



Understanding Border: An Account of Lived Experiences

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(Received 03 January, 2025, Accepted 28 March, 2025)

(Published by Research Trend, Website: www.researchtrend.net)

ABSTRACT: Lived experiences of borderlanders provide a deeper understanding of what significance borders carry for the people. This paper is an outcome of a qualitative study undertaken across two time periods in a border village in Jammu and Kashmir. The paper is based on the lived experiences of borderlanders capturing their struggle, hope and resilience. The paper brings in the narratives of the people from the village and deciphers the meaning that those narratives carry. The paper offers a broader understanding of what significance borders carry and how they need to be relooked from the perspective of people rather only from security prism. The paper makes certain recommendations for a larger policy perspective to be formulated by the state with respect to governing of border areas.

Keywords: Border, Borderlander, Cross Border Shelling, Cease Fire Violations, Resilience.

INTRODUCTION

Territorial establishment is a phenomenon which has a history of violence in every part of the globe. Territorial demarcation establishes a defined space with certain borders. The biggest limitation of these borders is that they are far away from the existing developmental paradigm which is mainly focused with a growth centric approach, thus making border space more vulnerable. Borders not only limit extent where state exercises its authority but also have a symbolic depiction of dividing people with a notion of belongingness (i.e. 'us' and 'them'). In her work on the border and people of Jammu and Kashmir, Chowdhary (2012a), acknowledged Banerjee (2010); Manchanda *et al.* (2012), who were arguing, state often made people's lives more vulnerable in border areas. She further mentions that notions of national security which is based on militarization made borderlands an exceptional zone where citizen's fundamental rights to life, livelihood and movement are undermined. Borders and borderlanders have been an inquisitive phenomenon post decolonization of south Asia per se and India in particular. The dream of having an independent Indian nation state came up at a very heavy cost leading to killing of millions of people and also redrawing the lines on the map that we see as borders in current times. The borders so formed created territorial demarcations for the respective nation state however it could not make demarcations to the culture, emotion and belongingness that people behold. Rather borders created a paraphernalia where national security and pride become a framework of approach for understanding and governing borders.

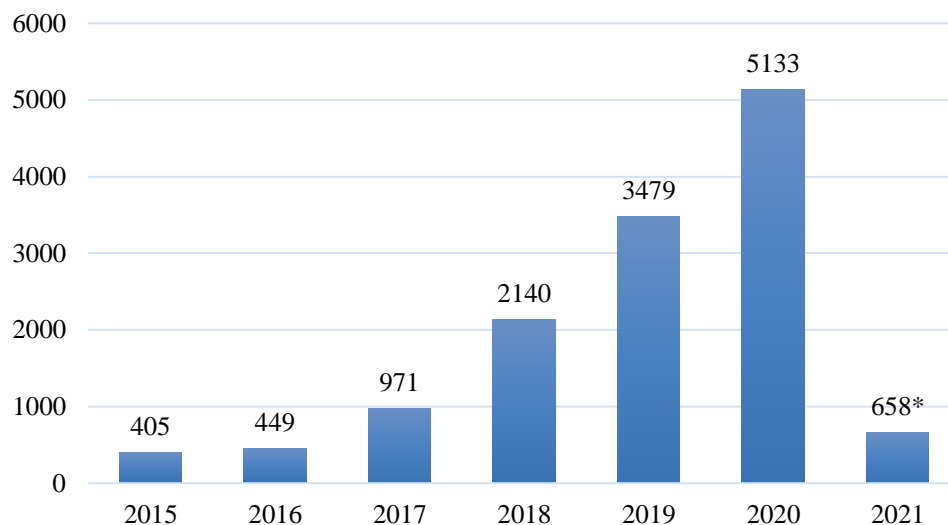
It is important to emphasize that borderlanders visualize and understand borders in a more nuanced way than the state herself. The partition of India created a long border in the state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), hence a large population became borderlanders. The border across Jammu and Kashmir, remains volatile and tense owing to continued sterile relations between two newly created nation states. The official categorization of borders as international border and line of control (LOC) provided another dimension to the very nature of the border and thereby to everyday living of borderlanders. The intermittent cross border firings and shelling is posing a severe challenge before border dwellers along the International Border and LOC in J&K. J&K shares 221 km international border with Pakistan and 365 km with China. The line of control (LoC), which divides the Indian and Pak- occupied parts of the state, is 1001km long (Jammu - 205 km. Kashmir - 460 km. and Ladakh/Siachen area -336 km) (GOI, 2003a).

There is a long history of displacement of borderlanders within Jammu and Kashmir. Since the partition of 1947 people have been displaced and rehabilitated within the state and it continued during the next three wars that India and Pakistan fought. Shekhawat (2013), in her study mentions that more than one lakh western Pakistan refugees are still living in J&K, majorly in the bordering areas of Jammu and Kathua districts. She

further explains other phase of displacement where good number of Sikh population (in 1964 government officially registered 40000 families) from the areas of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (i.e. Muzaffarabad, Mirpur, Bagh, Rawal Kot, Bhimber, Kotli, etc.) came to the state. Most of them came to Baramulla, Poonch towns and Jammu City. The wars of 1965 and 1971 displaced lakhs of people from bordering areas, whereas the Kargil war of 1999 displaced a considerable number of people from Kargil Shekhawat (2013).

The immense hostilities and fighting of wars between India and Pakistan not only continued tensions between two neighboring countries but made borders more volatile. The unfortunate aspect of this story is an extremely tense and volatile international Border and Line of control between India and Pakistan along the state of Jammu and Kashmir. During 2021, while answering a parliament question, Hon'ble Minister of Home Affairs acknowledged that there were many incidents of ceasefire violations (CFVs) in the recent past which affected bordering populations (Fig. 1 which is based on the answers for the two different questions raised in parliament), which were then shifted to safer places during these episodic tensions (GOI, 2018; GOI, 2021). Vulnerability of population to cross border firings is not limited only in bordering areas with proximity to LOC but the international border of Jammu and Kashmir is also getting affected with almost the same intensity.

CFVs escalated to greater extent from 2018 onwards and it was strongly felt that stability around the border is much needed. Considering this, a joint meeting between Director Generals of Military Operations (DGsMO) of India and Pakistan was held on 25th February 2021 at Chakkan-da-Bagh (Situated at LOC at Poonch) and discussed establishing a mechanism of hotline contact (GOI, 2021). The joint statement of this meeting agreed upon, “to address each other’s core issues and concerns which have the propensity to disturb peace and lead to violence. Both sides agreed for strict observance of all agreements, understandings and cease firing along the Line of Control and all other sectors with effect from midnight 24/25 Feb 2021.”



*CFVs reported till February 2021, during the next four months (till June, 2021) only six events of CFVs were reported.

Fig. 1. Number of CFVs reported in Jammu and Kashmir Border shared with Pakistan.

Source: GOI (2018); GOI (2021)

This was not the very first meeting between Delhi and Islamabad issuing a ceasefire statement. Historically it was evident that after losing significant lives many such agreements were made, e.g Karachi Agreement of 1949, Agreement of 1965 for the United Nations Security Council Resolution 211 and Shimla Agreement of 1972 (UNSC, 2025). Post Kargil war the cease fire in 2003 (GOI, 2003b) also received the same fate during later years.

Though the border between India and Pakistan all remained very volatile, it was the border in J&K that witnessed the worst suffering. It was only after the ceasefire agreement that the border tensions reduced and borderlanders returned to their homes to start their everyday lives again. It is indeed important to note that borderlanders are not a homogenous category as each border adds to the specificity of everyday life in a given border. Therefore, the complexity and nature of border varies and thus everyday experiences are different and need to be understood differently from the perspective of borderlanders.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The relationship of an individual with its habitation is very complex. It is not only an idea of ownership but entails the notion of 'belonging'. Ownership one may lose or be traded but not the belongingness. This notion of belonging is an outcome of blood relationship which even after denying never goes away. Borders are therefore seen as spaces which are exclusionary in one way but are intertwined culturally and emotionally. The border acts as a physical barrier creating a category of people as 'us' and 'them'. One of the major functions of the border is to act as a barrier protecting 'us' from 'them' (Oomen, 1995; Sibley, 1995). This understanding of the border as a physical barrier has been evoked as a framework for the governance of the border. The framework 'us' and 'them' creates borders as physical space meant to be kept under surveillance so as to ensure the protection and security of the nation state.

Our framework (Fig. 2) to understand borders relies on the notion that borders are culturally vibrant spaces with emotional longing and belongingness even if there exists a precarity of life owing to volatility. It is important to understand that borders carry a different meaning for the borderlanders. People living at borders are facing the survival crisis not only in terms of losing ownership but also being left in desolation of longing for belonging. Nobody wants to leave his/her or their place to the extent possible. The people want peace, they want borders to be peaceful and they want their everyday transaction to be smooth. They do not want any kind of escalation so as to be forced to leave their habitations.

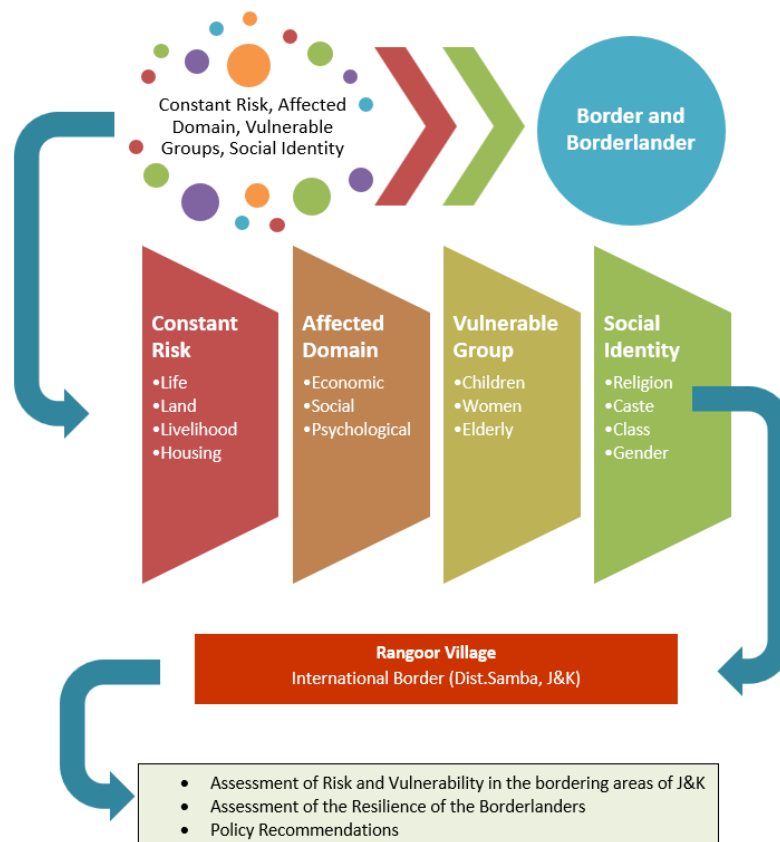


Fig. 2. Analytical and Methodological Framework.

Majority of the academic research related to bordering areas in Jammu and Kashmir have been undertaken from the framework of national security. This kind of framework has led to the emergence of policy where people become secondary and surveillance along with protection become primary. However, while looking to the borders as places of cultural and emotional vibrancy there emerges a newer kind of understanding where people and their issues become prominent. Issues of livelihood, poverty, vulnerability of disadvantaged groups are key concerns that also surmount the borders.

Therefore, a holistic framework needs to be built in to understand the borders and borderlanders in current times. The research gap of segregation of security and civilian interests need to be bridged and thus this study linked these two together for creation of better border spaces where people live with dignity and belongingness. The methodological and analytical framework of this research follows an integrated approach exploring the social, economic and psychological context through different social identities of various vulnerable groups (see Fig. 2).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used qualitative research methodology for understanding people's perspective of the border. The borderlanders are an essential respondent of this study. The study is based on exploratory research design where focus was to understand everyday life of people living along the international border with Pakistan. An in-depth investigation through qualitative methods ensured the enriched understanding of the studied phenomenon.

The interesting and peculiar feature of this study is that it was conducted at two different time periods. The initial field visits were conducted just after the heavy cross border shelling in the two villages of the Ramgarh sector in Samba District of J&K during the month of February 2018. This was the time when the border was extremely tense and heavy cross border shelling had occurred forcing the people to leave the villages. There was damage to the infrastructure and also to livestock. After a gap of six years another field visit was planned in these two villages again to capture experiences of the people. Based on these two separate field visits at different periods of time, this paper has been built on. The methodology uses narrative analysis to draw and infer the meanings. Spatial assessment of the field setting added more value to the research aimed at visualization of risk and vulnerability through spatial features. The study followed a 'do no harm' approach while following the ethical guidelines and ensured verbal consent from all the respondents who engaged in research.

In total there are 20 Districts in Jammu and Kashmir out of which eight (*i.e.* Kathua, Samba, Jammu, Rajouri, Poonch, Baramulla, Kupwara and Bandipora) are bordering Pakistan. Some of these share the international border (IB) and some of them share the Line of Control (LOC). The study was conducted in a specific village Rangoor located in Ramgarh Sector of District Samba which is situated along the international border (IB). Ramgarh sector is one of the prominent international borders which lies between India and Pakistan. The sector is a plain terrain with vast fertile land all along the border.

BORDER: LIFE AT MARGIN

Life at the border presents unique risks and vulnerabilities. There is a continuous threat to life, and any event may occur at any moment with any individual. The remoteness of these bordering villages and their topography exacerbate this concern. Jha (2010), stated that the government neglects these frontier regions and communities living in proximity to the border and are exceedingly vulnerable due to: i) restrictions on their movements, ii) continuous threat to their safety, iii) inadequate infrastructure, and iv) limited livelihood prospects. Inhabitants of volatile border communities frequently experience dislocation and displacement, resulting in both physical and psychological repercussions (Pathak, 2014). In context to the border in Jammu and Kashmir this adverse effect is also evident in Chowdhary (2012b) work in which she acknowledged that border communities are being forced to leave their home, being deprived of land and being denied education and healthcare. Individuals endure significant hardship due to conflict, violence, fear, and elevated risks of casualties, coupled with limited resource availability, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient access to essential services and implementation of policies and programs, alongside administrative neglect. The Planning Commission of India also acknowledged that specific geophysical circumstances and socio-economic conditions of J&K made individual's lives more challenging due to insufficient and inadequate infrastructure facilities (GOI, 2003a). It is because of our work place which is not so far from the border and more so the students who have been part of the courses we teach, made us visualize borders as interesting spaces of engagement. Our frequent visits to border areas made us realize people do not want to bring back the violent past, they just want to have a peaceful and prosperous future. Being averse to displacement, people living along borders share a belonging and identity with the place. Displacement would entail ripping these people off their identity and belongingness. The persistent political uncertainties in the state and hostile nature of the border, one cannot remain immune to all these happenings.

Rangoor a border village is nowhere less than any village as mentioned by Srinivas (2013) in his work. "The Remembered Village" nor was it much different from anthropological understanding of an Indian village by Jodhka (2012). Rangoor village situated along the international border at Ramgarh sector in Samba District, has visible marks of cross border shellings on various houses and other infrastructure in the village. The sordid tale of this devastation could easily be deciphered from the village itself. Every structure stands witness to consequences of this shelling and firing. The transect walk through lanes of the village made it evident that walls along the western side of the village have experienced heavy shelling as they are directly exposed towards the border. It was disheartening to know that sometimes people and their livestock get consumed by these unfortunate and tragic events. Engagement with the respondents while they showed the places and the visible marks where the mortar shells had landed, was making it clear that these places had witnessed dynamic interplay of risk and vulnerability in day-to-day engagements. Few women respondents seemed to be in no state of despair and wanted to see a peaceful border. These women unequivocally said that they would never want to leave the place and during all these 'disasters' they very much stay back except sending their young children to safer places.

BORDERLANDER: EVERYDAY LIFE

Sarpanch of the village who was an ex-serviceman had served the Indian Army for twenty years; shared that during 2019-20 the intensity of shelling they experienced was unprecedented. This was the time when loss of human lives and livestock was experienced more than ever. He laid emphasis that such shellings never used to take place in Ramgarh sector and it is only this year that the borders have become so volatile. He further added that the government should make all efforts to keep the border peaceful. It was very intriguing that he was very concerned about how this border is so volatile and tense with so much shelling despite an international border and not the Line of Control. He was of the opinion that such shelling and firings are common at line of control and not at an international border. He poignantly referred to why the international border between India and Pakistan in Punjab is not tense and volatile. He completely stressed on the need to make diplomatic channels effective and war is not going to provide any possible solution.

Contrary to what we witness in the news channels debates and the media coverings of the border shellings borderlanders have a different understanding of borders. It was indeed surprising for us to notice that people were annoyed and unhappy the way cross border shellings are taking place but at the same time they did hold an opinion that people on other side are also suffering the same. They also have to bear the same brunt as we do. Thus, in a way borderlanders are having a clear understanding of how the volatility of borders is consuming human lives and making life miserable across the border. Therefore, it can be derived that a collective anger towards each other was not at people's level but more at an establishment or a political level. This can easily be inferred from what sarpanch narrated:

“People are suffering from both sides. On the other side also people's houses get destroyed and damaged and here also we have to face similar consequences. They also have to leave their houses and livestock like we do. The situation is not favorable to any one of us. It is unfortunate that we are becoming victims of something that is not within our control nor are we responsible for it. It is the government on both sides who are basically controlling authorities and they determine what to do and what not to do. Even though our security forces are completely dependent on the government, they themselves don't want any volatility along the border. They are too concerned about our safety. We appreciate their concern for us but what can they also do”.

We again met this sarpanch during our field visit in the village regarding understanding the borders after a gap of four years. This time he is no more the sarpanch of the village. He was generous enough to host us and talk to us in detail about the village. Extremely joyous and cherishing peaceful life this time in the village, the ex- sarpanch narrated that nowadays it is fine here. The last three years have been peaceful and we have been able to do agriculture work and live life at ease. His words, “*bas shanti chahiye*”, which literally means that “just want peace” clearly depicted what the life on the border at that time was. No chaos, no conflict, just the peace environment is what borderlanders want. He said that we are hardworking people and we want to work, that is what we have to do. If borders remain peaceful, we are able to work and have a life, the moment borders become tense the miseries befall on us. The government can't even deal with the eventuality as we become displaced so does our suffering increase. I don't want any displacement for myself or my family or for any of my fellow villagers. When there is peace, chirping birds, people and lush green fields make this border no less than heaven but it becomes hell, surrounded by suffering, pain and misery when it gets tense.

We had an interaction with a group of old ladies in the village. The interaction was fun filled and very informative. The whole group clearly mentioned that they have never witnessed such a shelling till now. They have been living in this village post-independence and are witness to all the changes that have taken place over the period of time. They also agreed to an opinion that there has been an increase in cross border firings and shelling from the last two to three years. During the interaction they clearly pointed towards the changes in the housing of the people as more and more people are now residing in the pakka houses and mostly preferring to build one strong basement which act as bunker during the cross-border shelling.

BORDER VILLAGE: IDENTITY, BELONGINGNESS AND RESILIENCE

In the village Rangoor after every couple of meters description by local persons started with, “that was the house which was hit by shelling”, “recently shells fell in that field” and so on. On our way, roadside appearance of bunkers (which were in bad condition and were constructed as safety measures for use by the general public in case of emergencies like shelling) was more frequent than any other institutional support of the state. After crossing police check posts, border security force's watchtowers and a huge trench along the border we reached Rangoor. Other than these structures which represent surveillance, tension and control this journey was no different than visiting any village in Punjab or Haryana. This brief visit was an eye-opening journey where people were living under constant risk of getting caught in border shelling. Risk can be defined as the possibility of some undesirable outcome through

any action or activity. In the case of this village their “*peaceful living*” is the one which is altered with the possibility of any undesirable outcome, i.e. life threats through border shelling.

Almost from each household someone is/was in defense services. Their professional training and inclination in such vulnerable and tense situations make their lives more mechanical in nature. It was surprising to hear that these defense personnel, suggest members of the households to be in different rooms in their respective houses during tough times when risk of shelling superimpose their personal lives. Though one can argue that in the modern world such an act is merely embedded with the notion of privacy, here it is important to note that this obligatory act is embedded with the notion of personal safety and minimizing the loss in case of any eventualities. Since the past couple of years, the frequency of cross border shelling has increased and villagers noticed a pattern. Shelling majorly occurs during festival season or during the harvest season. In both cases it leads to social turmoil as well as economic turmoil. Temporary displacements during such events raise the risk of theft of the property. On one front there is risk of personal safety and on opting the available option of relocation the risk of loss of property still haunts the villagers. Livestock remains the last priority in such eventualities and sometimes becomes a victim of un-fateful fatal injuries. In certain cases, one male member stays back and looks after the property as well the livestock, but that too with restricted mobility because of constant cover for any random shelling episodes. In every adverse condition, humanity is filled with resilience and Rangoor is no exception to this. People constructed some safehouses with strong concrete basements, so in case of heavy shelling shelter can be taken in those basements. Within the village many walls were witnessing the shelling marks, and many houses were not having windows on their west side walls (not fully sure that its well-planned strategy or some random choices). Village life is not restricted to indoor activities. Mobility remains a dynamic characteristic and an essential element for agriculture or livestock rearing. Though enhanced risk of shelling in recent years curbed the mobility but it was the resilience that even during such tough time obstruction in mobility didn’t happen in toto.

Despite the emergence of adverse conditions in this village, it does not deter people from growing, flourishing and expanding their physical presence. In the past twenty years (*i.e.* since 2004) this village expanded and became more and more dense. The rationale which we generally hear as to why people still live in such areas where risk and vulnerability has increased manifold since the last couple of years, becomes baseless while having a birds’ eye view of the village in a timeline (Fig. 3). This expansion towards the village's periphery is as natural as any other village in the country. This pattern does not reveal any risk or vulnerability but it reflects the essence of owning a place with more acceptance. The transportation lanes in images of the village (clearly visible in 2004 and 2010 images), made it clear that this village has been properly planned rather organically evolved. The residents confirmed that they were displaced from the Poonch sector and have been resettled here during the 1965 and 1971 war between Indian and Pakistan.

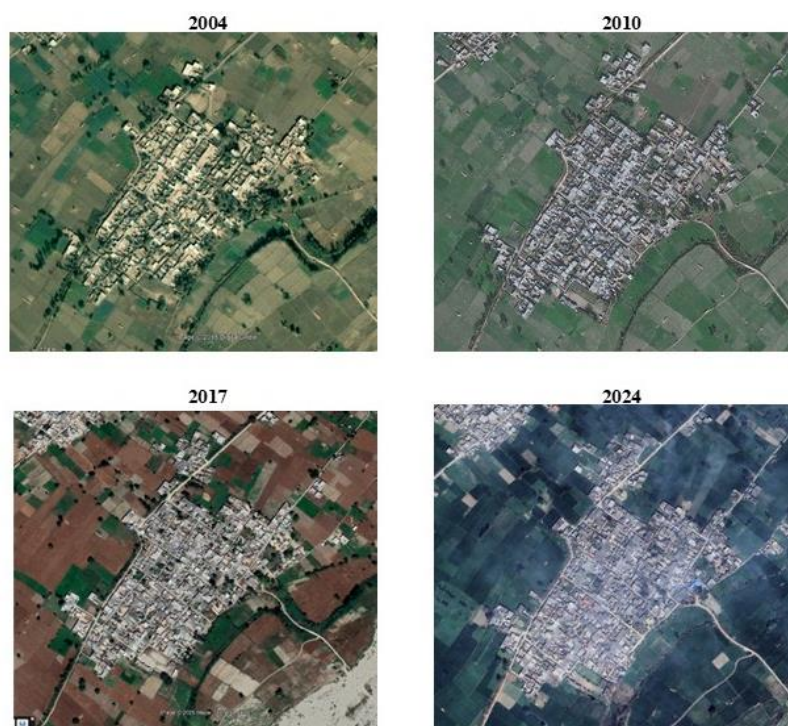


Fig. 3. Rangoor Village Expansion from 2004.
(Source: Googleearth, 2025)

This historical context is important to understand this physical expansion. One assumption based on the essence of healing the old wounds of two ungrateful wars is that it took almost half a century and probably one generation for whole heartedly accepting this physical space with full belongingness. The second assumption is that this much longer time was also required to accumulate much wealth and resources for such expansion. In any of these assumptions risk and vulnerability affected the villagers in their personal sphere since their resettlement in Rangoor Village.

During our field visit in the village a 76-year-old man seated in his chair observed us and, in a quite stern manner, enquired about our presence. We informed him that we wish to know about the experience of residing in this village. He offered a slight, astonished smile and invited us inside. He provided us with water and tea and mentioned that it was somewhat challenging to stay in this village. He stated that:

"Residing in this area is extremely challenging due to the lack of basic utilities. We experience inconsistent electrical supply and lack access to water, necessitating long journeys to get it. One of my neighbors' daughters is ill and was shifted to Jammu due to inadequate healthcare facilities available locally. It presents significant challenges for us. We are forced to travel to the city for every need. On top of that, we have a border which makes the situation worse. You know how unpredictable it can be, and we always live in fear. The government said they would build bunkers, but they still haven't been constructed adequately. Even if they are built, what will we do with them? It just adds to our stress, thinking about what might happen in life. What use are these bunkers if they make our lives even more difficult? Our roads are so bad that even vehicles can't travel smoothly. Talking about roads and connectivity, transportation here is extremely limited. Government buses don't reach here, and on top of that, there's no network coverage for phones. So, what can we do here? We are forced to live here because we can't live in the city; we don't have land or money. Since we are living here, the government isn't doing anything for us. We are entirely on the sidelines in this village, with the border very close by. It's always in our minds that there could be shelling or some kind of conflict starting at any moment."

CONCLUSIONS

Large number of people reside along the borders in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir and faces difficult circumstances due to their proximity to border. This vulnerability should be delt through a specific policy measure, which is still missing as a state response. The issues and concerns that remain unaddressed because of non-availability of policy documents thereby impeding the work of the officials when it comes to governing the border lands which demand specific measures. The continuous displacement and loss of lives of people from border areas is a cause of concern and the suffering and persistent hopelessness in the psyche of the border dwellers is a worrisome trend. We believe that borders need not be seen from a security paradigm only (though that is essential), rather borderland should be seen no less than any other civilian area but with a different context. A nuanced understanding in terms of policy framework needs to be developed which takes care of borderlanders as prime stakeholders and ensures safe, secure and better life. Inclusivity through borderlanders participation in planning and management can ensure their larger welfare. Border areas are to be treated as habitation of civilians who need our attention, who need state induced development and whose rights need to be fulfilled through envisioning a future. On the basis of this study, we are proposing the following key policy recommendations:

1. The role of political dispensations and diplomatic engagements is the most crucial and vital in making borders peaceful or docile. It is strongly believed that there is a need to improve and increase diplomatic engagements between the two countries so as calmness could prevail and volatility along the border reduces. In the larger interest of the governance of the borders we believe it is important to build public opinion in the direction that supports the idea of diplomatic engagements between two countries.
2. The safety of the people along with their livestock should assume significance on all policy frameworks with regard to the governance of the borders. We strongly advocate for new construction and repair of already existing of both individual and community bunkers in villages along the borders while keeping in view of local conditions and technological advancements. There should be proper managing authority to look after these bunkers and keep them functional.
3. Borderlanders should be active participants of any policy framework. Local and Regional consultations should be organized particularly regarding the resilient architectural designs which are safer and more suitable for such settings to minimize the loss of life and property. It will not only boost the confidence of the villagers but will also help in risk mitigation during emergency situations.

Borders are the existing reality of current nation states. Borders can either be porous or stringent however volatility of borders is something which is adding a concern to the populations living across the borders. Irrespective of volatility and other challenges of borders in Jammu and Kashmir, borderlanders have belongingness and attachment

with their places. The feeling of home and land being part of one's identity is something that attaches the borderlanders to their villages. Thus, in this sense it becomes crucial to understand borders as living entities which carry identity, meaning, homeliness and of course belongingness. Therefore, the borders need to be seen from a nuanced understanding of this social reality rather than as a security paradigm where nation states want surveillance and control only.

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