



SHORT STORY

*Borders in Globalization Review*  
Volume 4, Issue 2 (Spring & Summer 2023): 121-125  
<https://doi.org/10.18357/bigr42202320994>

## Home, by the River down that Valley, beyond that Fence

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*This documentary fiction builds on lived experiences in the borderland district of Poonch, in the contested region of Jammu and Kashmir, administered by India along the contested border with Pakistan. The short story draws on fieldwork conducted between 2018 and 2020 as part of my PhD thesis and for an article published in this journal. The characters and events in the essay are fictional but inspired by real-life people and history, based on informal conversations, unused data collection, and other reflections from the field that did not make it into my academic work. An inspiration for this approach is the writing of Gloria Anzaldua on the US-Mexico border. Her reflections demonstrate that lived experiences need not always fit established academic and disciplinary boundaries. Subjective narratives around partition and separation cannot be contained by any one disciplinary framework. The trauma, yearning, and loss within these experiences are so multifaceted that they can be expressed through various writing styles. It is time, I believe, that borderland studies encourage interpersonal accounts in disciplinary inquiries, following some of the steps taken in sociology and social anthropology.*



Photo credit: the author

'The sky seems to be closing in Papa, let's come back again another day,' said Janaki to Jagat.

'Hold on, it should clear up in a while. You see Janaki, from these heights up here we have a better chance of getting a great view today, the one that we have been waiting for,' replied Jagat.

Jagat-Ram or Jagat was Janaki's father. A fine educator, Jagat had served here in these mountainous terrains as a school teacher all his life. The lands they both were exploring that day in search of the promised view were the mighty Pir Panjal ranges of Poonch, a small borderland that today is situated along the line-of-control, the notorious boundary between two neighbours, India and Pakistan.

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Before 1947, the erstwhile fiefdom of Poonch was under the Dogra monarchy in the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. Much like the acquired diversity that was consolidated into the state that the Dogras had built through brutal missions and campaigns, the diversity as it existed then in 1947 in the fief of Poonch was a valuable one.

Jagat would often narrate parables of his brave ancestors to Janaki. Gathered as folklore from his father and grandfathers, he would tell her tales of these magnificent lands. That day, while waiting for the sky to clear up, he narrated another one to her:

Long ago, a tribe that goes by the name *Sudans* descended upon the ranges of Hindukush and made the Pir Panjal Himalayan ranges in Poonch their new home. Some know them as Sudhans, others call them the Sudhozais. They were the hill-warriors, trained in battle-axes, archery, and swordsmanship. For long they lived as protectors of these lands and defended the many perilous Himalayan passages that led to the capital of the kingdom in Kashmir from adversaries. Poonch was thus a strong frontier that repulsed many invasions. *Sudans* defended these lands with their blood. Later, these passes were used by the great Mughals to enter Kashmir, where they both marvelled at and used her beauty as their own.

Once, a Mughal emperor appointed one of his knights serving in the Mughal cavalry as a *sardar* and asked him to look over the maintenance work in one such pass here that led to the valley enroute Mughal-road. The knight gradually fell in love with his surroundings, but he fell harder for a *Sudan* woman, who loved him as much as he loved her. However, the tribe would not agree to their union, so they eloped, with the knight galloping his horse, fully in control of its reigns, riding it to outrun the fierce riders from the tribe chasing them.

As fate would have it, they reached a blind end, an insurmountable cliff that tested their love for each other. In the moment, both of them surrendered to love and rode the horse off the edge, only to unite where no one could ever separate them again.

'You see those cliffs on the east, daughter. It is said that these are the cliffs their horse took off from,' remarked Jagat with Janaki looking eastwards with her bewildered eyes. She was not just seeing the cliff but trying to envisage the brave *Sudan* woman on that horse with that knight, baffled at the revelation of the power of loving another human. Janaki knew love, but there in that moment, she perhaps saw it naked, right in front of her eyes, riding off into the beauty of Pir Panjal and becoming one with it.

'Look! Look, there it is. Janaki, take a look at that range towards the northwest, down that hill by the edge of the river,' exclaimed Jagat joyously.

This shook Janaki from her reverie, and she realised that the sky had cleared up. All the ranges northwestwards

were then visible, fresh and clean, as if the weather closed in only to wash off the haze over these mountains.

'Walk me through it, Papa. Is that the hill below that tree line? I can see the river meandering towards the edge of the hill, almost touching it from the north. Is it that range?' asked Janaki.

'Yes, yes, exactly that one. I told you Janaki, the view from up here would be like nothing we have seen before. There, right there, by the river down that valley, beyond that fence, is our home. Have a good look, Janaki. That is where we belong.'

Jagat was referring to the other half of Poonch that lay beyond the fence into the territory of Pakistan. The line-of-control passing through these lands bisected the former fiefdom of Poonch into two parts during the tragic 1947 partition. Jagat's family was displaced a few miles on this side of the line into the part of Poonch that fell into India. The line did not only divide the territory in the erstwhile fiefdom, but the tribe as well. *Sudans* were a multi-religious vibrant tribe, but in that mayhem of partition, the bonds of harmony and love in such tribes were strangled by the knots of hatred and revenge. Among those were Hindus and Sikhs who had to leave their homes in Poonch on the Pakistani side for Poonch on the Indian side, and many were Muslims who were displaced inversely. At least they were satisfied to live amongst their other tribe members, well within the boundaries of their beloved fief, though now in groups with similar religiosity.

The line which divided land and religion could not divide hearts, though. Jagat often apprised Janaki about the values of plurality and fraternity that the descendants of the *Sudans* had upheld generation after generation. He told her about his life as a schoolmaster who had to teach students in schools that were situated there, in some of the most hostile zones in the world. And yet it was the love and brotherhood between a Hindu, a Muslim, and a Sikh *Sudan* that kept him sailing through the violence and the hatred that this unfortunate boundary spewed.

'But how would we identify our home? We need stronger binoculars, something that we may not find in the town market here,' said Janaki while pondering the purpose of climbing a new peak every other month when details in the settlement across the fence were hardly discernible.

Thinking about binoculars and their availability, Jagat hinted at taking leave of the place as it had already begun to drizzle. 'We should make a move,' he added. 'The ride downhill will be risky if it rains heavily.'

As they hiked down towards their car, a quick turn of events, more dangerous than rain and thunderstorm, took them by surprise. A large shell exploded in the hill nearby, spraying shrapnel all over. Besides breaking the serenity, it loudly marked the start of a rough drive downhill that both Janaki and Jagat had to then undertake. Another one exploded, this time upon a village settlement at a close distance to Jagat's and Janaki's position.

'Rush Janaki! We need to get into the car before this reaches us. Run towards the car, take shelter and lie low whenever I say so. Keep one eye on the car and the other at me. Do not look at the explosions, they will scare and distract you, there's nothing to be afraid of... keep running.' Jagat kept admonishing Janaki while leading her way, through the boulders and rough steep patches, to the car.

As they started riding downhill, the most important task of reaching lower heights where the cross-border shelling could not harm them was all that Jagat could think of. They rode in complete silence as, in order to make conversation, the words spoken inside the car needed to be louder than the exploding artillery outside.

Having crossed those risky curvilinear stretches, Jagat breathed a sigh of relief when he glimpsed the town nearby. Janaki kept looking back at those heights where the smoke and the bombardment were playing a strange dance of death.

'This has become an everyday routine,' remarked a disappointed Jagat. 'For seventy-five years I have been a witness to this cross-border violence. The world should ask us what normalcy feels like. I would say to them our abnormal is your normal. We shall ride in the morning next time, Janaki. The evenings here are getting darker and heavier day by day.'

'Papa, what about those villagers uphill?' asked a terrified Janaki.

Unable to answer, Jagat quietly signalled her to gather the essentials from the car and to go inside the house.

That evening, forces on both the sides heavily bombarded Poonch (as it existed on both sides of the boundary). The sounds, though distant, kept haunting Janaki, and she could not distance herself from the interactions she had with the villagers before the delusional calm was shaken by the dreaded violence across the line. Only a few hours ago, she waved at two ethnic Pahari women clad in traditional *salwar-kameez* with big bold bright patterns walking with earthen-water pots uphill. Only a few hours ago, Jagat stopped near a group of boys who were going back to their houses with heavy schoolbags on their shoulders. He distributed sweets to them and urged them to educate themselves all their lives while Janaki interacted with the lone little Bakerwal girl in that bunch of boys. Samira, the little one, told Janaki how she did not like these boys but had to walk with them because she needed someone to protect her in case bombs started dropping from across the fence. Janaki wanted to ask her, 'where are the other girls?' But she herself was familiar enough with the status of education in a zone of conflict.

Janaki gave a tight hug to Samira while leaving her in the company of the boys with a heartfelt 'Allah-Hafiz Samira, may God protect you!'

Jagat easily comprehended Janaki's perplexity and told her how life had always been layered with so many difficulties in these lands. To cheer her, he started describing the house beyond the fence as it existed in 1947 when Jagat's father last saw it. His father had told Jagat how beautiful it was, standing tall in the middle of terraced paddy-fields in the village Kalote in Hajira. He told Janaki how his father asked him to always imagine it as a house with a big walnut tree in its courtyard. Several villagers would assemble under its shade, both men and women in the same courtyard, discussing mundane details of everyday life in the village over a cup of *noon-chai* (salt-tea) with a pinch of added sugar. He added how next time they shall use powerful binoculars to locate any house with a big walnut tree by its side. This both excited Janaki and made her sad at the same time.

'But what about the tight surveillance near the fence? Would it be safe standing at those heights and looking over the fence with binoculars? What if 'they' are watching us back Papa?' asked Janaki, terrified of the potential consequences.

Once they were taking a similar trip uphill when several policemen detained Jagat for the word that he had inscribed on the back window of his car. It read حجیرہ, *Hajira* in Urdu, and this shocked the police as a car roaming around in Poonch on the Indian side had the name of a place that existed in Poonch on the other side, in 'enemy territory.' What excuse could Jagat have given about this mad love for his ancestral place, particularly across a boundary which had only framed people with suspicion and espionage? Only luck saved Jagat that day.

'We shall figure this out when we are there next time,' replied Jagat.

Janaki had gotten to the bottom of Jagat's love for the house across the fence. She had seen all her life how Jagat longed to see it even just once. She knew that the past seven decades since partition had changed so much, and that Jagat had no ownership of that house that existed now only in his imagination. All he wanted was to see it before he died. This strange sense of belonging perhaps had been a result of all those years of yearning and loss, common between Jagat, his father, his grandfather, and now Janaki.

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Rivers connect what lands divide. The river, on the banks of which Poonch town was situated, flowed westwards directly into the Poonch on the other side. What regimes and boundaries cannot divide are the flowing waters of the brooks and the breeze across the mountains. They connect people in strange, mythical ways. The flowing waters of the river in Poonch were thus significant as Jagat and Janaki could send greetings across to their ancestral lands whenever they desired. These waters were also particularly important because Janaki's elder

brother, Jagat's only son, had accidentally drowned in them long ago when he was only a child. They searched the river day and night for two days only to find his body resting peacefully on a patch of land that belonged to Jagat's great grand-father. It was still a mystery for Jagat to see his son having chosen the land of his ancestors when he embraced death. 'Drowning was just an excuse. He had to be taken to where he actually belonged,' Jagat would often remark in grief. Militaries on both the sides got involved in rescuing the body and handing it over to the family, as the zone where he laid was a vigilant border with many dangers, such as embedded landmines and snipers watching for trespassers.

Janaki would often go near the stream and offer flowers in memory of her brother, knowing that the waters would listen to her and would take these petals to her ancestral field, chosen by her brother as his final resting place. She would dip her hands in it, and the waters would often deliver her brother's soaked yet warm body to her. It would come alive for a moment, talking to Janaki about all the things left unsaid.

Janaki never completely understood the conflict these lands and her community had been living with for decades. She sometimes went to her rooftop in the chill of a winter's night and gazed at the lights shining atop the hills beyond the fence, knowing well that one of these lights might be coming from her ancestral house. She would often be startled at the disruptive purpose that this line, the impregnable boundary, held for a community with deep kinship lineage and shared cultural ethos. It snowed on her house when it snowed on those across the boundary. Water-nuts blossomed here when they blossomed there. They relished seasonal fruits together, spoke in one dialect, wore similar traditional clothes, and were descendants of the same lineage. Then why were these two countries asking them to look at each other as enemies? Janaki could never look at those lights as belonging to her enemy, not even when houses around her would unfurl an Indian flag that symbolised hatred for the neighbour Pakistan, more than love for their own country.

One fine evening, Jagat was reading Janaki a short story by Krishan Chander, the famous Urdu *afsana-nigar* (storyteller). Krishan Chander spent his youth in Poonch. The story was a tragic tale of two lovers who married on a bridge that suddenly became a de facto border in 1947, when the trouble first hit these lands. The bride belonged to a hamlet on the side that remained with India, and the groom belonged to the one on the other that was by then taken over by Pakistan. India's and Pakistan's commandants guarding their respective posts on either side could not decide where to allow such a marriage to take place. They finally settled for the bridge that connected the two surveillance checkpoints.

Jagat often read to Janaki in Urdu. Urdu was his first language, and he taught in Urdu-medium. Each religion

chose its own language, but Jagat always taught Janaki the value of diversity. He had told Janaki how his first posting as a schoolmaster was in a school located in the middle of the cross-border firing zone. He was the only Hindu teacher posted in an all-Muslim village. But the plurality of the community was such that they took pride in their common lineage, language, and culture, and revered their multi-faith population as Pahari-ethnic heritage.

Jagat, in his reminiscing, often spoke of a little girl named Nusrat, who would pack a homemade *parantha* (bread) every day for Jagat, despite his repeated requests asking her not to do so. She would say, 'Abba sends this for you, teacher. He says give this to the noble teacher who has come all the way up here to teach kids in our village.'

Jagat remembers how once he had an injured ankle and could not walk to the school for many days. The local Sarpanch (elected village headman) Azam Khan opened his house up for him and asked him to stay there until his wound healed so that he was nearer the school.

Janaki thus had always looked at the boundary as a wall that had been forcefully keeping the community divided for the past many decades. Even though people on either side had lived as Indians and Pakistanis respectively for the past seventy years, Janaki knew that once this wall was broken, an outpouring of infinite love for each other across the border would erase the wounds that this wall had unleashed so far, wounds that sometimes came in the form of day-to-day violence, and other times as eternal separation and yearning.

Growing up, Janaki was always confused about the choice of her career. Her dream of taking Jagat across the fence to his ancestral house and village had always put her in dilemma vis à vis career choices that could actually give her an opportunity to do so. She would think maybe joining the United Nations could help her where she could be engaged in one of their volunteer programmes and visit Pakistan one day. Then, she would think about diplomacy and foreign affairs in her own country, with Pakistan as her regional focus. But, two things that would always discourage her were, first, her religion, and second, the regional location of Poonch that she belonged to. The hatred and animosity that these boundaries had generated on both sides disturbed her. She did not want to endanger her father's life, as visiting the other side of her beloved Poonch through any of these programs could raise suspicion. She had heard frightening tales about how suspicion could lead to accusations of spying, and there was no explanation she could then conjure for having come this close to the border through the other side in Pakistan when they lived so close to it from the other side in India.

In anticipation of a positive change, one day she drove along with Jagat to the last military post held by India on the Indian side of the frontier, where the Poonch-

Rawalakote bus service centre was located. She wanted to inquire about the number of non-Muslim *Poonchies* (people of Poonch) who had travelled across through a newly inaugurated bus route that operated weekly between two neighbourhoods. The talks of both the nation-states pushing for friendly ties through such cross-border exchanges had her fooled. She thought that the record of how people from all fronts and religions had visited the other side and had come back safely would support her cause of taking up such a venture across the line for Jagat and herself. Hers was not a voyage to metropolitan destinations like Karachi and Lahore, which many people on either side undertook. She wanted to visit Kalote, Hajira, in Poonch on the other side, only a few miles away from her present hostile geographical location.

As she approached the post, one soldier clad in military uniform stopped her. She respectfully presented her case which the soldier could not understand, as it seemed foolish to him for a woman to think of traveling to the other side just for the sake of having a look at an unknown village and an unseen house. A few minutes into the negotiations, a few more soldiers gathered. Some of them laughed at her, and some were confused as to what this young woman was imagining in her head.

Bombs started pouring in, and the soldiers immediately dispersed to their respective locations on the posts. The last soldier standing ordered her to move back or else he would have to call one of his seniors to come and intervene. Hearing the commotion, a junior officer came out of the bunker. Others in the group had already apprised him of this mad lady enquiring about strange things. He requested Jagat move back immediately, as

the cross-border fire could harm them at any moment, then he looked at Janaki and added, 'madam, you can cross from here to the other side when there is no war like this one right now. You can cross when there is peace and our bodies are not exposed to lethal threat as they are now. Any person trying to cross these dangerous fences otherwise shall be looked upon as a traitor and shall be terminated in all capacity without a delay in orders.'

'Peace, you say sir, but when will that be? It has been over seventy years already. We just need to visit our village a few miles across. *Sudans*, our ancestors, had protected these lands with their blood. How are we, their descendants, a threat today?'

Jagat pulled her back as the sounds of fire and artillery grew louder and louder.

They once again drove back in silence amidst the horrifying sounds of bombardment. Near their house, Jagat broke his silence and said, 'Janaki, I am growing old. But you have a long beautiful life ahead. Promise me if I cannot visit the house with the walnut tree, you will, one day.'

Janaki, while looking away from her father's eyes, said, 'I promise, I will visit it with you soon. We both shall visit it together. Our love for our fellow tribesmen and women across the line is stronger than the lines that they have divided us with. It will take us to where we belong, and we will see it with our own eyes, spread love to the people living there, and tell them that we are not enemies as they have made us to be.'

Jagat hopelessly saw hope in Janaki's words, again.