

Lines That Divide, Lives That Endure

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India–Pakistan relations fractured profoundly in 2025. The terror attack in Pahalgam on 22 April 2025, which claimed 26 lives, precipitated a sharp escalation. India responded with Operation Sindoor, reportedly neutralising over 100 militants. These developments shattered the Indian government’s narrative that Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) had normalised post-Article 370 abrogation, including assertions of secured borders and reduced militancy. In retaliation, Pakistan launched counterattacks, particularly targeting areas in the Poonch region of Jammu and the Uri sector in Kashmir. As a result of intense cross-border shelling and the looming threat of conflict, many residents in Poonch were forced to abandon their homes, caught in the uncertainty and fear of potential escalation.

In this fraught context, the study of borderlands takes on a heightened urgency. Mohita Bhatia, Rekha Chowdhary, and Sandeep Singh’s edited book, *Lines and Lives: Stories of Conflict, Resilience and Hope from Jammu and Kashmir Borderlands*, fills an essential gap by offering narratives from frontier communities of Poonch, Arnia, and Rajouri in Jammu and Kargil in Ladakh. Given the renewed volatility of borders in mid-2025, the question of how borderlands are lived and contested is more pressing than ever. Years of claims about normalcy have been undermined and the human and political dimensions of the Jammu and Ladakh borderlands—often sidelined in dominant conflict narratives—deserve sustained ethnographic attention.

Borderlands, Conflict, and Lived Experiences

The book is structured into seven chapters, with the first three focusing on various regions bordering J&K and the everyday struggles of people living in these contested areas. In the opening chapter, the editors present a theoretical framework for understanding borders and borderlands not as fixed or unchanging entities

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but as dynamic spaces constantly contested, breached, and reconfigured. They argue that borders should not be seen as static or permanent but as continuously reshaped by social, political, and military interactions.

The chapter outlines the main objectives of the book. First, it aims to highlight the volatile and sensitive nature of South Asian borderlands. Second, it seeks to underscore the unique characteristics of the borderlands in J&K, which are marked by ongoing violence, instability, and contestation—setting them apart from many other Indian border regions like India–Bangladesh, India–Bhutan, and India–Nepal. However, the authors tend to overlook the fact that even where these borders may seem uncontested, issues of citizenship remain deeply disputed—especially the India–Bangladesh border (fencing and border management protocols)—and are by no means settled. Third, the book attempts to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Kashmir conflict by going beyond the usual focus on Kashmir to include the perspectives and experiences of people living in the border areas of Jammu and Ladakh, whose lives are closely intertwined with the conflict but have often been marginalised. The authors illustrate how these contestations manifest in the complex relationships between local residents, borders, security personnel, and the people on either side of the borders. This approach aligns with Bouzas (2019), whose ethnographic study of Kashmir’s borderlands also emphasises the lived realities of those inhabiting highly securitised and politically sensitive spaces across the borders of Kashmir.

In Chapter 2, Chowdhary and Bhatia provide a historical overview of the

settled and unsettled borders of the former state of J&K—namely the international border (IB), the Line of Control (LoC), and the Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL). However, there is no mention of the AGPL in the chapter and the focus is primarily on the IB and the LoC. Both borders are characterised by volatility and repeated ceasefire violations, with 2020 witnessing the highest number of such incidents. Although the authors present data on the casualties resulting from these violations, they do not delve into the reasons behind the spike in hostilities during 2020, particularly significant as it followed the abrogation of Article 370.

A key concern is the lived experience of border communities, including divided families and complex feelings of belonging and exclusion. This is evident in the treatment of individuals who migrated from Pakistan-administered Jammu and Kashmir (PoJK) and settled in Indian-administered areas. Despite long-term residence, they are still labelled and treated as refugees, raising questions about identity, belonging, and state recognition.

In Chapter 3, Chowdhary explores the border region of Arnia, located in Jammu. Though Arnia is classified as a settled border, adjacent to Pakistan’s Sialkot, it still experiences significant conflict. Chowdhary argues that the volatility and instability in Arnia are comparable to those of the LoC. The chapter highlights how the process of “bordering” in this area—while officially resolved in terms of state sovereignty—remains deeply contested in everyday life. By examining the lived realities of local residents, she shows how people cope with the consequences of partition, including cultural disconnection from communities on the other side of the border. Additionally, the region is marked by heavy militarisation, frequent shelling and firing, security threats, mines, barbed fencing, and landownership disputes. Refugees, for example, often inhabit what is technically classified as “evacuee property,” which legally does not belong to them.

Displacement, Marginalisation, and Cross-border Connections

In Chapter 4, Bhatia examines the divided families of Rajouri and Poonch in the Jammu region. Bhatia argues that national

borders employ exceptionally stringent measures to regulate and monitor the everyday lives of people living in border regions. The ways in which residents in national peripheries engage with and negotiate bordering practices are markedly different from how people in the mainland experience and navigate internal or diffused forms of borders. Recent events after Operation Sindoor have further highlighted this disconnect between borderland realities and mainland sentiments. While the chapter discusses the displacement of Hindu and Muslim communities from both sides of the border, it overlooks the Sikh population living along these marginal border areas. Their experiences of coping with war, conflict, and repeated displacement remain unaddressed. Notably, there has been an internal displacement in the Sikh population of the region following the 1947 war (Sharma 2020).

Chapter 5, by Seema Shekhawat, examines the phenomenon of divided families in the Kargil region. The chapter emphasises the heavy militarisation of these border zones, where state security imperatives often supersede the human

dimensions of life, and analyses the psychological ramifications of the partition on the local population, particularly focusing on the fragmentation of marriages and familial ties. Shekhawat documents how successive conflicts have repeatedly disrupted marital relationships, resulting in profound socio-economic and emotional repercussions for the affected families. The chapter demonstrates how the Hajj pilgrimage has emerged as a critical site for reunification, offering separated families a rare opportunity to reconnect, albeit necessitating travel to a third country. The chapter concludes with an expression of cautious optimism, highlighting the prospective opening of the Kargil–Skardu border crossing as a symbol of hope that sustains many border residents.

Chapter 6, by Mohita Bhatia and Mamta Sharma, explores the experiences of refugees from POK, focusing on how their citizenship and resettlement have been shaped by political and religious dynamics. Hindu refugees from POK were not granted official refugee status, as India considers POK as a legitimate

part of its territory and sees the border as temporary. As a result, these refugees have faced neglect and marginalisation. Hindu POK refugees have long-standing grievances against both the union government, which failed to properly resettle them, and the state government, which offered minimal support. Their memories of partition—marked by mistrust of Muslims and cultural alienation—were intensified by right-wing groups that framed refugee issues through a religious lens. This sentiment grew even stronger after the exodus of Kashmiri Hindus, which rekindled memories of loss and trauma. Caught between Hindu nationalism, the Indian government's politics, and the policies of the former state government, the chapter highlights how politics influences and exploits the struggles of these refugees, using their suffering to further nationalist agendas.

Chapter 7, by Chakraverti Mahajan and Sandeep Singh, examines the unique nature of the LoC in the Rajouri and Poonch regions, highlighting how cultural continuity, familial ties, and *baradari* (kinship networks) persist despite the

physical and political separation caused by the border. The chapter draws on scenes from the film *Lines* to explore themes such as border-making, enduring kinship, migration, death, displacement, and the complex navigation through layers of bureaucracy and borders. Unlike the previous chapter—where religion was a key factor in dividing communities and shaping refugee experiences—this chapter presents a more nuanced and inclusive narrative. Here, religion does not serve as a divisive force. People are open to conversions, and many express pride in their enduring cultural ties. While religious identities may have changed, their shared culture and relationships remain intact. The chapter also delves into the socio-economic underdevelopment of these border areas, which suffer from poor access to education and employment, limited rights for children, and a lack of landownership or entitlement due to prolonged refugee status. Issues such as land fragmentation caused by fencing, low agricultural productivity, militarisation, intense surveillance, and threats of infiltration and violence have contributed to a feeling of alienation, where residents feel like strangers in their own land. While the authors mention a government scheme aimed at border area development, they note that due to bureaucratic inefficiencies, manipulation of rules by local political actors, and misuse of funds, the intended benefits have not reached the people. However, this aspect of policy failure is not explored in depth. The chapter ends with a reference to a dialogue from the film *Lines*, but it remains unclear how this citation contributes to the overall argument.

The final chapter, by Chowdhary, focuses on the Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) initiated after 2001 by India and Pakistan as part of broader peace efforts. These measures included the opening of borders and the launch of bus services connecting different parts of J&K with regions across the LOC in Pakistan. The underlying idea of these exchanges was rooted in the concept of “soft” or “porous” borders, which aimed to make the movement of people and goods easier while respecting nationalist sentiment. This approach was inclusive and

empathetic, allowing people to revisit their ancestral homes, reconnect with family members, and overcome the sense of alienation that prolonged conflict had created. It also introduced the possibility of cross-border trade, addressing the economic marginalisation of the region by creating employment and commercial opportunities. Chowdhary refers to this initiative as a significant innovation in conflict resolution, one that fostered a sense of “notional unification” between estranged neighbours. These measures remained in place until 2019, when they were suspended following the abrogation of Article 370. However, the fact that they were suspended, rather than permanently discontinued, offers hope to people that such connections might be restored in the future. Despite the bureaucratic difficulties involved in obtaining travel permits, many continue to value these exchanges deeply, as they bring emotional fulfilment.

The book captures the histories, memories, and everyday realities of fraught borderlands. It shows how displacement, violence, and marginalisation intersect with resilience, kinship, and cultural ties. Ultimately, it reveals that while states redraw boundaries, communities continue to endure, adapt, and assert lived experiences beyond official narratives. The book challenges the conventional view that sees conflict as coincidental with Kashmir by focusing instead on Jammu and Ladakh. The title, however, refers to J&K. It would help drive the book’s core argument—that is, expanding the problem of borders beyond Kashmir—if Jammu and Ladakh were clearly foregrounded in the title itself. The continued presence of the army in disputed areas is seen as “normalised” despite occasional resentment (p 8). But the effects of militarised presence on everyday bodily comportment (frisking, checkpointing, crackdowns, and search operations) and its psychological effects deserve deeper ethnographic engagement.

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