. Her mother did not want a divorce. Rubina and her mother received news of her father when some of co-villagers met him in Iran in 2005. In the same year, her mother died. A relative based in Delhi informed her father about the death but he could not come to J&K as his visa application was rejected. It is difficult for Rubina to forget the last moments of her mother. "I never saw my mother smiling ...She fulfilled all her duties but internally she was completely ravaged... Even after death, her eyes were open probably looking for her husband ...," she said. Fifty-eight year old Hasina's father had gone to visit his ailing sister at Brachel and found himself on the other side after the 1965 war. "My mother died pining for him but my father could not return even after she died, although before the partition he made that journey by foot in five hours," she narrated.

Women like seventy-nine year old Khadija lost their mental balance, being unable to confront the harsh reality of the separation. Khadija lost her mental balance in 1966 after her husband and only child could not return from Skardu. Confined to a small room she only recognizes the photographs of her husband and son and at times, screams at those still photographs as if to entice them to react.

Frail health notwithstanding, those alive are quite keen to see their separated relatives at least once before dying. Eighty-five year old Hasina Bano of Hunderman Brok is desperate to meet her brother who lives in Skardu. "I am just waiting for the bus to roll down on the Kargil-Skardu road to meet my brother." Eighty year old Tabassum of Kirkit Haral is on her deathbed and her last wish is to see her daughter who lives in Baltistan. "I wish to be alive till I can see my daughter and grandchildren. The recent opening of the roads in other parts of Kashmir has raised my hopes... I will not die peacefully if I do not see them," she said. Bibi Jaan, seventy-two, from Brolmo on the Pakistan side, was married in Hunderman just two kilometres away on the Indian side. For the last thirty-seven years, she has not seen her two brothers and their families. Her parents have since died. With tears, she said, "We are separated just by two kilometres, but to reach my maternal village is my lifetime dream. I could not see my ailing parents before they died but I will not die before meeting my siblings."

Rubina Begum from Latoos village recounted, “I was three years old when we got separated from my father. He did not divorce my mother but remarried in Skardu. My mother devoted herself to bringing me up. She has been the worst sufferer of the division. In my marriage an elderly of village performed duties of father. It was a very emotional moment. I can never forget those moments when I was married like an orphan... I missed my father so much! He was just a few kilometres away but he could not attend the marriage of his daughter... I do not know if I will be able to meet him as he is very old, while the opening of the road still appears a chimera.”

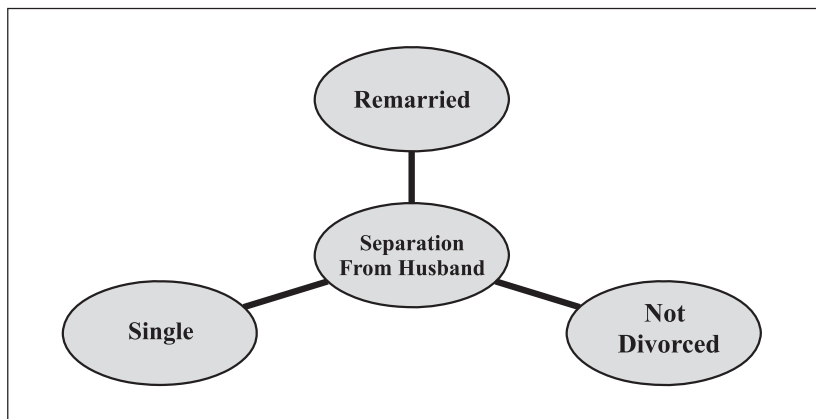
Many have given up hope of reunion with their separated relatives. They talk about life after death where no arbitrarily drawn borders will separate them from their loved ones. Ninety-two year old Nasiba Bi of Kirkit Haral is one such woman. Her husband had gone to mourn over the death of a close relative in Brolmo across the LoC. He could not return. Her words reveal the pain and anguish she undergoes. “I know my husband is alive. I can visualize his presence by my side but I am hopeless. I will meet him in the other world; at least there will be no border to separate us.”

Though the prevailing scenario has made Nasiba Bi develop fatalistic attitude, some ‘lucky’ women from these remote areas could meet their loved ones though for a short period. Azima Bi is considered blessed in her village Hunderman as she got the opportunity to meet her husband who lives in Skardu. They met in 1998 after fifty years of separation in a Karachi hotel room, where she had an overnight stay on her way to Hajj. The meeting not only brought back the memories of the past but also brought forth the fragility of their reunion as they met only for a night. In Azima’s words, “I could not talk to him. I just kept crying through out the night. The other people who were accompanying me tried to console but I knew that the reunion is very short and this enhanced my anxiety as I wanted to eternalize our reunion. My husband had become quite weak and looked much older than his age ... He had brought two dresses for me. Now I wear only those two dresses... When it was time to leave I fainted. I do not know when he left... He told the people accompanying me that we will meet again soon.” Her hope to meet her husband was rekindled with the opening of the Srinagar-Muzaffarbad route and the announcement that the Kargil-Skardu route would open soon. Days passed but the much awaited news of the route opening did not reach her. What arrived was the news of her husband’s death in January 2007.

Temporary reunion was not enough for Rabeena Bi who got separated from her maternal family after marriage in Latoo. She was fortunate to meet her brothers. Speaking about the meeting with her two brothers, she said, “In 1982 I met them at Hajj. It was indeed a dream come true. They promised to visit me but could not because of travel restrictions... Since then we are not in contact. I do not even know where they reside currently. I want to see them again ... at least once more before dying.”

Woes of Separated Wives

There are many women who got separated from their husbands in the aftermath of the 1947-1948, 1965 and 1971 wars. Separation from one’s husband and its economic, social and emotional implications for the Shia women of Kargil were tragic as it pushed them to a vulnerable position in the dominant patriarchal setup. Some of these women did not opt for divorce, and out of those who got divorced, some remarried while others remained single. Some separated wives are in contact with their husbands while others are not even aware of their whereabouts. However, all these separated women are enmeshed in a single trap of forced separation from their beloved.



There are narratives wherein the separated couple neither divorced nor remarried despite the failure of their reunion attempts. Ninety-two year Fatima married in Brachel got stranded at her parental village Kirkit Majdass after the first war in Kashmir. After years of separation, her husband succeeded in getting passport and visa to cover a distance of over 1500 km via the Wagah border to Kargil. The long distance coupled with the time taken in completing travel formalities took its toll as Fatima passed away just two days before her husband reached Kargil.

Her daughter Zanib burst into tears while narrating this tragic story, “Was it fate or the states obsessed with territory, whom should I blame? I got separated from my father when I was five years old. My mother did not remarry and devoted herself to bring me up. It was tough but with the support of my maternal grandfather we survived. Yet the separation had shaken her inner core. Every morning she woke up with the hope that it will be the last day of her separation. Every night she used to get disappointed... After getting the news of my father visiting us her happiness was unbound. We bought new dresses and renovated our dilapidated house. We hoped the end of our life long miseries is near. But fate has something more tragic in store for us. My father started his journey from Skardu on May 12 and my mother died on May 14 due to massive cardiac arrest. My father was heartbroken and died in Skardu after two months.”

Most separated husbands remarried in the places where they got stranded but there is a variation in the pattern of remarriage followed by separated wives. Some women accepted divorce and remarried after waiting for reunion with their husbands for a period that ranged from ten to fifteen years. Zeina Begum from Brolmo had come to Hunderman in 1971 to meet her parents but she could not return. Zeina and her husband waited for 10 years to be reunited. With the passage of time, they realized the impossibility of their dream and divorced. While her husband Ashraf remarried in Skardu, Zeina remarried in Kirkit Haral. Her longing to meet her ex-husband has not faded. She told us, “It was a forced divorce. We were forced to part by the tragic circumstances. What could be more unfortunate for a human being? ... Leading a single life is not considered good for women in our society so I had to remarry... I want to meet him at least once. I do not know if it is morally right or wrong but sometimes memories haunt me.”

For many divorced women their second marriage was more a compromise for economic and social security and for their children. The case of Zoona Begum of Kirkit Haral, who waited for twelve years for the return of her husband, can be cited here. “During the demarcation after the 1971 war, I got the news that my husband was returning from Skardu. He was not allowed to return by the Pakistani security forces since the village was on the other side of the border. My husband was forced to go back to Skardu. With the passage of time there was no other option but to take divorce and remarry for the sake of my three children.” On being asked whether and how she remembers the past,

she responded with a mix of nostalgia, anger as well as shyness. She says, “What to do? I cannot forget the past but what can I gain by this reminiscence- only trepidation and suffering. Given the opportunity, I would definitely meet my ex-husband. I am sure my husband will not object to it... the children miss their father badly.”

Many of the divorced women somehow got accustomed to the reality of remarriage, others like Habiba Khatoon even refused divorce. She died in November 2007 waiting for her husband. She had been married for four years and had two children, when Kashmir got partitioned. Her husband was stranded in Kharmang on the other side of the LoC. Her husband proposed divorce after ten years but Habiba did not agree to it. Instead, she built a window in her house overlooking the Kargil-Skardu road. She spent most of her free time looking at this road, waiting for the day her beloved would return.

There are instances when the separated wives accepted divorce but did not remarry. Mariam, sixty-seven, from Kirkit Badgam village, separated from her husband after 1971 war, remains in touch with him through occasional letters. Her husband got stranded in Skardu. After the war, this village came to the Indian side. While there are many stories of people dying pre-maturely due to the trauma of prolonged separation from their families, there are also narratives like that of Mariam, whose hope of reunion has kept them alive. To quote Mariam, “I am in contact with my husband through occasional letters. I have raised my children all alone and married them off. But through all these years, I have faced the ordeal of leading the life of a widow despite my husband being alive. I am not sure if I would be able to see my husband in this life but hope keeps me alive.”

Unlike Mariam, some women have lost contact with their husbands after some years, like Suraiya, eighty-three, who was married for two months when the partition of Indian subcontinent happened. Being a shopkeeper, her husband had gone to Skardu to bring his monthly stock, but could never return, with ceasefire impeding his comeback. After remaining in communication for five years Suraiya lost contact with him and is not aware of her husband’s whereabouts now. She did not remarry as she harbours hope for a reunion. She said, “I still remember his words before he left for Skardu on that fateful day. He told me no one can separate us... Ours was a love marriage and there was vehement opposition but we were adamant... But fate separated us almost

irretrievably... If a loved one dies, the time heals the wound but my wound remains unhealed till I die. I know he is still alive and is residing just about 150 km away but I cannot meet him. What can be more tragic?"

Some women, after getting the news of their husband's death, hoped to cross the border to pray at their graves. Living in Hunderman, Rahima's husband went to Brolmo in 1971 to attend a wedding, but could not return. Rahima was surviving on hope until she got the news of her husband's death in 2006. Though the hope of physical reunion was shattered, Rahima wanted to pray at the grave of her husband. "My prayers for reunion with my husband went unheeded ... Now I want to pray at his grave for the peace of his soul. Is it too much to ask for? I pray Allah to keep me alive till that moment. It is a race against time since I am too old now," said Rahima with moist eyes.

Many women are not even as fortunate as Rahima, as they have no confirmed news of their spouse. They are unable to decide which course to follow: nurture the hope to pray at the graveyard of their dead husband or long for a reunion as the news of death remains unconfirmed. Sakina is one such woman. Her husband had gone to Skardu to buy some essential items and was stranded when the war broke out in 1965. He remarried in Skardu after waiting for ten years. Sakina did not remarry and kept waiting for him. In 2004, she got unconfirmed news of her husband's death. She lamented, "Since the news is not confirmed, I do not know whether I should mourn or long for reunion. If the news is correct, look at my fate. I have not even mourned the death of my husband for whom I have waited my whole life. Though I am leading the life of a half-widow but somewhere in my heart for all these years, I had hoped for reunion... This news has left me shattered. I am collecting money to send my son to Hajj to verify the news. The information, whether good or bad, is very crucial for me. If he is no more, at least I would mourn, if he is still alive, my hope of meeting him will get rejuvenated."

Even more tragic are the stories of those women who could never get any news about the whereabouts of their husbands since the separation. Majid Ali from Hunderman had gone to Brolmo when the 1971 war broke out and he could not return. His wife Safeena Bi died in January 2008 with unfulfilled dream of seeing her husband. Her narration of the tragic story to us in May 2007 was a revelation in itself. Safeena

did not know where her husband was until the end. She spent her whole life trying to ascertain his whereabouts. She said, "Since our marriage was only six months old at the time of separation, I do not have any children. But I have not remarried... I do not know if he is alive or not but I will be his wife until my last breath. I have dedicated my life to him." Similarly, Fatima becomes inconsolable when she remembers the old days. Her desperation to know the whereabouts of her husband is revealed in her words, "My husband is missing since 1971. He had gone to Skardu in search of a job. There is some unconfirmed news of his residing at Skardu. I have been waiting for the last thirty-seven years just to know about him. I want to go and look for him... please help me."

Though pangs of separation overwhelm the lives of the people, the dismal scenario could not subdue their spirit as they confronted the challenges of life on their own. Women who got separated from their husbands and raised their children as single mothers or as the wife of another man reveal stories of endurance. They do not talk of empowerment or probably do not recognize or understand its theoretical rigour, but by confronting the challenges posed by discriminatory social system, economic compulsions and illiteracy, these women have displayed commendable strength. Their stories of survival against all odds portray extraordinary hope and patience. To quote Mariam Bi who decided to raise her four children as a single mother, after she was separated from her husband in 1971, "It was not an easy task. Although the whole village was sympathetic, I did not wish to become a dependent person and live on their largesse. Earlier I had never ventured out of my house but after separation from my husband I started farming. In the day, I used to work on our land and in the night, I used to make rugged carpets to sell in the market. To give a better future to my children, I sent all four of them to a government school. My sons went to higher secondary schools but due to monetary compulsions, my daughters could study only up to primary school. My elder son got a government job after finishing his secondary education. Then I married off my daughters. Now my sons are earning well and are settled in the Kargil town. I live in the village since all my memories are associated with it. My husband died in 1982. Now my sons can arrange for money but I am too old to travel more than 1000 km to see his grave... People say I am very courageous but see, to be called courageous, what price I have to pay!"

Mapping Gendered Hurdles

The chronicling of gendered hurdles brings out in open the specificities of ordeal the women of Kargil face. The desire to meet one's family or to visit one's birthplace is widespread among the border people of Kargil, but the gendered nature of the issue of separation is revealed when women's specific experiences are brought to the centre of the discourse. Women continue to undergo multiple traumas as the separation from their loved ones emerges as an issue not of the past but of constant interrogation in their psychology as well as an issue of daily survival. While grief, resignation, frustration, anger and fear form part of lives of divided people, women are at the receiving end due to their very gender and location in the society. Despite the opening of two intra-Kashmir routes, their waiting appears to be unending. This chapter focuses on the specificities of the Kargil women's suffering, which has become further apparent with the opening of the selective routes in Kashmir.

The Specificities

The members of some divided families got the opportunity to meet their relatives at Skardu via the international border or the opened intra-Kashmir routes or at places like Iran and Saudi Arab (Mecca). The women are in a disadvantageous position in comparison to their male counterparts as only a few of them could cross the divide. Disadvantageous position in terms of their location in the social hierarchy and other banes such as illiteracy, lack of exposure to public life and resource crunch have ensured that their separation continues longer.

Complicated procedures in getting passports and visas explain why many women have not crossed the divide to meet their loved ones. To quote Rahima Bi of Hunderman, "Who would not like to meet loved ones? But it is not that simple. Applying for a passport, arranging money for the travel, and, in case of Hajj, sending the message of our departure to Hajj to our families across the border is not easy, especially for a woman... Besides financial constraints, we face many difficulties in getting the documents to travel more than a 1000 km all alone." The ordeal gets magnified with the lack of resources. Since women do

not have control over family finances and are considered unproductive in terms of earning money, they are not free to take decisions on spending money on such a long and comparatively costly journey. The Hajj, despite being highly subsidized, is not affordable for many women especially separated wives who do not have a sustainable means of livelihood in an area where the main means of livelihood are farming, daily labour and other small, menial jobs. Hence, it is quite difficult for most of the women to raise money to cross the divide.

Gender-specific ordeals exemplified in the narrative of forty year old Rabiya. In 1971, baby Rabiya got stranded in Kaksar at her maternal uncle's home while her parents and siblings remained in Skardu. She tried to cross the border on many occasions but could not succeed. Rabiya later married her cousin in Kargil. But her heart still pines for her parents. In her words, "Three people from this village went to Skardu through the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad route... My husband is not willing to spend money on my travel. Also, nobody is there to help me with the procedural work... My husband is also apprehensive of my travel all alone..."

The patriarchal state of mind is deeply ingrained and even women who happen to head families cannot escape its orbit. The psychological conditioning has prevented many from crossing the divide. Some, who could collect the required money for the Hajj, preferred to send their sons instead. Take the case of Tabassum, who had come from her in-laws house at Brolmo to her parental house in Kirkit Badgam in 1971 to deliver her baby. She got stranded due to war. With all the desperate attempts at reunion going in vain, Tabassum got the news of her husband remarrying. He also asked her if she needed a divorce to remarry. Tabassum refused and preferred to live with her son and memories of her husband. With all the savings of many years, she sent her son to Hajj to meet his father in 1994. In her words, "I sent my son to see his father. It was not possible for both of us to go due to economic constraints. The border could separate us physically but not our hearts... My son was eager to meet his father. How could I refuse? It is just like having one piece of bread and my son and I both are hungry... obviously, my son would have the first right on the piece. After all he has to bear the legacy of his father."

Similar is the case of Sabina Bi, who preferred to send her son to Skardu to pay tributes at the grave of her late husband who got stranded on the

wrong side after the 1965 war and died in 1996. The news of his death reached her in 1997. After collecting the required amount of money, she sent her son to Skardu in 2003. She recalls, “I never imagined I will ever be able to meet him. Everyday I thought the artificial border will disappear. My son was very young when we got separated. My daughter too wanted to go but there are financial constraints. Besides, it is difficult for a woman to go that far all alone. My son is happy that he could at least see the graveyard of his father. He has brought a lump of soil from there that I have kept with all love it deserves. I have told my son to put this lump of soil alongside my body in the coffin if I die before visiting his grave.”

Gender Insensitive Routes

The survey in the Poonch and Rajouri districts brought into focus how gender-specific hurdles hamper the mobility of many women, despite routes being opened in their region. Though both men and women have to deal with travel-related ordeals, women have to confront additional hurdles. Sixty-two year old Safeena of Surankote was excited when she heard about the opening of trans-LoC routes as it brightened the prospects of her meeting her siblings. She narrated her woes in the following words, “Though the Poonch-Rawalakote road is open, the procedure is too complicated, right from filling up the form to getting the permit. My application has been rejected twice – first, because the form was not properly filled and second, for unknown reasons. The form is too complicated and the procedures are too complex for a woman to handle single handed. I have applied again but do not know if I will get the permit and even if I do, when? My father was on his deathbed when I last got news in January 2007. I do not know if I will be able to see him....”

Forty-five year old Raziya Bi of Chandok village has not applied for a permit despite her desire to meet her maternal family at Rawalakote. Lack of professional help and her husband being unrelenting, illiterate Raziya has no option but to wait for procedures to become easier or for someone from across the divide to visit her. Raziya’s story brings into focus a pertinent issue in the context of women, i.e. besides the procedural hurdles they also have to confront family barriers. Before getting the official permit to cross the border, they have to get ‘permission’ from family, particularly from their husbands. In majority of the cases, they are the last person in the family to get the chance to

visit their separated relatives residing across the divide. It is a norm in the divided families of Poonch and Rajouri to allow the women a chance to travel only after male members of the family have travelled across the LoC. Sakeena Bi, a resident of Ajote village in Poonch could not meet her sister who got stranded in Kotli during the 1947-48 war. The announcement of the bus service came as a pleasant surprise for Sakeena. However, her reunion with her sister was full of hurdles, from 'getting permission' from her husband to running from pillar to post to complete all the formalities; from waiting anxiously to get the authorities' nod to visit her sister for merely fifteen days, which was too short a period, she felt. Eventually, Sakeena could cross the divide but only after her husband had met his separated family.

The situation of those women whose husbands do not have relatives across the border is more precarious as it becomes difficult for their husbands to comprehend their pain. In this context, the story of Raunaq Bano living in Surankote is revealing. Bano was separated from her paternal family when the village in which they were residing went to Pakistan in 1948. Her husband, an ex-service man of the Indian army, did not allow her to remain in contact with her relatives across the LoC. She had no direct contact with any of her family members until 2007. The rolling of the Poonch-Rawalakote bus in 2006 built up her hopes of meeting her parents and siblings. As soon as the bus started, some relatives who visited Kashmir across the LoC brought a DVD that her brothers had made for her. Watching the DVD brought a mix of happiness and sadness to Raunaq. She got the news of death of her parents. The DVD also gave details about relatives whom she had never met. One by one, the whole family, including her sisters-in-law, brothers-in-law and their children introduced themselves to Bano via DVD. Since receiving the DVD, Bano has watched it several times. While playing the DVD, Bano even begins conversing with her brothers and sisters appearing on the TV screen, as if they can hear her. Repeatedly she kisses the screen as if kissing her siblings and their children in reality. Bano desperately wishes to see her family across the LoC, but does not have 'permission' from her husband. Intimate conversations with her husband revealed his apprehension that contacts across the LoC can raise suspicion. Hence, he does not want his wife to visit her family across the border nor someone from there to visit them. While Bano's husband was giving this explanation, Bano asked him a moot question with frustration marking her face: "What if your family members were there? Would have you gone there or not?"

Her husband evaded this question and Bano added, “This is the price I have to pay for being a woman. Had I been a man I could have boarded the first bus. I will take this anguish to my grave.”

Craving for Reunion

The above discussion leads to perception that the fate of the Poonch and Rajouri women would be the same for the women of Kargil after the Kargil-Skardu route is opened. Just like their counterparts in Rajouri and Poonch, the Kargil women, too, will have to confront procedural as well as family hurdles to cross the divide. The authors asked the respondents in Kargil their view on this issue. All the respondents strongly argued in favour of opening the route despite their disadvantageous position in the society as they felt ‘something is better than nothing.’ As compared to chances of going to Baltistan through other intra-Kashmir routes, they reasoned they would have better chances of meeting their loved ones if this route is opened. The cost of travel will be reduced drastically. Also getting permission from one’s family would be easier to visit through this short route.

Married in Kargil, sixty year old illiterate Hasina was quite vocal while arguing in favour of opening the route. “We can travel to every part of India, but we can not visit our close relatives who reside at a distance of even less than 5 km across this divide. The LoC is not a line of control; it is the line of calamity. We have endured the most due to bilateral animosity. The Kashmir valley had the problem of militancy and even then the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad road opened. The militancy in later stages spread to Poonch and Rajouri districts and even then, the Poonch-Rawalakote road opened. What about the Kargil-Skardu road? Are we not human beings or we not have emotions? Politics is going on since last sixty years; now let us give a chance to humanity. My mother died an unnatural death while suffering the trauma of separation. There are many others like her. I appeal to policy-makers to let us meet our separated brethren and restore the ties of marriage and common culture,” she argued vociferously.

Salima Bi, who lives in Kirkit Badgam village, pointed out, “I have already made preparations to meet my uncle and cousins. I am waiting for both governments to open the Kargil-Skardu road so that divided families like us could reunite. We have to travel by air or via the Wagah border to Lahore, which takes days. It is very expensive... If the Kargil-Skardu road is opened, it will be very cost effective. The chances are

higher that my husband will give me permission to travel alone via this route. He can see me off at the bus station and my brother can receive me when I reach Skardu. Who knows, my husband may accompany me as it will not be costly. I am desperately counting the days for this opportunity to arrive.” Salima’s twenty year old daughter Naila, too, showed keen interest in visiting the relatives she has never met. She said, “Though I have not met them, but they are uncles, aunts and brothers whom I am very keen to meet,” revealing the desire of the younger generation to meet their separated relatives. Reflecting the sentiments of divided families, Salima revealed her dream of establishing marital ties across the divide by marrying her daughter off to her brother’s son in Skardu.

Rehana, while narrating her story, told that her Skardu-based father wants her stepbrother to marry a girl from his native village Hunderman. In Rehana’s words, “It is quite heartening to know my father wants to retain ties with Hunderman. The common relatives who brought this news told that every evening while in Brolmo village, he used to sit facing the direction of Hunderman to feel the air of his birthplace. I do not know if my brother will be able to marry here or not but I have seen a girl for him and hope he would be able to make it.” Rehana has one appeal to the leaders of India and Pakistan: “Open Kargil-Skardu and all the other intra-Kashmir routes and let people meet their loved ones.”

The yearning among the women of Kargil for reunion with their relatives is deep and intense. But when that dream of reunion will take the shape of reality depends more on the resolve of policy-makers than the genuine longing of victims of tragic separation. These women of Kargil have already waited long to meet their loved ones. It is time that the governments take the long overdue humanitarian step in opening the Kargil-Skardu road.

Chapter VII

Conclusion

Though studies on the humanitarian dimensions of borders in other regions are scattered, the Kashmir border has received the least attention in its multidimensional aspects in academia and research circles. This study is an attempt to fill this critical gap in border studies by focusing on the contested and insensitive divide in Kashmir and its implications for borderlanders. The complex symbiosis of the border and its residents is not a subject to glance over as the complex relationship needs to be examined and interrogated to bring the reality of one of the most violent zones into focus. Enough time has lapsed, since the inception of the conflict, in addressing the political and strategic aspects of the issue; it is imperative to understand the rigidity of the border and address sufferings of the borderlanders.

The collapse of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent end of the Cold War set the trend for the importance of borders to no longer be confined to the separation of states; rather, the border discourse has been widened to include narratives revolving around the socio-cultural and economic aspects of borders and borderlanders. Most borders are no more static, rigid and inflexible line of separation; they have gained lives in this era of globalization where the trend towards mingling, multidimensional interactions and softening has gained currency. In the case of Kashmir, which enjoyed an integrated life for centuries, the border discourse has overtly emphasized the territorial dispute between India and Pakistan at the cost of the fact that the arbitrarily drawn border has not only divided the territory but also families, and has mutated their lives and shared identity.

Territorial concerns have dominated much of the conflict discourse, so it is no surprise the humanitarian aspects remain submerged under the maze of political debates and rhetoric. While Kashmir's image in the international sphere as the 'most dangerous place on earth' has been flashed repeatedly in literature, the humanitarian dimensions of the haphazardly created and contested border gets only occasional focus. India and Pakistan have fought four wars in the past sixty years of their independence, which directly or indirectly revolved around Kashmir. The wars drew and redrew borders in Kashmir. The wars, war scares

and border skirmishes devastated the lives of the border people for no fault of theirs, except their closeness to artificially created borders (if that can be a fault at all). There has been large-scale displacement, loss of livelihood and shattering of the economy besides the division of families on a permanent basis. Among the divided people, the situation of women is doubly dismal as they suffer being part of the group as a whole as well as due to their gender. However, recorded history largely documents hostilities and bargaining between states. The chronicling of the suffering voices is largely absent and more so the gendered viewpoint is non-existent.

The contested dividing line in Kashmir runs over 700 km in mostly inhospitable terrains. A line drawn and redrawn on maps by two sovereign countries without consultation with the people living in the region eventually became a sacrosanct border. The line divided Kashmir on no particular principle other than the fact that it represented the respective state's control on the day of ceasefire, be it in 1947-48, 1965 or 1971. The consequent division of villages, houses and families by the haphazardly drawn stiff border has shattered the lives of the border people. They wonder how a line drawn at the behest of the governments without taking into account their concerns could separate their families, houses and villages. But, their bewilderment continues to remain a part of local discourse.

Two major developments post-2000 led to the gradual transformation of the character of the conflict from violent animosity to peaceful deliberation and dialogue. First, it was the realization on part of India and Pakistan that to engage in negotiations can earn better dividends than the policy of violence. Second, and more importantly, it was the efforts on the part of the two establishments to involve people living on both sides of the LoC for constructive peace, by softening the stiff border. Thus came into focus the hitherto neglected issue of divided families and urgency of their reunion. Besides the humanitarian dimension, it was the prospects of trade and commerce in this era of globalization that motivated the leaders of both countries to open the LoC. In the changing global order, in which borders of control have transformed into borders of contact in various parts of the world, it is imperative to bring the same realization to Kashmir.

History was made in the year 2005, when the route between Srinagar and Muzaffarabad was opened. In June 2006 another route, Poonch-

Rawalakote, was opened. The opening of these two routes witnessed a partial lifting of the veil of separation, with the exchange of decades of accumulated love and affection. Since the artificial division, the lives of border families have undergone drastic changes but it was the ties of blood and shared identity that kept their hopes of reunion ablaze. In Poonch and Rajouri, people who got stranded on other side of LoC have converted to Islam though their relatives on the Indian side are Hindus. Notwithstanding this religious difference, the meeting of divided relatives brings subtle human emotions to forefront, overshadowing the political and territorial tones of the conflict. In one case, Maulvi Agha Khan from Kotli was welcomed by his Sikh brethren in the Poonch district amidst slogan *Jo Bole So Nihal Sat Sri Akal*.

Amidst all the hype of the peace process between India and Pakistan and softened borders in Kashmir in terms of the opening of these two routes, the divided families of Kargil continue to suffer. The borderlanders of Kargil are separated from their kith and kin residing in Baltistan by a distance of even less than five km. These people belonging to the Shia sect of Islam have little in common either with the valley people or with those of Jammu. Kargil and Baltistan were part of a single entity before the partition of Kashmir. The people residing in the whole region have close socio-cultural and familial links with each other. The division of the region not only divided villages and families but their common history, culture, language and common mythologies. The tragic tales of division in this region that remain part of local discourse have not been chronicled.

The rigidity of the border has not deterred the spirit of these people to remain in contact, though the means adopted by them are either inefficient or insufficient due to their very disadvantageous location. The people have shown immense creativity in their attempts to meet their kith and kith across the LoC. One such option is to go for the Hajj pilgrimage or to Iran. However, it is not easy for all to avail and most have no option but to wait till the softening of the border in their region. For some of them, occasional letters bring news about their separated relatives but only after long intervals, as the letters have to go through scrutiny by security forces on both sides, and have to travel through a long and circuitous route. Many others do not have any information about the whereabouts of their separated relatives. The complicated procedures of passport and visa acquisition, and illiteracy and economic constraints have ensured that reunion through the India-Pakistan

international border remains a dream for most. Similar ordeals are confronted with the two intra-Kashmir routes that are open. They do not bring much solace to the people of Kargil as they have to make a long and circuitous detour from Srinagar to Muzaffarabad to Islamabad to Skardu to meet the members of their families. Travelling through the Poonch-Rawalakote route further increases the time. As the members of divided families who have directly borne the brunt of separation from their relatives are old, it is difficult for them to cover such a long distance of over 1500 km to visit their families who actually reside within a stone's throw of the village.

The dividends of the Indo-Pak peace process have failed to reach Kargil. The opening of the two routes rekindled the hopes of these people since Kargil has a huge presence of divided families in villages perched on difficult mountain terrains. Despite the fact that India and Pakistan have agreed in principle to open the Kargil-Skardu route, consequently raising expectations of the Kargil people, their plight remains unaddressed.

The non-opening of Kargil-Skardu route, still in pliable condition, can be considered anathema to peace process, as the utility of the route cannot be underestimated. Thousands of divided people are awaiting its opening for reunion with their loved ones. Local people can also use this route in winter months when the national highway linking Kargil to rest of India remains obstructed due the intractable condition of the Zoji La pass. The economic significance of this route is also immense. The Kargil-Skardu road, a branch of the old Silk Route, has existed for centuries. There was burgeoning silk trade on this route as the Munshi Aziz Bhat museum in Kargil testifies. The opening of the route can boost trade and mountain tourism; hence generate employment for the local people and revenue for the government.

Though every member of the divided families is a victim of this arbitrary division, women confront both general and specific hurdles as far as crossing the divide is concerned. Their low social stature in the family hierarchy, dependence on male members of the family, lack of economic independence, non-exposure to public life and their illiteracy, in many cases, have ensured they are the last in the queue for reunion. The pangs of separation for the wives, who are very old, are beyond narration. Many of them have died, many others are languishing on their deathbeds and some of them live with flickering hopes of reunion.

Women acquire a central place in this discourse of the divided families as they are not only the victims of the division but suffer more acutely due to their very location in a society in which everything, including their rights, is seen through the prism of the patriarchal setup. Their narratives are not part of even the local discourse. The centrality of gender in the whole discourse has been emphasized with the aim to lessen their invisibility, make peace and reunification gestures inclusive and gender-sensitive.

The tragic tales of border women makes the case for humanity to be given due importance rather than stubborn politics of territory and strategic thinking. Borders that are a means of control should be made a point of contact. They have to become the sites where not only states meet but also people. The softening of the border, as witnessed in recent times, should not be partial and exclusive. The governments of India and Pakistan need to consider seriously opening the Kargil-Skardu route, especially for senior citizens. The meeting will have a tremendous positive impact as these are the people who have not only seen violent wars but have also seen the region as a peaceful, vibrant and prosperous place. The peace capital and peace potential of these meetings can only be ignored at a huge cost.

These humanitarian developments and their promotion can pave the way in ameliorating sufferings of the people, defusing tensions and helping to transform the conflict. An irrelevant LoC will transform the conflict from a territorial issue to a venture in reunion, peace and development. It will help transform the rigid division separating states and people to a flexible line that allows states and people to come together for peace and prosperity. Such an agenda will soften the rigid positions of the parties involved and turn their gaze to the issue not from hardcore realism but from the perspective of the people who matter. The reunion of divided families can work as a foundation of harmony in undivided Kashmir and of the gradual moderation of the conflict. The positive reverberations will not remain confined to the borderlanders but will reach across India and Pakistan. The time has come to recognize the imperative by focusing on humanitarian and economic dimensions of conflict, which surpass largely tenuous political considerations.

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