

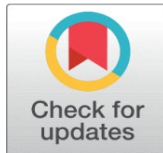
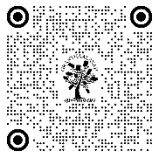


BORDERS AT THE MARGINS: LIVED EXPERIENCES AND GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES OF BORDER COMMUNITIES IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR

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ABSTRACT

This study re-envisioned border studies by focussing on the lived experiences of communities in Jammu and Kashmir's border regions, where borders transcend mere geopolitical lines and become vibrant socio-cultural landscapes. This research paper highlights the complex issues these communities face, such as security threats, economic exclusion, and restricted access to essential services like education and healthcare. These challenges are intensified by the region's geographic isolation, intermittent military conflicts, and political volatility, which create an environment marked by instability and vulnerability. By examining historical conflicts, systemic neglect, and geopolitical tensions, the study reveals how these factors compound the hardships of border populations. Furthermore, this paper evaluates the effects of leadership measures, such as construction projects, health, schooling, and living characteristics in enhancing conditions in such deprived regions. Consequently, the analysis presented in the research contributes to the existing body of knowledge on effective and efficient policy implementation and governance in borderland regions, while questioning the dominant paradigms of development. Thus, this work contributes to the existing literature on border studies by providing a systematic understanding of borders, community resilience, and governance in their complex interrelationships.

Keywords: Borderlands, Geo Politics, Governance, Government initiatives, Jammu & Kashmir

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of borders has evolved significantly in academic discourse, shifting from a focus on geopolitical demarcations to viewing borders as dynamic socio-political constructs that profoundly shape identity, governance, and everyday life for communities situated within them. Borders serve not only as lines of division but as spaces of interaction where politics, culture, and power intersect. Scholars like Kolossov (2005) and Newman (2011) argue that borders are both connectors and separators, serving as sites of identity formation and social differentiation that are continually redefined through the lived experiences of those inhabiting these regions. This re-imagined perspective on borders is particularly pertinent in the case of Jammu and Kashmir, a region whose geopolitical significance and historical tensions with neighbouring states—Pakistan and China—create a distinct social landscape along its borders. The border regions of Jammu and Kashmir, particularly along the Line of Control (LoC) with Pakistan and the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with China, are marked by high militarization, sporadic violence, and significant political friction

(Singh 2019; Kaul 2018). These borders exemplify what Houtum (2011) describes as "performative borders"—spaces where the state's sovereignty and its relationship with marginalized communities are constantly enacted and contested. This study adopts a socio-cultural lens to examine how such performative bordering shapes both the identities and the hardships of local communities, as well as the state's approach to governance in these challenging environments. This perspective allows us to see borders not as fixed entities, but as processes that actively produce social and political realities, impacting individuals' sense of belonging and the government's policy responses to security and development needs. A growing body of literature highlights the concept of "bordering," where the physical separation of land extends to economic, social, and psychological marginalization. As Anderson and O'Dowd (1999) point out, borders engender an "us" versus "them" distinction, enforcing a symbolic "othering" that places border populations at the periphery of the national agenda. This process of "othering" fosters a sense of alienation, often intensified in Jammu and Kashmir where the geopolitical tension translates to systemic underdevelopment, limited access to resources, and a pervasive sense of insecurity. As Paasi (1999) observes, bordering is an ongoing process that reinforces territorial identity while simultaneously excluding border populations from the national mainstream, thereby impacting their access to economic opportunities and essential services. For Jammu and Kashmir's border communities, this exclusion has tangible consequences, as access to healthcare, education, and employment remains limited amidst recurring violence and political instability (Zutshi 2004).

The intersection of border studies with identity theory provides another layer of insight into the lived experiences of border communities. Identity theorists argue that borders play a crucial role in shaping collective identity through the process of categorizing and differentiating groups. Barthes (2006) emphasizes the role of narrative in constructing identities along borders, where local myths, historical experiences, and cultural symbols converge to form a distinct border identity. This narrative construction is particularly salient in Jammu and Kashmir, where prolonged conflict has fostered a strong sense of community resilience but also a deeply ingrained perception of vulnerability. The persistence of violence along the LoC, coupled with the physical and symbolic isolation from the national core, has given rise to unique narratives that influence how residents view themselves in relation to the state and neighbouring countries. Houtum's (2011) analysis of borders as "symbolic constructs" suggests that these narratives do not merely reflect pre-existing realities; rather, they actively shape individuals' identities, infusing borders with complex emotional and cultural significance.

From a governance perspective, the challenges of administering border areas add another layer of complexity. State-led initiatives in Jammu and Kashmir have included constructing infrastructure, providing emergency shelters, and promoting livelihood generation programs. However, as Dar (2015) notes, the effectiveness of these initiatives often remains limited due to the region's remoteness, harsh terrain, and the continuous threat of cross-border hostilities. The framework of "border governance" extends beyond conventional security concerns to include the need for socio-economic development, infrastructural resilience, and community-based interventions. This study examines how government policies in Jammu and Kashmir navigate these dual imperatives, seeking to balance national security interests with the welfare of marginalized border populations. Singh (2019) argues that while efforts such as constructing bunkers and enhancing local healthcare infrastructure have helped alleviate some immediate concerns, their impact is often short-lived without consistent implementation and long-term strategic planning.

This paper positions the borders of Jammu and Kashmir as socially constructed spaces where the state's political and developmental strategies intersect with the lived experiences and identities of border populations. By highlighting the concept of "performative bordering" and integrating the frameworks of "othering" and "identity formation," this study provides a nuanced analysis of how borders shape life for Jammu and Kashmir's border communities, offering insights into the challenges of governance, resilience, and social inclusion in contested borderlands. Ultimately, this research contributes to a more holistic understanding of borders as both geopolitical realities and lived spaces of complex identity negotiation, where state policies and local experiences collide in ways that define the social fabric of border regions.

2. LIVES ON THE EDGE: STRUGGLES AND RESILIENCE OF BORDER COMMUNITIES IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR

The borderland people in Jammu and Kashmir grapple with a unique set of challenges, rooted in the region's continuous geopolitical tension and socio-economic marginalization. While the physical division between India and Pakistan serves as a boundary line, its effects penetrate deeply into the lives of those residing in its shadow. This section explores the multi-faceted adversities these communities endure, covering issues from safety concerns and displacement to economic hardships, limited access to essential services, and profound psychological impacts.

1: PERPETUAL SECURITY THREATS AND DISPLACEMENT

Border populations in Jammu and Kashmir live under the constant threat of violence and displacement due to unpredictable cross-border shelling and skirmishes. For these communities, life is defined by a cycle of sudden disruption, as conflict along the Line of Control (LoC) can erupt without warning, forcing families to abandon their homes and seek safety. While interacting with some of the research participants residing near the LoC, encapsulates this pervasive uncertainty: "We are always on edge, never knowing when the next shell will fall. We are always in constant movement with our children at multiple times in our lives, but we always return. It is our home, yet it feels like a place we can never truly settle.¹" Their words illustrate the emotional toll that living in such a volatile environment takes on families, emphasizing the profound sense of insecurity that permeates their lives.

This recurring displacement affects all facets of community life. It disrupts children's education, interrupts work, and imposes physical and psychological burdens on residents. Many inhabitants adopt a survival mindset, always ready to evacuate at a moment's notice, as articulated by research participants. While this resilience is admirable, it stymies long-term planning and development. As they continue, "Every time we settle down, we know we might have to leave again. It makes it hard to think about the future." Bose (2003) captures this state of "perpetual insecurity," noting that "border populations live in a state of 'perpetual insecurity' due to the unpredictability of conflict, which shapes every aspect of their daily lives" (Bose, 2003 p. 78.). The narratives of those like Amina reveal how deeply entrenched conflict influences not only their present realities but also their hopes and aspirations for the future.

2: ECONOMIC MARGINALIZATION AND LIMITED LIVELIHOOD OPPORTUNITIES

Economic underdevelopment poses a significant challenge for the border communities of Jammu and Kashmir. Frequent conflict diverts resources away from infrastructural development, leaving these regions lacking even the most basic amenities. During a community meeting with residents from a border village, many voiced their frustrations about their economic situation. During interaction some of the research participants, who were local farmers, captured the sentiment succinctly: "Our land produces little, and we have no industries. In peacetime, we struggle to find work; during conflict, our fields become battlegrounds." their words reflect the stark reality faced by many, where agricultural potential is thwarted by violence and instability. The dire economic conditions have led to feelings of abandonment among the residents. Some young participants, lamented, "Sometimes we look around and think, why do we even exist in this part of the world? Our markets are empty, and there are no jobs. We feel forgotten. Their observations highlight the emotional toll of economic marginalization, contributing to a pervasive sense of hopelessness in the community².

The lack of stable employment opportunities traps many families in a cycle of poverty, severely impacting their ability to improve living standards or invest in their children's futures. Bilal, a teacher, explained the implications of this cycle: "I want my children to have a better life, but how can I save for their education when I barely make enough to feed them?" This struggle for basic survival illustrates the depth of economic deprivation and its cascading effects on aspirations and future generations. Moreover, local narratives reveal how these challenges hinder community cohesion and resilience. Fatima, an elder in the village, shared, "We used to have markets filled with goods and laughter. Now, we just see empty stalls and worry. We used to support each other in our work, but now everyone is just trying to survive." This reflection emphasizes how economic exclusion not only limits individual growth but also erodes communal ties that once fostered collaboration and mutual support.

¹ Group Discussion, 24 June 2023. (Salamabad Uri), Baramulla

² Group Discussion. 12 June 2023, (Kamalkote, Uri) Baramulla

Zutshi (2004) argues that “the ongoing conflict drains resources that could otherwise be directed toward development in the border areas, perpetuating a cycle of poverty. These personal narratives illustrate the profound impact of economic marginalization on the residents' lives, reinforcing the need for targeted interventions that address both economic and social dimensions of development in these forgotten lands (Zutshi, 2004).

3: SILENT BATTLES: THE UNSEEN PSYCHOLOGICAL TOLL OF CONFLICT

The psychological toll of continuous exposure to violence and instability represents a profound challenge for border residents in Jammu and Kashmir, particularly among children. Growing up in an environment marked by fear and displacement, young individuals are especially vulnerable to developing long-term mental health issues. During a focused group discussion, Meena, a local schoolteacher, articulated the plight of her students: “The children are strong, but I see how they flinch at loud noises. They have learned to be brave, but they are losing their childhoods.” This statement encapsulates the duality of resilience and vulnerability experienced by children in conflict zones, highlighting how survival mechanisms can mask deeper psychological scars³.

Research by Kaul (2006) reinforces this observation, noting that “the conflict environment has left deep scars on the mental health of the younger population, leading to long-term psychological issues” (Kaul, 2006). The chronic instability faced by these border populations fosters a breeding ground for anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In discussions with local parents, many expressed their concerns. Moreover, some of the research participants narrated that, “our children have nightmares. They wake up screaming. We don't know how to help them.” Such testimonials reveal a critical gap in mental health services, as communities grapple with the aftermath of conflict largely in isolation⁴.

The absence of mental health professionals in these remote areas exacerbates the situation, leaving residents to cope with trauma independently. Many have turned to cultural coping mechanisms, relying on family support, faith, and community solidarity as informal strategies to manage their mental health challenges. However, these approaches cannot replace the need for professional psychological care. As Khan (2020) points out, community support can be beneficial, but it is insufficient without structured mental health services, which are necessary for addressing the complex needs of trauma survivors in conflict. This psychological crisis is compounded by the broader socio-economic issues facing border communities, creating a cyclical pattern of trauma and instability (Khan, 2020). Bilal, a local teacher, remarked during the discussion, “How can we expect our children to heal when their futures are so uncertain?” This observation highlights the interconnectedness of mental health and socio-economic conditions, revealing that without addressing the broader context of conflict and marginalization, efforts to mitigate psychological trauma may remain insufficient.

Different conceptual frameworks surrounding trauma and mental health emphasize the importance of understanding the socio-political context in which individuals live. Herman (1992) argues that trauma is not only an individual experience but also a collective one shaped by social and cultural factors (Herman, 1992 p. 24,). This perspective underscores the need for interventions that do not merely treat symptoms but also engage with the larger socio-political realities that perpetuate trauma in communities affected by conflict. Thus, as scholars and policymakers consider interventions, it is crucial to integrate mental health support into a holistic framework that addresses both the immediate psychological needs and the underlying socio-economic challenges faced by these border populations.

4: GEOGRAPHIC ISOLATION AND LIMITED ACCESS TO SERVICES

Geography further compounds the challenges faced by border populations in Jammu and Kashmir. The mountainous terrain of the LoC area renders many villages inaccessible, making it difficult for residents to access healthcare, education, and other essential services. This isolation is felt keenly during times of crisis, as ambulances and medical aid often struggle to reach the injured during episodes of shelling. Research participants from a remote village of Uri, explain, “We try to provide what we can, but with limited resources and difficult terrain, it feels like we are always fighting an

³ Personal interaction, 10 June 2023 Kamalkote Uri, Baramulla

⁴ Group Discussion, 27 May 2023. Isham Baramulla

uphill battle.⁵ This geographic marginalization exacerbates residents' sense of neglect, making it challenging to envision a future that includes them in the nation's broader developmental vision. Despite occasional government interventions, like the construction of bunkers, these efforts have had only a limited impact without consistent, long-term infrastructural investment.

5: GOVERNMENT INTERVENTIONS AND INFRASTRUCTURAL GAPS: BRIDGING THE DIVIDE

To mitigate the profound challenges faced by border residents in Jammu and Kashmir, the Indian government has initiated various interventions aimed at improving living conditions and providing security. Among the notable programs are the construction of community bunkers and enhancements to road infrastructure, which are intended to offer critical protection against cross-border shelling and facilitate connectivity to the rest of the region. However, the effectiveness and implementation of these initiatives have been inconsistent, leaving many residents feeling abandoned by the state. Singh (2019) highlights this disparity, stating that "government programs to construct community bunkers have provided much-needed protection, but the infrastructure is often incomplete and unevenly distributed.

Local narratives illustrate the mixed reception of these government efforts. Fatima, a resident of a border village, shared, "The bunkers are a good idea, but we need them to be properly built and maintained. Many are still not finished, and in times of shelling, we find ourselves scrambling for safety without enough protection." This sentiment resonates with others in her community, who feel that while government initiatives may provide a semblance of security, they fall short of addressing the deeper infrastructural deficiencies that hinder their daily lives.

Furthermore, although policies aimed at enhancing connectivity have been introduced, the pace of implementation is often stymied by the ongoing conflict and political instability in the region. Rafiq, a local farmer, remarked, "The roads are being worked on, but how can we trust the government when every time things improve, there's a new round of conflict? Our lives are always on hold." Such perspectives reflect a broader frustration with governmental efforts that seem disconnected from the realities of life in border areas, where security imperatives often overshadow developmental needs⁶. This disconnect highlights a critical theoretical debate surrounding state sovereignty and security in conflict zones. Scholars like Zizek (2009) argue that in contexts of protracted conflict, the state often prioritizes security measures over humanitarian needs, resulting in a gap between policy intentions and lived experiences. This gap is evident in Jammu and Kashmir, where infrastructural investments do not translate into meaningful improvements for the local population, leaving them in a state of limbo between the demands of national security and their basic needs for safety and development.

To conclude the adversities facing border populations in Jammu and Kashmir are multi-layered, encompassing security threats, economic deprivation, psychological impacts, geographic isolation, and inadequacies in government intervention. These communities live in a liminal space, where their existence is shaped by both the immediacy of conflict and the chronic neglect that comes with being on the fringes of national policy priorities. Recognizing the distinct challenges faced by these residents is crucial for developing effective interventions that move beyond short-term solutions and address the structural inequities that define life along the borders. By understanding the complex interplay between geopolitics, development, and identity in these regions, policymakers can begin to envision strategies that integrate border communities more fully into the nation's developmental landscape, fostering both security and inclusivity.

3. FACTORS EXACERBATING THE PLIGHT OF JAMMU AND KASHMIR'S INHABITANTS

The enduring conflict between India and Pakistan is the primary factor contributing to the ongoing challenges faced by the inhabitants of Jammu and Kashmir, particularly in border areas. The region's geopolitical significance has turned it into a site of perpetual tension, where cross-border skirmishes and military operations create an environment of insecurity and instability. As Bose (2003) articulates, "the conflict has transformed the border regions into zones of instability, making life precarious for the civilians" (Bose, 2003). This instability directly impacts the daily lives of residents, who are often caught in the crossfire, forced to evacuate their homes and abandon their livelihoods. The

⁵ Group Discussion, 28 June 2023 (Salamabad, Uri. Baramulla)

⁶ Personal interview, 15 May 2023, Birjala Baramulla

militarization resulting from the conflict further exacerbates the plight of local populations. The heavy military presence not only disrupts daily life but also restricts movement, which complicates access to basic services such as healthcare, education, and economic opportunities. Zutshi (2004) emphasizes that "the heavy militarization in the border areas creates logistical and psychological barriers for residents, further alienating them from the rest of the state" (Zutshi, 2004, p. 115). These barriers not only isolate communities but also instil a sense of fear and anxiety, hindering their capacity for social and economic development.

Moreover, the ongoing military operations and sporadic violence lead to frequent displacement of populations along the Line of Control (LoC). Families are compelled to abandon their homes at a moment's notice, disrupting their lives and livelihoods. The psychological impact of such instability is profound, as noted by Kaul (2006), who highlights the deep scars left by the conflict on the mental health of the population, particularly children (Kaul, 2006). This continuous state of fear and uncertainty not only undermines the immediate safety of individuals but also has long-term consequences for community cohesion and resilience.

Furthermore, the geopolitical rivalry between India and Pakistan perpetuates a cycle of militarization and conflict that complicates any efforts toward reconciliation and development. Singh (2019) argues that "border communities are frequently viewed through the lens of security concerns, which leads to their further isolation and marginalization" (Singh, 2019). This perception as a security threat not only hampers effective governance but also diverts essential resources away from community development towards military expenditures, further entrenching the cycle of poverty and neglect in these regions.

To conclude, the ongoing conflict between India and Pakistan plays a critical role in shaping the lives of those residing in Jammu and Kashmir, particularly in border areas. The interplay of violence, militarization, and political instability creates an environment where residents are perpetually vulnerable, facing significant barriers to safety, economic stability, and social development. Addressing these challenges necessitates a concerted effort to move beyond militarized approaches towards a framework that prioritizes peacebuilding and the well-being of border communities.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the challenges faced by border communities in Jammu and Kashmir are deeply intertwined with the protracted conflict between India and Pakistan, which has led to a governance crisis characterized by instability, economic marginalization, and social fragmentation. Effective governance in this context requires a multifaceted approach that not only addresses security concerns but also prioritizes the development needs of these communities. Conceptual frameworks, such as Johan Galtung's concept of "positive peace," highlight the necessity of addressing the underlying causes of conflict rather than merely managing its symptoms. This approach advocates for a governance model that emphasizes social justice, equitable resource distribution, and the empowerment of local communities. By strengthening local governance institutions, as emphasized by Robert Putnam, it is possible to enhance accountability and ensure that development initiatives resonate with the needs of border populations. Moreover, integrating Amartya Sen's capability approach into governance strategies can facilitate the expansion of individual freedoms and opportunities for residents. This involves not just the provision of basic services but also the fostering of economic resilience through job creation and access to markets, thereby addressing the root causes of poverty and disenfranchisement. Furthermore, promoting cross-border cooperation and dialogue can play a pivotal role in mitigating tensions and fostering a sense of community across the Line of Control. Engaging in collaborative governance frameworks that involve local stakeholders in decision-making processes can help bridge divides and build trust among communities that have been historically marginalized.

Ultimately, a holistic governance strategy that incorporates conflict resolution, local empowerment, and collaborative frameworks is essential for addressing the complex challenges faced by border communities in Jammu and Kashmir. By prioritizing these elements, policymakers can work towards creating a sustainable and peaceful environment that supports the well-being and development of these marginalized populations, thus paving the way for a more stable future in the region.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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