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Kashmir as a Borderland: The Politics of Space and Belonging across the Line of Control

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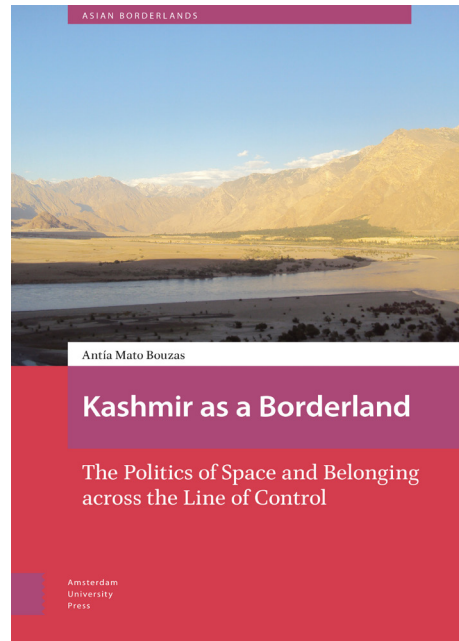
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In South Asia, most of the present-day borders were demarcated by the British to overcome their security anxieties. These borders, therefore, are the results of war, conflicts, and victories while sometimes they were drawn as an outcome of diplomatic efforts and administrative convenience (Tripathi & Chaturvedi 2019). The borderland of Kashmir is not an exception. *Kashmir as a Borderland* is perhaps the most important contribution to the literature of the South Asian border in general and the disputed border of Kashmir in particular. The significance of the book is made apparent by Bouzas' deep and long-term personal engagement with people living on both sides of the turbulent Line of Control that characterizes the field of comparative border studies. India and Pakistan share a common border of Jammu and Kashmir, which is divided into two parts in the Himalayan region of South Asia—the India-administered Kashmir and Pakistan-governed Kashmir, with an internationally defined Line of Control. It is one of the most militarized frontiers in the region often drawing attention from the international media (Digal 2019).

The book, as stated in the Introduction, aims to analyze 'how the Kashmir conflict is understood, lived and perceived at the border—a specific location where the ideas of statehood and belonging are particularly problematic' (19). Bouzas has narrated the obstacles and problems faced during the field



work and data collection phase of the project mainly due to the sensitive nature of the topic. The author has written an engaging, lucid, and accessible work, based on extensive and rigorous fieldwork. Its main strength derives from its comparative approach to some broad theoretical debates—bordered versus borderless world, territorial fragmentation, liberalization, border transformation, the critique of state space, sovereignty, postcolonial border making, and epistemological systems of borders—and its ability to subsequently focus and ground these debates in the empirical analysis of Kashmir borderland. Focusing on the politics of belonging with reference to the circumstances that lead people and groups to make a distinction between belonging and not belonging,

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the author's overall argument is that belonging generates a specific knowledge about how the world is (b)ordered. The book makes a thorough investigation into the issues of belonging leading to a 'new understanding of the Kashmir borderland' (33).

The book's Introduction sets the research frame by explaining the rationale and logic to study the Kashmir dispute from a borderland perspective. The author has conducted fieldwork that consists of interviews, conversations, the collection of local published and unpublished sources. She also mentions the problematic aspects of doing research in the contested and disputed zones of Kashmir. She was able to talk to ordinary people, lawyers, bureaucrats, nationalist leaders, former militants, local intellectuals, development organizations, cultural activists, and religious leaders. Chapter 1 lays out an analytical framework of the interplay of a plethora of inter-related issues including colonial partition, border fixing, nationalist struggles, power, politics and historiography in Kashmir's contested borderland. Chapter 2 & 3 conceptualize and examine the 'Kashmir issue' based on four urban areas: Srinagar, Muzaffarabad, Kargil and Skardu. These two chapters (63-118) exemplify the main strength of the scholarship on Kashmir border. It is observed that various vested forces remain active in the borderlands of Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan since the US-led war on terror. The author cited an example of misinformation in this regard. In 2002, several Indian and international media, including the *New York Times*, reported the presence of a huge number of suspicious Chinese soldiers in Gilgit-Baltistan. The author examined the news from different sources including the local informants, independent sources and her personal field work. She found that the information was false. As she wrote, 'The intentions of propagating such false news have not been disclosed, but this shows the state of security paranoia over events in the area. Security in the Kashmir borderland is not only about managing the current context of uncertainty, but also about preventing transformations that are considered undesirable from the state security's point of view' (67). The increasing militarization of Kashmir leads to widespread discontent. As a result, curfew, conflicts, restrictions, chauvinism, fundamentalism, and killings have become a normal affair in the border cities. The author has lucidly documented the Indian Central government's legislative measures and interferences in the internal affairs of Jammu & Kashmir resulting in the curtailment of the border state's autonomy guaranteed through the Article 370. Thus, she has revealed the truth by means of field data and accumulated experiences. I would like to note here that the current Hindu nationalist Modi government has recently stunned everyone by revoking nearly all of Article 370 which has been the basis of Kashmir's complex relationship with India for some 70 years.

Chapter 4 details the issues in Skardu and Kargil—two urban areas located near the Line of Control. The primary issue in these areas is the divisive and confrontational nature of the Line of Control arising out of the hostilities between India and Pakistan. In Chapter 5, the question of locating people in the debates about borders, especially with reference to the non-demarcated Line of Control, is examined before the Conclusion is finally offered. It shows how the border is transformed over time from porous to highly fenced resulting in the regulation of cross-border movements of the populations. The bordering and ordering processes are lucidly explained. The extra-judicial killings, rapes, and disappearances of the people have been a matter of grave concern at the borderland of Kashmir.

In this regard, it would be relevant to mention the story of a recent 2019 award-winning Indian movie entitled, *Hamid*, made by Aijaz Khan. Hamid is a Kashmiri 7-year-old boy. Rehmat is missing, who is father to seven-year-old Hamid and husband to Ishrat. While Ishrat tries to find her husband, like how thousands of Kashmiri women do; by going to the police and later to the morgue, little Hamid has his own, unique and brilliant way. Hamid is told that his father has gone to Allah (God). On learning that Allah's cell phone number is 786, Hamid tries to call him on the phone, but in vain. With this simple narrative, thus, filmmaker Aijaz Khan tells a thousand tales and conveys the unending sufferings, emotions, pains and agonies of the Kashmiri people. Moreover, in a 2019 Bengali book, Parvez (2019) has nicely documented the geo-strategic issues and ethno-political history of the nationalist movements in Kashmir.

The main contribution of the book reviewed above is a detailed case study of the troubled borderland of Kashmir. This work will pave the way for future research in the field of comparative border studies. It will certainly appeal to the growing number of specialists, particularly political scientists, sociologists, economists, anthropologists, and international relations scholars who study borders, as well as students, particularly graduate students, as it is a wonderful work of scholarship on borders.

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