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Suchetgarh Women: The Strength and Excluded Section of the International Border

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Jammu and Kashmir, a region straddling India and Pakistan, illustrates the intersection of two major South Asian states along the International Border (IB), where protracted violence profoundly impacts local communities. This study explores the lived experiences of borderland women in Suchetgarh village, Jammu, focusing on the impacts of ceasefire violations and hostile interactions between Indo-Pakistani forces. Utilizing a feminist methodology, the research highlights the profound effects of conflict on women's physical and psychological well-being. It underscores the dual victimization faced by these women: one stemming from entrenched patriarchal structures and the other from militarism and everyday violence. Despite enduring these adversities, borderland women contribute significantly to local economies, education, and social cohesion, embodying resilience and social unity. However, they remain marginalized in socio-political and security spheres due to prevailing patriarchal norms. The study advocates for increased female representation in security forces and policy-making to mitigate the adverse effects of militarized borders. It also emphasizes the potential for feminist perspectives to inform border security studies and improve women's roles in these regions. By focusing on borderland women's perspectives and their call for peace and dialogue, the study challenges traditional realist frameworks and offers insights into the human dimensions of Indo-Pakistan border conflicts. The research calls for enhanced understanding, empathy, and the incorporation of gendered voices to transform longstanding violent relations into peaceful conditions.

Keywords: Borders, borderland women, Jammu and Kashmir, ceasefire violations, security.

Introduction

Borders have a reputation for being infamous “power symbols” (Donnan 1998, 1). They are the geographical and political delineation of precincts between two states or administrative subdivisions established through political agreements. States have defined

border ideologies as having a fixed and permanent nature (Chowdhary 2012). The term “borderlands” refers to areas that are distinct from the mainland and serve as a state's territorial boundary (Chowdhary 2012, 9). The boundaries of the European Union and the state's

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internal administrative areas are two instances of unfenced, open, unprotected borders. Other borders are truncated, restricted, or both, and can only be crossed through legitimate official mechanisms. In this study, the term 'Borderland people' refers to the residents of restricted and securitized borders. They typically have different geographic limits on their freedom of movement, and their way of life and sociopolitical attitudes differ significantly from those of people living on the state's mainland. Borders have a tangible impact on people's lives, putting them in dead-end situations with various constraints and vulnerabilities, marginalizing them in a variety of ways without giving them a choice (Raina 2021). Borderland people and the obstacles to borderland living, such as life security, material security, constraints, and uncertainty, make it essential to study their experiences.

The people living on the borders of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) entangled between India and Pakistan witnessed the long-running war along with physical and psychological effects on borderland communities in general and women in particular. This paper studies the impact of ceasefire violations on borderland women at Suchetgarh village in the Ranbir Singh Pura sector of Jammu district, J&K. Using narrative technique, the paper explores the different facets of women's affected lives as borderland residents and members of borderland society.

Methodology of study

The challenges that women in Suchetgarh Village, Ranbir Singh Pura Sector, Jammu division, J&K, encounter as a result of ceasefire violations are examined in this piece. Situated within the region under study, this research is informed by our intersecting yet distinct positionalities. Ruchika Raina, from Jammu, foregrounds the gendered experiences of woman lives in borderland spaces, while Firdoos Ahmad Reshi, hailing from Kashmir, examines issues of protracted conflict of J&K borders and militarism in the region. Together, these perspectives facilitate a grounded and ethically attuned exploration of women's lives at the margins of the international border. The paper's objective is to provide the lived experiences of borderland women who are members or residents of borderland cultures and to study their socio-ecological and political facets of existence. This paper also enhances scholarly inquiry on J&K's International Border (IB) and provides valuable insights for creating fairer and more efficient policy solutions. An ethnographic approach is very suitable for examining the intricate and diverse experiences of women residing in borderlands. Researchers can acquire profound understanding of the social, cultural, and political forces that influence life in these locations by fully engaging in the daily experiences of their subjects. Thus, ethnographic research has been employed in conjunction with participatory research methodologies

and a reflective examination of the researcher's positionality to conduct the present study.

Via open-ended questionnaires and informal conversations, these women's stories have been gathered. Interviews were conducted in Hindi and Dogri, according to the respondents' linguistic preferences. Dogri interviews were translated into English by the first author, and Hindi interviews by the second author. Some participants requested anonymity (pseudonyms are indicated). Care was taken to preserve the original meaning and nuance of participants' responses. It has also been documented when participants speak loudly, softly, or remain silent while discussing certain problems and their regular livelihood. Twenty borderland women were approached using the ethnographic method and using the purposive sampling technique of non-probability sampling. Purposive sampling has been taken into account with the inclusion of eight homemakers, four students, four working women, and four senior women of eight households. To investigate the social, economic, educational, health, and political prospects of borderland living, people from all walks of life—educated and uneducated, married and single, wealthy and poor—have been taken into consideration. It is crucial to note that this research includes only the village of Suchetgarh and does not encompass the full border region of Jammu and Kashmir.

Theoretical underpinnings

Regarding the theoretical underpinnings of this study, we have employed the theoretical construct of intersectionality and feminist realist critiques of classical realism as proposed by Tickner and Enloe. Intersectionality is a notion that offers a complete framework for comprehending how different social identities and institutions intersect to create distinct experiences of oppression and privilege. When examining women's encounters with borders, the concept of intersectionality uncovers the complex manner in which gender, race, nationality, class, and other social classifications intertwine to influence their actual experiences. This viewpoint recognises that women do not encounter oppression in a solitary aspect, but rather through various, intersecting identities that shape their life experiences and opportunities (Collins 2000). This approach is crucial for examining the intricate difficulties encountered by women in Jammu borderlands, who frequently navigate complex socio-political terrains characterised by short-term wars, i.e., ceasefire violations, temporary migration, and security concerns in the region. This framework helps us understand how these intersections contribute to the existence of systematic injustice and social inequality (Crenshaw 1989).

Borderlands are distinctive socio-political spaces where different manifestations of authority and opposition intersect. Women in these places frequently face

increased vulnerabilities as a result of the overlapping aspects of their identities. The intersectional method facilitates the analysis of how national policies, cultural norms, and local power dynamics have a disproportionate impact on women. Gender norms and expectations significantly influence the way women perceive and encounter security on borders. Research has indicated that security programmes frequently neglect the distinct needs and susceptibilities of women, resulting in insufficient safeguarding and assistance (Tickner 2001). Tickner's critique of classical realism calls for a gender-sensitive approach, arguing that traditional theories overlook women's contributions and experiences (Enloe 2000). Gendered security assessments demonstrate the differential impact of militarization and border policing on women, often intensifying their marginalisation. She further underscores the necessity of integrating women's roles and experiences into global politics, revealing how their perspectives challenge and enrich our understanding of international relations. Both perspectives advocate for a more inclusive and empathetic framework in addressing conflicts.

Indo-Pakistan Border: The Background

One of the most active and deadly frontiers in the world is the Indo-Pakistan border, which is situated in South Asia. India and Pakistan, the two nuclear-armed nations in South Asia, disagree about Jammu and Kashmir (Varshney 1991). On the border between India and Pakistan, armed personnel are stationed to maintain border security and safeguard the territorial integrity of each country's sovereign state. The main issue has existed since 1947 along the boundary that passes through the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Both nations' border security policies and defense techniques have evolved throughout time as a result of the conflict along this boundary. On the one hand, international borders are changing from their historical function of containing the movement of people, goods, and ideas from one country to another and are increasingly porous. One example of this is the Schengen area of the European Union. On the other, the borders of South Asia, notably those of Pakistan and India, are becoming more controlled and militarized. Border fighting has been a recurring issue since India and Pakistan were divided after gaining independence from the British Empire, particularly in the Jammu and Kashmir region. Historically, to save the territory from tribal invasion, the Hindu Maharaja of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir acceded to India under dubious circumstances. An unresolved issue resulted from Pakistan's invasion, which gave them illegal control over the western and northern areas of the state (often referred to as POK in India and Azad Kashmir in Pakistan) (Ali 2019). Due to the separation of Indian territories and the tribal enmity in J&K, a significant exodus took place on both sides. As a result, the state of Jammu and Kashmir has split into two separate sovereign entities, each of which controls

a portion of the state. Notably, India and Pakistan jointly control the bulk of the erstwhile princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. This non-uniform boundary creates problems for border management in terms of territory, cross-border shooting, terrorist infiltration, drug trafficking, and human rights concerns. Due to internal state problems like the unrest in Kashmir followed by encounters with militants, the imprisonment of political leaders for a number of months, surveillance, and other challenges the populace faces in accessing high speed internet or in the complete breaking of cellular connection, many rural communities on both sides of these two borders are deprived of a normal and smooth life as well as a sense of security (Narayanan 2020). Additionally, external forces like ceasefire violations on the IB and the Line of Control (LoC) or terrorist actions supported by terrorist groups with headquarters in Pakistan have increased the number of villages bereft of regular living.

In 2012, Pakistan breached the ceasefire on 37 occasions, compared to 51 incidents in 2011, 44 in 2010, and 28 in 2009 (Deccan Herald 2012). In 2014, Jammu and Kashmir's Line of Control (LoC) and International Border (IB) recorded 562 violations, marked by intensified shelling, firing, Border Action Team (BAT) operations, and sniper attacks targeting civilian areas and forward posts by Pakistani troops (Economic Times 2014). There were 405, 449, and 971 instances of ceasefire breaches in 2015, 2016, and 2017, with 10, 13, and 19 fatalities, respectively. Regarding 2018, the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs reported in October 2018 that CFVs killed 52 people on the Indian side over the course of the first seven months of the year (including 28 civilians, 12 soldiers, and 12 Border Security Force personnel) and injured 232 others (Press Trust of India 2018). The Indo-Pakistan border experienced 3,289 ceasefire violations in 2018, which is the most in the previous 16 years (Economic Times 2020). Additionally, the IB and the LoC communities continue to suffer devastation as a result of Indian and Pakistani troops' escalating cross-border firings due to a lack of border management laws and regulations. In addition to wrecking infrastructure and agriculture, ceasefire violations are costing human lives and economic prospects. The lives and human rights of borderland people are in danger due to the hazards presented by Indo-Pakistan troops utilizing sophisticated or conventional weaponry on the Jammu and Kashmir border, which have been reported for a number of reasons. Moreover, while conventional forms of violence such as ceasefire violations may have subsided, the evolving nature of threats, including militant activities and drug trafficking, perpetuates a state of turmoil. Rajni (pseudonym), age 32, forwarded her concern about the changing nature of border conflict, while discussing the potential of weapons used during cross-firings, "[b]orders on our part will always remain in turmoil. Some years back, ceasefire violations were the most critical threat; now, it has been overtaken by rising militancy-related events in the region like

terrorist infiltration and attacks on army vehicles and civilians. With the emergence of these terrorist attacks, the borderland life remains tense" (Group Discussion, Suchetgarh, October 24, 2019).

Suchetgarh: A border village

A village on the IB in the Jammu division, Suchetgarh, is renowned for its unusual combination of fertile land and active boundaries. The Muslim and Hindu communities of the village of Suchetgarh were uprooted during the 1947 Partition, with the Muslim community moving to Pakistan and the Hindu community moving to India. There were links by bus and train between the city of Jammu and Sialkot in the Punjab province before Indian independence. Now, Suchetgarh is the last village on the border between the Indian side of Jammu and Kashmir and Punjab province in Pakistan. Before Indian Independence, there was an Octroi Post at Suchetgarh to collect taxes; today, this post is utilized by a Border Security Post for flag meetings between Indo-Pak military authorities. The region is currently a well-liked border tourist attraction in Jammu Division as a result of its historical and geographical significance. Currently, the four villages that make up Suchetgarh Panchayat are Nijabatpur, Bidhipur, Koratana Khurd, and Suchetgarh. This sector was selected for the research primarily due to its proximity to the 'zero-line' in the Ranbir Singh Pura area of Jammu and most troubling ceasefire violations/shelling experiences along the IB in Jammu division. The village of Suchetgarh, which is one of the bordering communities of an IB in Jammu, has 208 residences and a total population of 946 people, including 507 men and 439 women (Government of India 2011). The village is located on the border along with the military checkpoints and concertina wire which runs parallel to the 'zero-line' or 'no man's land' between India and Pakistan. The border and securitized points/concertina wire also run amidst the farmland of local farmers. Coming to the turbulence of borders, the region has experienced a history of ceasefire violations and supposed normalcy overshadowed by psychological uncertainty and fear. For better understanding, we will count the figure of physical and psychological impact in 2018. There were two significant ceasefire violations in the Suchetgarh IB Area, one from January 18 to January 20 and the second from May 18 to May 22 (Raina 2019).

The January 2018 ceasefire violations resulted in five fatalities and 18 severe injuries on this side of the border, while for May 2018, four fatalities and 11 serious injuries were recorded (BMO 2019). Minor injuries were not reported because of the heavy traffic at the Community Health Centre, R.S. Pura, during ceasefire violations. The Government Medical College in Bakshi Nagar, Jammu, received the majority of referrals for critical injury patients.

Broadly speaking, the boundaries between India and Pakistan continue to be a source of disagreement, conflict, and contestation in the midst of debates on de-bordering. Given that the traditional approach to border studies is marked by hyper-masculinity and patriarchy, the gendered effect of boundaries deserves specific examination (Shekhawat & Del Re 2019). Enloe, Lacey, and Gregory (2016) emphasize that rather than focusing just on the international level, one must examine the interaction between the personal and the international. Despite being commonly ignored in borderland research and expert reports, girls and women interact with borders and experience border conflict and violence in very different ways than male border residents. In the midst of a conflict that might dramatically impact women's everyday interactions with the military and society in these border towns, their personal and social lives cannot be ignored. Zakaria (2018) also highlights the narratives of struggles and resilience of Pakistan-administered Kashmir due to political and military conflict between India and Pakistan. In this study, the narratives of Suchetgarh women from normal days of supposed peace to times of ceasefire violations present nuanced understandings of the IB's history and politics. The study humanizes the border conflict by focusing on personal narratives of borderland people through women in the village of Suchetgarh. Following the collection and analysis of data concerning Suchetgarh borderland women, three prominent themes emerged from the field study: (1) everyday violence and borderland women, (2) women as agents of strength, and (3) women as an excluded section. The subsequent sections of the paper will explore these themes in detail.

Everyday Violence and Borderland Women

The study came across the phenomenon of everyday violence in the form of ceasefire violations and militarization of borders which negatively affects everyday life along with patriarchal arrangements in borderland societies. The borders and their militarization impact women adversely: restrictions on mobility or walking out freely, negative social interactions, pervasive surveillance, limited exercise of agency, and even redefined gender roles wherein they are exposed to direct violence. After the collection of data, many themes related to everyday violence and women emerged. Women's victimization has been explored in three spheres: during the period of ceasefire violations, in relief/displacement camps, and in their everyday lives, the supposed peace period. In the village, homes are both fully and partially concreted, with grave marks from cross-border fired bullets on the walls and depressions from mortar explosions both inside and outside the homes. The bulk of dwellings in the town are single-story to avoid direct cross-fire from the opposite side, and few of them are border-facing. As Mamta (pseudonym), 44, explains while showing the devastation through recent mortar

shells in the village houses, "[t]here was a time when bullets had been used in cross-firing, but now, the use of mortar shells is much unsafe. The houses get damaged from shells, so the cattle lives. Everything comes at the point of risk in that period" (Personal Interview, Krotana Khurd, October 4, 2019). Participants indicated that mortar shells do more harm than bullets because they may shatter home walls and ceilings whereas bullets can be stopped by barriers. Additionally, live shells have been found by villagers on multiple occasions before being neutralized by security officers for safety reasons. Aarti, 28 explained what emerges when information of ceasefire violations comes from neighbouring border blocks:

Whenever ceasefire violations start at any other border area, we do not sleep at night. ... We count the minutes when would we have to leave the village, and we get panic by thinking much about our children. ... Fearing that roof would fall down with mortar shells. (Group Discussion, Suchetgarh, October 24, 2019)

Whenever ceasefire violations occur in any location of the border districts, residents get an alarm call to be prepared to leave for safer sites, including relief camps. Women participants have confirmed that the male members start looking for safer places while they stock up the feeders of cattle. When asking Pooja, 30 on the preparedness of displacement in the times of ceasefire violations, "[h]ow do you go to relief camps?" she replied, "[f]amilies with vehicles and resources leave the village quickly, but we do not have enough to move, so we must suffer and wait for outside assistance. In such circumstances, everyone takes care of their personal lives and families" (Personal Interview, Krotana Khurd, August 30, 2019). Thus, an intersectional lens is needed to examine how factors such as socio-economic status and access to resources influence the specific experiences of exploitation and violence in these regions. Furthermore, the study came across the traditional norms and blatant patriarchy where women are taken as symbol of dignity and pride and need to be protected. Many women participants claimed they are not allowed to relocate with their daughters to relief camps. The young daughters and daughters-in-law often fled to safer regions with close relatives or were left at home due to societal dread of being engaged to other men in camps. In order to improve the likelihood of a girl's chosen marriage, which is inappropriate in their customary attitude, they might engage in inter-caste relationships against the family's preference. Before services related to education and health take centre stage, worries about water availability, sanitation, blankets, and clothes still dominate the displacement camps. Authorities usually lack efficient management and relief camp planning due to the unknown duration of ceasefire violations and displacement periods. However, while participants appreciated the efforts of Border Security Forces and their help in difficult times

of border turbulence, still, in the majority of instances, decisions to move are made on the spur of the moment, and the security forces and government cannot afford to provide quick transportation on time. Women who had stayed in displacement or relief camps spoke about their complicated worries regarding the arrangements, facilities, and safety. They lacked adequate accommodations, tents, and other necessities. They commonly revealed that women in camps are compelled to spend their sleepless nights acting awkwardly in the presence of male members. Women often struggle with security and safety in these disorganized camps. The following occurrence was described by Rabbi Devi (pseudonym), 58:

During cross-border firings, a bus was loaded with women and children sent to Chohalla camp on a July evening. There was not a single man from the village on this bus; they simply relocated us to a safer location. The camp was held in a government school with little facilities; we were not provided with power/lights, not even a rug or mat. The school's filthy surroundings and full-grown grass in outdoors instilled fear of snakes, according to someone who claimed to have felt one. We were bound to stay at a naked and open location, keeping watch all night. (Personal Interview, Krotana Khurd, August 30, 2019)

Samrna (pseudonym), her neighbor, age 55, spoke up between the conversation regarding the same camp, saying:

We were only ladies with children here. Unknown adult boys were strolling outside the school's rooms. We became suspicious that we would be robbed or mistreated. They were from a nearby village, one of them claimed, and men standing outside sent him to inquire about what was going on there. But, at the same time, a woman among us phone-called the Police, and two cops arrived in short time and took the youngster with them. Despite this, they had to stay awake all night owing to dread and panic at this location. (Intervention in Interview, Krotana Khurd, August 30, 2019)

Generally, the border villagers took efforts to protect girls from such harassment, such as sending them to a relative's home if they had any at safer places, or having them remain at home with an older or male family member. In the community, Rajni (pseudonym), a 32-year-old mother of two, raised the alarm because she was worried for the safety and security of her daughters in the camps and at a relative's place too:

We do not prefer to take adult girls in the camp, who knows what may happen in the camp ... [Pause with apprehension] I send my daughters to the relative's place and me, myself go to the camp as it does not look good to visit somebody's home every time with the whole family. (Group Discussion, Suchetgarh, October 24, 2019)

The overwhelming majority of mothers who accompanied or sent their daughters or other family members to a relative's home during a ceasefire violation expressed discomfort at being away from home, in other people's houses for an unknown amount of time, and feeling like a burden on others. Another participant of Group Discussion, voiced her worry, saying "[f]or how many days one can stay at others' home, one has to come back ... [struggling for words and pausing] after all, everything is here, house, land and cattle (Suchetgarh, October 24, 2019)."

The new dynamics of the border have resulted in gendered impacts wherein parents of daughters opt for early marriages which hamper their prospects of basic and even higher education. This is exemplified by census 2011 as well as the study's findings. According to the 2011 Census, in the villages of Suchetgarh Panchayat overall literacy rate is 39 percent, with 49 percent of men and 27 percent of women being literate (Government of India 2011). Reflecting these dynamics, Meet (pseudonym), a 21-year-old college student, narrated:

The borderland life is tough where survival instincts dominate and other social good like education of girls are being neglected. Instead of educating girls, here our parents go for short cuts in the form of early marriage preferably outside the borderland sectors. There is hardly a consideration of women's choice of marriage, her education particularly the higher education. (Personal Interview, Bidhipur, October 11, 2019)

Here, the study recognized that the border impacts women in a different way and creates gender-specific victimization which prevents women from realizing their true potential and keeps them limited to their traditional roles of housewives. Likewise, as in any other patriarchal set-up, girls and women are expected to act in accordance with social standards in everyday life. They serve as 'symbols of dignity' for the family and the neighbourhood, and leaving a traditional setting can devastate the home and community. Female family members, especially mothers, are questioned after accusations about a girl's every unexpected action. Given women's interactions with patriarchy and the border at the same time, the gender-specificity is noteworthy. The border's impact on everyday life has also resulted in gendered impacts in terms of the health of borderland women. The study came across three impacts of violent borders on women's life. They start with the many psychological disorders, fears, and trauma that emerge from ceasefire violations. As a result of being on the periphery of the war, they also have a number of economic challenges. Finally, they must manage their well-being, dignity, and social standing throughout the time of ceasefire violations and everyday life.

Women and the family are regularly the targets of terrible incidents on the borders, with many gruesome tales. War and migration cause a lack of resources,

infrastructure, and basic comforts that disproportionately harm women around the world. In male-dominated civilizations, the food and healthcare distribution chains are positioned at the bottom for the women's section of each community. In an interview, Gandhi Nagar, a gynecologist who had worked at R.S. Pura Hospital during ceasefire violations, expressed grave worries about women's health:

For a pregnant woman, the process of displacement and rehabilitation is quite distressing. In the rush to save their lives during Ceasefire violations, a woman nearing her due date usually leaves all of her medical documentation and records of her pregnancy behind. In many circumstances, doctors are forced to take a risk at the last minute without knowing the patient's past medical information, such as blood pressure, ultrasound, and other tests. Doctors must rely only on verbal explanations of the patient's and attendants' criteria.

Pregnant ladies are anxious about their land and cattle as well. Hearing about property destruction and livestock traumatizes them, leading to difficulties in their pregnancy. Additionally, family members, particularly if the husband stays at home to care for the animals, add to the worry of pregnant women. (Government Hospital, Jammu, November 6, 2019)

She also spoke about the rise in polycystic ovary disorder (PCOD) patients in border regions. Despite having a healthy diet (the area does not have a large fast food culture) and working physically in the fields, PCOD instances are increasing in border regions. The displacement and rehabilitation may be to blame for the rise in PCOD in the region. The doctor also voiced worry that one of the factors contributing to the growth in PCOD patients may be the increasing stress brought on by ceasefire violations. Health and health infrastructure can be severely impacted by conflict or catastrophes, which commonly precede injuries/fatalities and displacement in the area. The eyewitness reports of Suchetgarh women highlighted their terrible mental condition, constant fear, and helplessness in the phase of ceasefire violations. When the ceasefire violations in May 2018 occurred, a Swarna Kour, 35, who was three months pregnant expressed at times, with fear on her face:

Before my last pregnancy, I had two miscarriages. During the ceasefire violations, my family and I left house as soon as the firing began, running for safe refuge in terrifying conditions. Fear, hurry, and worry characterized that period, and I was no exception. We made it out of the area without being hurt, but our home was almost completely destroyed by the shelling. (Personal Interview, Suchetgarh, September 26, 2019)

Furthermore, the study claims that the girls and women in the borderland experience a sense of vulnerability as a result of two factors: first, the unidentified physical,

psychological, and material harm they share with all other family members and village residents as border residents; and second, the discrimination they experience due to their gender in the male-dominated military forces of the village and a society based on patriarchal ideals. Traditional patriarchal societies/culture and the male-dominated military atmosphere may be to blame for the mental health of women. Nominally, the border stations in the Suchetgarh region are manned by 12 women constables, a sub-inspector, a pharmacist, a physician, and an assistant security officer, but they are not required to attend the Octroi checkpoint regularly, according to an Inspector of the BSF stationed at Octroi Post, Suchetgarh. There have never been any reported conflict/harassment cases between BSF personnel and locals or women specifically, and nobody has ever raised the issue of military criminal records in the village. However, Suchetgarh women participants, being part of a patriarchal set-up, complained that because the forces are largely male-dominated, it is unpleasant to wander around freely in the neighbourhood at dark and early morning hours. The militarization of borders has its impacts on the borderland women which forces them to live in constant psychological insecurity amidst the surveillance. Women experience suffering in many different ways, some of which are common to all people and others which are exclusive to women. Suchetgarh being a part of the border fortification involves the military's presence, resembling a military cantonment. Significant military posts, guard towers, and patrolling ensure that there cannot be free atmosphere like on the mainland. Moreover, the situation instils social anxiety among the female population of village. Movements inside the home, and outside as well, are psychologically controlled in patriarchal and male-dominated militarized societies. Seemingly, women have to navigate through the military gaze while carrying out basic activities such as going to the market, farming, or cattle-works. Many participants have described the phenomenon of 'the male gaze' which is an unpleasant thing for them. Mosmi (pseudonym), 20, said:

We always feel like someone is watching us, despite the fact that they (military forces) do not intrude on our privacy by commenting/talking to us (Girls) or interacting with us. The BSF personnel are good in behavior; they simply carry out their responsibilities without interfering with our work. But, after all, they are guys, and we always remain under their gaze, therefore we must remain vigilant at all times. In this context, we must also deal with local people, who do not consider it normal if any girl or woman greets or stands near BSF personnel in any way. Boys commonly meet them on the streets and at checkpoints but we cannot do so as bounded by society. (Personal Interview, Suchetgarh, September 26, 2019)

This omnipresent threat of border villages affects their sense of safety and freedom psychologically, if not physically. This not only hampers their ability to

perform daily chores, but also restricts their social interactions and economic activities inside and outside the home. In a way, women's supposedly tranquil everyday lives during peaceful periods are significantly impacted by the constant presence of watch towers and troops (patrolling and moving). The women, especially the young girls, are expected to behave in a particular way due to the foreigners' presence in the village. The study shows that in borderland Indian society, the everyday lives of women are already marginalized, and ceasefire violations, persistent fear of loss (lives and material), and the presence of military troops have intensified this marginalization in a number of ways, directly or indirectly. Therefore, the study concludes, the impact of ceasefire violations on women is fear in regular life, distressing emotional and psychological experiences, along with presence of military posts. Amidst the military conflict, familial and social ties are strengthened by borderland village women. This section mainly shows that the gendered experiences of border conflict are focal points in the ceasefire violations, displacement, and struggles of daily life. It examines the disparate effects of security measures and border challenges on women in comparison to men, exposing the gendered character of borders and border society. However, this victimization does not fully encapsulate the experiences of borderland women, as they also demonstrate significant resilience and contribute substantially to the social and economic fabric of borderland communities. The subsequent section addresses this theme.

Women as Agents of Strength

The study emphasises the gender-specific aspects of borderlands, illustrating how women in these areas manage their lives in the face of the difficulties presented by borders. Ghosh (2020) delves into the daily realities of those residing in border regions, highlighting the profound impact that borders have on their identities and overall life experiences. She analyses the multifaceted nature of borders, which encompass not just political boundaries but also serve as arenas for social, economic, and cultural exchanges. By contributing to the economy, raising families, and engaging in other aspects of border life, this paper positions borderland women as pillars of 'strength' of the family and community. This theme, which emerged from the data, has highlighted women as agents of social strength and cohesion. As a part of borderland societies, women of Suchetgarh have taken part in consistent inter-caste conduct, food sharing, and cultural exchange in everyday life; women do come and assist one another with household duties. However, inter-caste marriages are not acceptable. Yet maintaining inter-family sharing, fostering community ties by sharing duties, and passing down traditional values to new generations, Suchetgarh women are a great social strength of this borderland community. Rajni, 32 described their social and economic bonds in the following words:

We knitted each other sweaters and other handicrafts, which helped during hard times on the social and economic fronts. We make monthly installment payments, which helps women with their financial requirements, while helping out around the house aids with social and familial needs. (Group Discussion, Suchetgarh, October 24, 2019)

The second element of strength that the study came across has been women as economic agents. Women generate between 60 and 80 percent of the food in the majority of poor countries, accounting for half of all food produced globally (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2007). In the village of Suchetgarh, the women are in charge of all household duties, including cooking, cleaning, and animal and agricultural labour. In order to heat their homes and prepare food throughout the winter, the ladies of this hamlet create a form of fuel from dried cow dung. Several girls and women in the village work as tutors and tailors, as well as outside the village as private instructors, aides, and labourers, to help support their families financially. While dealing with cattle, Sansaro Devi, 70 said, "O sister, you can see us doing all the chores, but who remembers our work...?" (senior participant while doing cattle works at her home, Suchetgarh, September 27, 2019). However, in terms of their household's financial status, most rural women do not view their economic empowerment as a source of pride or self-sufficiency, despite their undeniable role as the foundation of the village economy, families, and society at large. From planting to harvesting, they invest their time and energy in the fields. They also prepare meals for their own men and hired labourers who work in their fields. Depending on the family structure and the location of the fields, the Suchetgarh women contribute directly and indirectly to agriculture.

Cecelski (2000) remarked that women have emerged as resource managers and tend to be better at this work than men because they are more impacted and endure a heavier load of labour in both household and economic activities. On average, women shoulder 53 percent of the total work burden in developing countries and 51 percent in industrialized nations, according to World Economic Forum. The women in the village of Suchetgarh make financial decisions in their households, either by themselves or alongside their husbands. Nearly all women think that the social and financial responsibilities of the family are best handled by women since males are unable to do it. Komal (pseudonym), 19, said, "[b]oys do not understand the stress that their families are under, so they simply order what they want, but girls deliberate before making any demands on their parents" (Bidhipur, October 12, 2019). The regular practice of managing household resources, agricultural production, and income makes women wiser to govern and conserve resources at micro-levels. So, it can be concluded that if they are provided more information and understanding of new technologies,

the market, job opportunities, and sustainable development on big platforms, they may show capability in managing resources and others.

During ceasefire-violation displacements, Suchetgarh women endure the camp life together, a third element of strength in difficult times of borders. They share physical and psychological stress and anxiety with each other, helping to continue their collaboration in the period after ceasefire violations. Asha, 40 provided this tale of help for a pregnant neighbor:

During the night of the ceasefire violations, our neighbour, who was in the latter stages of labour, began experiencing pains. It was imperative that she be sent to the hospital right away. Although a vehicle had been provided by the security forces, the fire got tense and prevented us from getting to our destination. We assisted the woman with her typical birth while spending the night at the temple premises close to the Octroi Post. A newborn girl was born into the care of the village women during the night of terror and gunfire. (Personal Interview, Suchetgarh, September 27, 2019)

Ghosh (2020) explores the paradox of security in borders, where efforts to establish security frequently lead to increased unease among the Indigenous communities. But the study analyses the consequences of militarization, surveillance, and ceasefire violations on borders, and opens the way to bypass inter-caste challenges and promote social cohesion in difficult times of active border conflict as well as in daily existence, especially through women. The border region itself is characterized by pervasive poverty, high rates of illiteracy among women and children, and severe violence against women (Banerjee 2010). Unexpected ceasefire violations have a negative effect on the social and educational standards for women (as discussed earlier) on the border, which ultimately affects their personalities and psychological well-being. On the other hand, in the post-ceasefire or supposed peace period, women struggle to normalize the environment at home for their children. Suchetgarh women devote most of their time to raising kids and imparting to them daily living skills. They contribute to the development of society by fostering positive social norms among youngsters at home and by passing down traditional knowledge despite unfavourable physical conditions on the boundaries. By sending children to relatives' homes in advance of ceasefire violations (or whenever rumours start to circulate), involving them in extracurricular activities, and teaching at home the skills of weaving, knitting, and other traditional handicrafts, Suchetgarh women attempt to lessen the impact of border-conflict at family and societal levels.

Regarding opinions about the border situation, almost every girl and woman was against the war mindset. They were also worried about the difficulties people living on the other side of the border might have as a result of

ceasefire violations. When asked how she felt about those who resided on the opposite side of the border, Rabbi Devi, 58 responded, *"Pakistanis living on that side of the Border are also a poor section of people like us; they must also be in stress. The rich people anywhere enjoy, we (poor) all are same everywhere"* (Personal Interview, Krotana Khurd, August 30, 2019). Whereas Zakaria (2018) critically examines political propaganda, the role of educational textbooks and study material in shaping narratives in the Kashmir conflict and sometimes the construction of adversarial identities among youth, it is logical to assume that peer pressure (for enlisting in the military) and professional aspirations are the causes of borderland youths' propensity for total conflict with Pakistan. Dheeraj, 24 while playing on the playground, *"[t]he security forces that surround them motivate them to guard and safeguard their country's and people's borders, respectively"* (Conversation with Suchetgarh Boy at Sattowali Playground, September 20, 2019). The data collected revealed that the Indian military forces also provide great financial stability and respect to their families. Conversely, girls and women in the Suchetgarh do not argue with men in the community. Rather than being emotionally linked to the nation's boundaries, they are more concerned about the protection of their families, pets, and possessions. Rita, 28, home-maker aspired about border-conflict, *"[w]e want calm on the borders so that our lives can be peaceful; we do not want every day strife. At home and with children, everyone should be happy and safe"* (Personal Interview, Bidhipur, October 12, 2019). Thus, Suchetgarh women favour conversation and peace negotiations when the subject of Indo-Pakistan ties is raised. Women, as the foundation of the family and community, are devoted to long-term efforts to establish a more equitable society, according to a number of feminist studies that have focused on the role of women in the struggle (Mazurana & Proctor 2013). This can be seen from women's opinions. Women on both sides may be the most effective mechanism for changing the seven decades of violent relations into peaceful circumstances.

A call for a deeper understanding and empathy towards borderland people has been analyzed through women's narratives in this study. Women are a social and economic strength of borderland communities and play a vital role of strength during conflict and post-conflict periods. There is need for peace and reconciliation considering gendered voices and aspirations of borderland women, providing in-depth insights to the human dimension of Indo-Pakistan border conflicts and aggression. However, women's voices and efforts are often neglected, and dynamics of masculine militarism dominate border management. Women's agency is suppressed, affecting their ability to apply their perspectives, address the gendered impacts of borders, and become a part of policy formulation—they are thereby subject to the political violence of exclusion as well as physical and cultural violence.

Women as an Excluded Section

Suchetgarh women have very little political influence/voice and no involvement in military or border affairs. Through the analysis of political parties, women are highlighted as engaging in electoral politics in a number of nations, including Sweden, the United Kingdom, France, India, and Japan; the studies have shown how obstinate patriarchal ways of acting and thinking can be, either in the ideological left, centre, or right (Enloe 2004). Although India's legal frameworks emphasize women's representation at the grassroots level by providing 33 percent reservation for women in local government bodies such as Panchayats, this has not effectively resulted in their representation and emancipation. Due to the Panchayat's allocated seats for female candidates, it was assumed in the village that a female Panch would need to either have some political experience or political links through family members in order to seek a post. They serve only as the voice of the village's male population through husbands or fathers-in-law. Despite occasional calls for gatherings or meetings, women are less likely to serve in their community. In the case of female voters, they attend the meetings as 'forced participants' whenever it is necessary from a political standpoint or to showcase them during bureaucratic visits. In response to a question on her plans to run for office as a woman Panch of her Panchayat, Rani (pseudonym) stated:

In the most recent Panchayat elections, this ward was reserved for female candidates; prior to that, my husband served as Panch of this ward for two years in a row. My husband, together with the current Sarpanch, campaigned for me in the elections. During the campaign, I made no promises; nevertheless, if someone comes to me or to husband with a problem, he will endeavour to address it. (Krotana Khurd, August 30, 2019)

Her husband, who had been silently listening to the challenges of a female Panch's opinion, interrupted the conversation: *"we [active males and workers of Panchayat] decide most of the Panchayat meetings when to hold and discuss the related issues and matters with males of the village ... What would women do in the meetings?!"*

Furthermore, the study revealed that more politically engaged women and girls are viewed as 'disobedient' in terms of social prospects. Although the locals don't expressly call them ill-mannered, there is frequently whispering behind their backs. Only two or three women, excluding Panchayat members, are politically active in the village, and they do so with their husband's support. Additionally, no village girl or daughter (who is not yet married or younger) shows up to public events or takes part in political campaigns. It has also been noted that the media and political leaders have consistently listened to a one-sided perspective, i.e., the masculine one, when discussing the issues and effects

of border crossings owing to a lack of public input. Consequently, borderland women experience violence through exclusion, which is driven by patriarchal structures in society and the dominance of militaristic doctrines in border management. Despite legal provisions for women's representation at the grassroots level, such as the 33 percent reservation in Panchayats, these measures have failed to ensure their true representation and emancipation.

Relatedly, women's social status and decision-making are still influenced by their family's social, economic, and political position. Daughters and wives are often associated with the family's honour and dignity; systemic marginalization silences women's voices and exacerbates their vulnerability. While some families give decision-making power to women in household matters, it is often based on the consensus of the family's males. Even educated and working women are expected to perform traditional roles in the family. In borderland village life, the idea of marriage by choice ("love matches") arose from talks in the village about how adolescents in camps might interact and form relationships, potentially leading to marriage. Families are hesitant to send their daughters to camps where boys from various villages and castes congregate, which is another social insecurity produced by border conflict. In the displacement/relief camps, unknown people congregate under the common shed in schools and universities. It has been narrated by the participants that even married women have at various times faced misconceptions and accusations from their husbands owing to their interactions with other males in camps.

The Office of the District Development Commissioner, Jammu, established the Centre for Border Youth Training and Empowerment (CBYTE) initiative in Suchetgarh. CDPO R.S. Pura serves as the nodal authority for the project (Jammu and Kashmir Integrated Child Development Services n.d.). This initiative falls under Skill Development, BADP, and J&K. The CBYTE project aims to provide physical and mental training to border youngsters interested in serving in the country's defence forces, increasing their proficiency. The district administration has built playgrounds in all border regions for this project. But, neither district or sub-district government promote the physical and mental development of borderland females or encourage them to pursue their selected vocations under CBYTE. Yuvraj Singh, an Office Assistant at the CBYTE project in R.S. Pura Border Sector, informed that the program has been running in six border zones (Suchetgarh, Arnai, Marh, Chidi, Pragwal, and Khour) as of January 2016. It is currently working with the 13th batch of candidates, with a total enrolment capacity of 70 at R.S. Pura. The candidates have a physical and academic instructor (former Army officers) and receive a monthly grant of ₹600 (Indian Rupees) to cover their food expenses. Singh also updated that "[c]urrently, no border girls have joined in this training and empowerment

programme" (Tehsil Office, R.S. Pura, November 12, 2019). Contradictorily, girls from Suchetgarh village who attend college get to enrol in the National Cadet Corps (NCC), with some of them aspiring to join the military. Girls interested in the scheme reported that the youth training and empowerment program is available only to boys from Border Villages, as there is no specific direction to create CBYTE for girls in the area. The state-led exclusion from opportunities in interesting job areas has also been observed in this sense.

Lastly, by focusing on subjects like Borderland women and their perspectives rather than more conventional investigation into the nature of borders, this study also adds to the body of knowledge on the borderland. To take into consideration women's potential at the intersection of gender and borders, sociological and political research on the struggles and experiences of borderland women is necessary. Women are the torchbearers of borderland families and society, with the potential to help the nation through military and security services, if recognised. They are unpaid labourers at home, despite also being the backbone of the village economy; they are under-represented despite collaborative efforts at social unity during times of trouble and during periods of supposed border peace; and they are ignored by the initiatives of politics, economic distribution, and decision-making bodies of borderlands, as well as by media persons. According to this study, women-centered politics and programmes on these geographical edges have the ability to reshape border politics and security, as well as bring in new social and political positions locally and nationally at large.

Conclusion

This study aims to understand the actual circumstances faced by the borderland women of Suchetgarh village due to ceasefire violations and the hostile behaviour of Indo-Pakistan forces in J&K border regions. The study's feminist methodology helps to give voice to many women's bodies and minds. Such border conflicts result in people losing their lives, losing loved ones, having limbs amputated, losing cattle and agricultural production, losing homes and common property, being separated from one another, and being relocated to new locations/relief camps under ambiguous conditions for long periods of time. Like their male counterparts, women in this Indo-Pakistan Border village experience two sorts of victimization: one is brought on by the long-standing patriarchal structure of traditional culture, and the other is brought on by militarism and its associated everyday violence. Due to ceasefire violations as well as additional obstacles provided by society, borderland women are experiencing a physical and psychological onslaught. They support the economy, educate children, and improve other aspects of border life. They are pillars of social unity and strength during the challenging times of ceasefire violations and

displacement. On the other hand, because of patriarchal structures of borderland communities, they are also excluded from socio-political and security/military fronts. According to this study, women's involvement in security and other related fields—as well as the connections between women in the Border Security Force (BSF), women in political leadership, and women in rural communities—could lessen the negative effects of borders on women. This study also opens up new opportunities for feminist security studies regarding women-specific policies in respect to borderland studies. If borderland women were able to participate in the economy, political system, and security arrangements as well as the transition to new socio-political roles on the geographical margins of Jammu, they would benefit from doing so. Feminist critiques of Hans Morgenthau's classical realism, such as those by J. Ann Tickner (2001) and Cynthia Enloe (2004), highlight the neglect of gender and women's roles in traditional international relations. This study examines women's narratives to advocate for peace dialogues and processes free from militaristic mindsets, suggesting that women on both sides could transform decades of violent relations into peaceful conditions. Understanding and empathy toward borderland people, considering their gendered voices and aspirations, provide valuable insights into the human dimensions of Indo-Pakistan border conflicts and aggression.

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