

Border Communities and the Status of Education at the Line of Control

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Abstract

People living near the Line of Control (LoC) of the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) are victims of dual hardship. On the one hand, they have been the victims of seven decades of international conflict persisting as existential cross-border ceasefire violations; on the other hand, they have been the victims of apathy of the Union and former state governments. Of all the marginalized groups of people in India, these people have been the most voiceless as their voices of plea for peace, basic health, education and infrastructure have neither been represented nor acknowledged in the mainstream public and political discourse. The deprivation and disadvantage of minorities, tribal peoples, and scheduled castes though unmitigated has still found voice in Indian politics, the Constitution and academic circles since 1947. But the deprivation and the struggle for everyday survival of the people at LoC irrespective of their caste, class, religion or gender has scarcely been a part of the discussion on social inequalities and exclusion in contemporary India. This paper is a qualitative research work that draws from ethnographic field studies from 2016 to 2018 in the border district of Poonch to shed light on the status of education of border children at primary and secondary schools near the LoC. It attempts to argue that due to the unstable nature of life at LoC the border people have not been able to understand and claim their right to education for their children against the Indian state due to whose foreign and domestic policies their everyday life is a struggle between life and death.

Keywords — *Jammu & Kashmir, Line of Control, Border Communities, Education.*

INTRODUCTION: THE BORDERED LIVES AT LOC

Much of the academic literature on J&K till date has revolved around the complex historical dispute between India and Pakistan; politics within the state with special emphasis on the political actors of the Kashmir Valley; identity politics of different regions: Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh in demanding political, administrative and financial autonomy in their respective regions; identity politics of different ethnic groups (Cohen; Dasgupta; Ganguly; Shankar Jha; Koithara). An analysis of the intellectual and civil society activism against human rights violations

faced by the people of J&K shows that focus has predominantly been on the Kashmir Valley to the detriment of the people living at the militarized backward borders of the state. The international conflict centric and the Kashmir valley-centric mainstream political and academic discourse has pushed to the margins the relentless suffering of the border people since 1947.

The LoC in J&K is 740 km long of which 103 km passes through the Poonch district of Jammu division (Maini 3). The LoC is guarded by the Indian Armed forces and supplemented by the para-military - Border Security Force (BSF). The border people at LoC perpetually experienced cross-border shelling and firing and survived through three international wars between India and Pakistan in 1947-48, 1965 and 1971. According to a study of the United States Institute of Peace, the LoC is an unsettled border and during the wars of 1965 and 1971, land grabs on either sides were the feature of cease-fire violations (Jacob 12). The cross-border bombing and firing heightened intensely during the period of cross-border militancy (1989-2003) and gradually declined after the November 2003 ceasefire arrangement between India and Pakistan. The 2003 ceasefire led to a decade of interlude and 'relative peace' for the borderlanders but the violations increased since 2014 disrupting grievously their everyday lives once again. In 2018, there were 2936 cease-fire violations by Pakistan across the International Border (IB) and the LoC, highest since the 2003 ceasefire agreement. In 2019, Pakistan had violated ceasefire more than 2050 times (till 21 September) that killed 21 and injured many at the LoC on the Indian side (The Hindu).

This paper is based on field surveys conducted over three years from 2016 to 2018 in three remote border villages – Salotri, Suvinaar, Jhulass – of the Poonch district. These border villages are located within a distance of three to four kilometres from the LoC. These villages are among of the government notified Actual Line of Control (ALC) villages that lie 6 km from the zero line. But more than 90% of the residents of these villages reside within 2km from the zero line. Entry in the border villages is restricted by the armed forces to any non-border resident. Since these villages have had land mines planted during the 1947, 1965, 1971 Indo-Pak wars and in 2002 following the Indian Parliament attack (2001), it is highly dangerous for any outsider to move through them. Outsider entry is also restricted due to the highly sensitive nature of

LoC which is prone to militant infiltration from across the border. The author, being a permanent resident of one of these villages could visit them for field study and research. His considerable local knowledge of the area and the population was used to engage in informal group discussions and unstructured individual interviews with the respondents.

II. STATUS OF EDUCATION IN J&K

Literature on the status of education in J&K is minimal. In particular, the J&K appraisal report of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (2010) takes a hard look at the state's progress from 2002 to 2010. Concerns have been expressed in the appraisal report on the tardy progress with respect to out of school children, children with special needs, gender disparities as well as data discrepancies." Save the Children's (NGO) 2010 report identified five related factors that constrained children's participation in schooling: (1) Family related factors (2) School related factors (3) Institutional factors (4) Governance factors and (5) Political unrest. The schemes like midday meal have not been able to attract students. While these documents provide some insights on the educational status in the state, a detailed account of the educational situation in border villages is missing. Most of the reports are on the educational situation in Kashmir valley or the urban areas of Jammu region, whereas the rural border villages remain neglected in academic research.

III. CROSS-BORDER SHELLING & EDUCATION

The village Jhulass has 1 government high school (classes 6 to 10), 1 government middle school (classes 1 to 8) and 3 government primary schools (classes 1 to 5). Salotri has 2 government middle schools and 1 government primary school. Suvinaar has only 1 government primary school. The government schools, the only source of education for the children of these villages do not have well qualified teachers as such teachers do not want to be posted in high risk border areas. All the respondents have recounted stories of school children and teachers killed or injured in sudden cease-fire violations.

The villages lack basic infrastructure like motorable roads and frequent public transport services and children travel several kilometres by foot to just gain elementary education under conditions of physical risk. Mines planted by both the Indian Army during wars and by the foreign militants during the decade of 1990s had snatched away the lives and limbs of many children commuting to school or playing outside homes or grazing cattle. There are still some areas in these villages that have been cordoned off as areas with live mines.

The students usually walk or cycle for twenty to thirty kilometers to and fro across the

difficult hilly terrain everyday to reach the government higher secondary school (classes 6 to 12) at Poonch. Private transport vehicles are few and always crowded. While similar conditions may be found in other backward and remote hilly areas of other states in India, the children of these border villages have to travel to schools in a day-to-day uncertain environment of sudden cross-border firing and shelling.

During the period of cross-border militant infiltration between 1989 and 2003, school buildings and playgrounds were the worst affected in firing and bombing as they are located within one kilometer of the zero line in these villages. There were only around 50 males and 10 females (from the three villages together) in 2016 who had an undergraduate degree. These undergraduates were the first generation learners of the post-2003 ceasefire decade when relative peace prevailed for the first time since 1947 and they got the opportunity to travel to the Government Degree College in Poonch town (20-40 km away from their villages).

When asked about education in the border schools, a 25 year old villager (Jhulass), shared his experience in the government high school Jhulass, which is just one kilometer far from the LoC. He said that the first and the most significant lesson that was taught to them at schools was how to save oneself if cross-border firing began abruptly. They were taught to how hide in ditches or canals and to take shelter of a boulders or trees or to crawl under shelling and bombing to the nearest place of relative safety. A large room in the government high school, that can accommodate nearly 200 students and teachers is where the students are herded to when the firing begins suddenly during school working hours. The rest of the school rooms are tin-roofed and cannot withstand a bombing while the larger room is concrete-roofed which the teachers believe provides relative safety for all. The respondent added that, "The people including young children here recognise the names and differentiate the noises of all kind of guns, artilleries and tanks used by the Armed forces.

The border children lose interest in education as they are unable to attend schools everyday due to cross-border firing and shelling. They have to skip attendance for a day to few days to even few weeks during heightened Indo-Pak hostility on the border. Teenage boys drop out of school to earn a living as labourers in agricultural fields or as drivers of passenger vehicles. The status of education of girls is even worse. The perpetual cross-border shelling makes the parents afraid of sending their daughters to school as they do not want their daughters to get permanently disabled during firing and lose the prospect of marriage. Early marriages are still prevalent with most young girls being married between fourteen to eighteen years. A highly educated girl in such ALC villages is the one who has

a BA degree and such girls are just 1% of the female population of these border villages.

The respondents observed that there is very little actual reporting from the ground on the number of civilian deaths and injuries in the remote border villages. Between 2005 and 2018, the unofficial figures for the number of civilians killed in the three surveyed villages is around 50. They narrated instances in which entire families with young children have been killed by bombs while sleeping or eating within the confines of their homes. The number of people and cattle injured is countless because whenever there is cross-border firing (which happens almost everyday in the period of heightened hostility and less frequently in times of relative peace), at least two to four people were injured by shrapnel wounds causing temporary or permanent disability. The buildings of schools and houses have their doors and windows built on the sides facing away from the border to prevent the bullets, shrapnels and splinters from bombs, from entering through them. Still the homes of children living near the zero line bear the marks of innumerable bullets in the doors and windows.

The local border residents remember and avoid the areas where live mines could be found even after decades of de-mining operations. De-mining operations are themselves dangerous in which even the security personnel get injured or killed sometimes. Siblings, Mohammad Khalid and Yasmeen aged 6 and 4 lost their lives in landmine while playing in the pastures in Suvinaar village. The family did not get even the inadequate compensation of ₹1.5 lakh to ₹2.5 lakh to landmine victims (Outlook) permitted by the State Human Rights Commission (SHRC).

IV. EDUCATION IN MIGRANT CAMPS

The people of J&K were affected by cross-border militancy between 1989 and 2003. The people of the Poonch district were one of the worst affected during this period. Border people who constitute 60% of the population of the district experienced huge scale displacement. Majority of the respondents (90%) from the surveyed villages had been displaced from their homes and fields at least twice in their lives while some of them (30%) had been displaced more than ten times since 1947. Cross-border mortar shelling, small arms firing and bombing using military tanks became a new normal at the LoC as cross-border infiltration of militants increased in the 1990s. The border villagers had to migrate to the nearest city, in this case Poonch city (15 to 20 km away from the respondents) leaving behind their cropped fields, homes and even cattle. For the surveyed villages, the nearest migrant camp was the government higher secondary school of Poonch where they stayed for a few weeks to a year (in unhygienic conditions), depending on the intensity and frequency of the shelling.

The disrupted school academic year was continued in the migrant camps but the quality of education suffered as camps cannot give the mental space for education that young children require. The teachers themselves had been injured or lost family members in the firing or had relocated to different migrant camps. 'No-fail' policy of the state government till tenth class ensured that all children could be promoted to higher classes even without attaining the necessary education goals of their school year. The lack of basic skills of reading, writing and counting had a detrimental effect on border children instilling in them an aversion to education and a sense of inferiority as compared to the children educated from non-border areas of the district. The male border children aspired to get into the 'belt forces' (armed forces) rather than continue their education past tenth or twelfth classes. According to the respondents, the number of undergraduates and post-graduates among border youth is abysmal because of the international conflict affecting their education from childhood.

V. CONCLUSION

Education of the children from the border areas, especially in J&K, is affected from childhood, not because of any local configuration of power like caste or class based discrimination for which the Constitution provides redressal but because of international conflict. Yet, the Indian state which is responsible for their educational backwardness is neglectful of their educational needs. The liberal democratic welfare state's promise of striking a balance between hope and frustration, truth and suspicion has miserably failed at the LoC. Their history of living in neglect is being written from 1947. Students from such deprived background regardless of their community category are latecomers to modernity. They have equal rights to education like their counterparts on the mainland. They should be provided the opportunity to continue their education without disruption as education is the only gateway for them and their families to lead a dignified life away from the conflict-ridden border. The Indian state must provide for alternate education facilities for the border children where they can continue their education in a safe environment with modern resources of education. At the same time, the state should make genuine efforts towards diplomatic, political and non-military resolution of the international conflict for the establishment of permanent peace at the LoC.

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