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Tales of Separation and Reunion

People of Jammu and Kashmir divided by conflict, united by amity

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March 2018



Centre for Peace, Development and Reforms (CPDR)

Contents

Introduction	03
An 'Anonymous' Combatant	04
Saints of Conflict; Story of a Mother	07
The Unending War	09
The Peace History of Poonch	11
A Tale of Two Cities: Rajouri and Mirpur	13
The Line that Cuts through the Hearts	15
Acquainted with night	17
The Refugee	18
Story of a Poet	19
Time is with Us	21
Conclusion	23
Key Messages	23

Acknowledgments

The documentation of these stories would not have been possible without the help of many people. I would like to thank Mr. Rashid Bukhari, Nauman Malik, Shah Jehan and Yasir Majeed who facilitated my travel to the remotest parts of the region and helped me overcome procedural hurdles of visiting the areas near the Line of Control.

It is with gratitude that I mention Conciliation Resources, a peace-building organization based in London, UK, whose support and guidance was crucial for conducting this research.

The views contained in this report are those of respondents and the author, and not of publisher.

Introduction

On 5th April 2005, the first bus departed from Srinagar towards Muzaffarabad after 58 years of separation between the divided parts of the erstwhile Jammu and Kashmir State. As a result of the peace process that started in 2004 with the Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's historical visit to Pakistan, it was agreed that a weekly bus service would be started between the two sides to connect the people of the divided families living on both sides of the Line of Control (LoC) through a permit issued by the authorities based in Srinagar and Muzaffarabad.

The initiative generated a lot of hope on both sides. It was expected that with the expansion of this initiative, the Line of Control would get softened to allow free movement of people across both sides in the coming years. A huge number of people travelled using this facility; but lately due to cross-LoC shelling, this travel facility was closed down for months before it could finally be re-opened.

This report intends to document the stories of divided families across Jammu and Kashmir who are caught in the conflict. The report includes stories from Poonch, Jammu, Mirpur, Rajouri and the Kashmir Valley. It is an attempt to highlight the pain and sufferings of the people who were separated for almost six decades and started meeting each other after 2005. It also includes a description of the expectations and suggestions of people on the ground as to how India and Pakistan can expand the outreach of such

initiatives and help create an environment where people living close to the Line of Control can live a peaceful life.

This study builds on previous attempts of strengthening the cross-LoC travel facility. However, it is the first effort of its kind that documents the travel stories in a structured way. Most of the stories discussed in the report are of non-academic nature- personal accounts of people's miseries. A total of ten stories have been collected over the past six months, focusing on the people living in remote areas near the LoC. It also intends to show the impact and importance of the travel facility in rebuilding the relationships across the divide.

This paper is in sync with the historical events that have taken place in Jammu and Kashmir since 1947. Stories of families that were divided in 1947 are at the beginning and other stories have been arranged according to the timeline of major events in post-partition era of the erstwhile Jammu and Kashmir State. Together they present a picture full of pain, despair and helplessness yet there's hope, a silver lining in the cloud, in the form of cross-LoC travel and political dialogue which is reuniting people and mitigating their miseries. The stories are followed by recommendations, urging India and Pakistan to expand the outreach of confidence building measures on Kashmir and resort to dialogue for the resolution of all outstanding issues in the region. ❖

An 'Anonymous' Combatant

On a fine evening in the Ora village of district Haveli in Azad Jammu and Kashmir; I saw, for the first time, the snowcapped Gulmarg Mountains overlooking the beautiful valley of Kashmir. At a distance of merely 3 km from the LoC, it was an arduous journey that took me almost four hours on foot, walking through the traditional Kashmiri houses made of bricks and wood. For the reasons which will presently appear, I will withhold the real

expressed itself all over him; asking me not to mention the exact details of his story as it could get him in to trouble afterwards. Samad's journey started in 1996 when, at the tender age of 16, he crossed over to the Pakistani side of Kashmir with the hope of going back one day as a liberator for his people. Now, he is 36 years old and is stranded on Pakistani side where he is working as a medical assistant in a local hospital. He vividly remembers the details

“ *Just like old times, my mother scolded me and twisted my ears for not being properly dressed up. I felt that she didn't like my 'new' name but she said nothing about it, the look on her face made me realize that like others, my mother has also understood that for people with 'contested identities', names don't matter* ”

name and titles of my first interviewee and call him Samad, a name that he had adopted over last two decades of his 'exile' on the Pakistani side of Jammu and Kashmir

There sat the man, in actual flesh, whom I had heard of so many times since the day I got familiarized with Kashmir. His name shot suddenly to the zenith from a battlefield but was to remain forever under cover, sadly. It was his look at the diary in which I was noting down the conversation that caught my eye: the quietness, the reserve, the noble gravity of his countenance; the simple honesty that

of his family and home town in Pattan, a picturesque locality in the suburbs of Srinagar, the summer capital of the Indian administered Kashmir. He recalled how the imagination of youth in his era was captured by the romanticism around the concept of Azadi (freedom) that made them leave their homes, families and whatever dreams of professional careers they had in their lives.

Though I was meeting him for the first time, it felt as if he was an old acquaintance of mine. Perhaps there was something that connected us and pondering upon what that 'something' might be, I asked him



about his possible journey back home. This was a difficult question at which he laughed heartily and said;

Kisi ko apnaye amal ka hisaab kya daitay (to whom was I ever accountable for my deeds)

Sawal saray ghalat thay, jawab kya daitay (how would've I answered when there were no right questions)

have been involved in encounters near my home on the other side, I have gone to the extent of roaming around my home at night and watching my parents from a distance though I never came eye to eye with them as I was concerned about their safety, it was the most painful experience that I have ever been through and those moments are stuck in my memory forever'.

This was a great surprise to me. I became

“ *'Yes I have crossed back numerous times, I have been involved in encounters near my home on the other side, I have gone to the extent of roaming around my home at night and watching my parents from a distance though I never came eye to eye with them as I was concerned about their safety, it was the most painful experience that I have ever been through and those moments are stuck in my memory forever'.* ”

His eyes glimmered to dispel my assumption that he was uncomfortable. He leaned down and spoke confidently to me, 'Yes I have crossed back numerous times, I

aware of two things right at that moment. That firstly, he was a man of strict veracity, and secondly, his judgment of things was good. He was not that 'made up of

sentiment' guy who knows little about the politics and this was revealed in the later part of interview when he was questioned about the confidence building measures between India and Pakistan on Kashmir.

But before that comes the interesting part of how his reunion with parents became possible in 2016. He recalls it as a normal day at office when one of his colleagues discussed about an elderly couple in the town searching for someone named (...) for the past few days. The name rang a bell in his ears as it was his real name but he dispelled the thought of his old parents being in the same town.

names don't matter'.

His parents were startled to find him at such a place; they had always imagined a bright future for him. They pleaded their son to move back but he would not listen to them. He is still apprehensive of his ambition to go back home because the family's safety is more important to him than getting his desire fulfilled.

This reunion of an ex-militant with his family became possible through the travel facility that was provided by India and Pakistan in 2005 and in one way, it has really cut through the myths that had been fueling the

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With the dawn of the next day, something out of the blue happened. He recalled how his mother, standing there in the hospital lobby looked at him with something of the sentiment that can only be felt for a crippled child; crippled he was emotionally as this was extremely painful. Though the Azadi hadn't come yet but he was liberated of a huge burden: a burden of loneliness, separation and ill-fate. In his own words:

'Just like old times, my mother scolded me and twisted my ears for not being properly dressed up. I felt that she didn't like my 'new' name but she said nothing about it, the look on her face made me realize that like others, my mother has also understood that for people with 'contested identities',

conflict since the last seven decades.

'Normalization' is considered a conspicuous word in Kashmir but in reality, only a normal and mentally healthy individual can bring about a change in the society. As Samad said in the last part of his interview,

'This normalization of people's lives by removing the barriers in travel, trade and political activity is may be the way forward. It is high time that the reach of confidence building measures is expanded to other parts of the erstwhile State of Jammu and Kashmir.' ❖



Eyes glimmering with hope; A gujjar woman with her cattle at the LoC

Saints of Conflict: Story of a Mother

Amidst the chaos of partition in 1947, a family of nomads in a small village called Degwaar, located in Poonch district of Azad Jammu and Kashmir, was preparing for a journey that would end after seven decades of separation and longing. Muhammad Sadiq Gujjar, the eldest in his family, has only one thing to narrate about partition and conflict, and that is the story of Maasi Haseera, his sister.

For politicians, warlords and states; conflicts are political in nature but for separated mothers and children, conflicts are painfully criminal in nature. The decisions of few powerful men give birth to such painful tragedies that no extent of creativity and expression can pen down. One such tragedy was Maasi Haseera's life story. The locals in Degwaar remember Haseera as someone who would roam around in the streets, oblivious of her surroundings, murmuring some words that only she could understand. For some

people, she was a mystic while others thought she was insane. Maybe she was neither of them but she surely was a broken mother who got separated from her only son after the war erupted in Kashmir during the partition riots.

She was a married woman living on the Indian side of Kashmir. After partition, she remained there with her in-laws but later, they threw her out of the family and snatched her only son. Later on, she was sent to Degwaar where her parents lived but she could never settle down as her son was away. During the 1965 War between India and Pakistan, the village was taken over by the Indian Army. Haseera found her son but after a few months, they were again separated as Degwaar was returned to Pakistan in 1966 after the Tashkent Agreement. This incident shattered the young mother psychologically and she lost her sanity.

Haseera's son who was living with distant relatives was at a stone's throw from her home on the Pakistani side. Her son had very few memories of his mother but when he grew up, his decade's long quest for his mother, who according to locals was either killed or was living in Lahore, started. Little did he know that his mother was roaming around in the streets and forests looking for her son who was nowhere to be found? Locals in Degwaar remember how Haseera used to spend hours standing at the Line of Control in Degwaar, hoping against hope

On an eventful day in May 2008, Haseera's son got his permit to visit Azad Jammu and Kashmir to look for his mother. It took him 41 years to cover a few miles and just as he expected, his mother's family was living in the same village, in the same house where his mother once lived. His family didn't recognize him at first, that's what the conflict does to you; it takes away your identity. By the time he reached, his mother had died and people, out of respect, had buried her and constructed her tomb on the roadside.

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that one day her son will cross over but all that longing was in vain. The following lines In the words of Pablo Neruda, her feelings were like;

***If I look
at the crystal moon, at the red branch
of the slow autumn at my window,
if I touch
near the fire
the impalpable ash
or the wrinkled body of the log,
everything carries me to you.,***

***As if everything that exists,
aromas, light, metals,
were little boats
that sail
toward those isles of yours that wait for
me***

On the ancient Mughal road in Degwaar, this tomb overlooks the village and reminds everyone passing by that not only are people trapped in conflict but in case of Jammu and Kashmir, conflict is also trapped in them. Maasi Haseera's tomb is a place of festivity now, something that she never had in her life. Her only son returned after 41 years just to find his mother's tomb and he visits that place every few years just to feel closer to his mother's memory. As Faiz Ahmed Faiz has aptly described;

بڑا ہے درد کار شتہ یہ دل غریب سہی
تمہارے نام پہ آئیں گے غم گسار چلے





Smoke everywhere as forces exchange heavy fire on LoC

The Unending War

It was a time of exalting excitement. LoC was up in flames, the war was almost on, and everyone was spewing patriotic fervor. Amidst all this drama, I met Master Sagheer in Donga Ghameer area of Poonch, situated right at the LoC. The smoke and smell of the recent shelling had casted a spell of despair and hollowness over the whole village and it was pouring out of everyone's eyes. The school teacher welcomed me in a nearby dhaba (cafeteria) with a reluctant smile. Though he talked at length about his experiences of conflict and separation, yet I felt an impeccable silence in his posture, it was actually a muted conversation.

For a change, we decided to discuss only the good things in our conversation but those things hardly came up, it was all about conflict. Sagheer, who himself is in his fifties, vividly remembers how his grandparents craved day and night to go

back and visit their ancestral village, Darra Dullian in the Indian administered Poonch. At a distance of only six km from Donga Ghameer, it was considered a 'no go area'. Sagheer didn't talk about politics and he, in fact, had no idea of how political decisions by a handful of people can change the lives of millions. The only loss that he kept talking about was the 600 acres of land they had left on the other side. He wondered how prosperous they would have been if Jammu and Kashmir had not been divided into two parts.

Partition of territories and changes in geographical boundaries of states is no big deal as it is a historical phenomenon that keeps on repeating itself but what perturbs human psyche and peace is the loss of contact between families once the territorial boundaries change.

Sagheer was of the opinion that the division

of their land wasn't on ground only; it blocked all the communication and travel facilities, even the letter posted from people on one side took more than a year to reach the other side and no news of marriage, death or birth could reach the relevant people in time.

His family had always dreamt of the day they would visit the other side of LoC and meet their relatives but it took too long. His grandparents had passed away by the time the two countries could realize that there

religious tolerance and possibility of the people of erstwhile J&K State coming together, he replied;

'I found out after 15 days that people I am sitting with, some of my relatives, people I am sharing stories with, are from a different religion but that didn't bother me. I never knew about this liberal side of my personality before and now that I know, I can assure you that we all can live together in peace and harmony, it's just that a lot of us don't know about the other side'.

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are human lives involved in this conflict and it's not just about a piece of land.

When asked if he was interested in going back to his native village and settle down there, he replied that for the people living on LoC, it hardly mattered as to which side of the line they were since both sides were under continuous shelling and were equally unsafe. Responding to a question about

Sagheer has witnessed three wars between India and Pakistan, and he looked quite fed up with the status quo. For him and other villagers there, this is a war that never stops and the only liberation they talk about is from the fear, uncertainty and hopelessness which have become a part of their psyche. They want this cycle of war to end. ❖





Sharif Khan narrating stories of cross LoC firing and his separation from the family

The Peace History of Poonch

Sharif Khan from Tetrinote, in his 80's, is a bibliophile of history. You look at him and you know how people are trapped in history and how history is trapped in them. When I met him for the first time; he was lying down, white bandage wrapped around his leg, spewing venom and abuse against the armies and shelling on LoC. He was hit by a bullet last week and had to go through a surgery. He couldn't walk yet he walked me through his entire journey of separation which is still going on.

Originally a resident of Mendhar town, district Poonch, now in Indian occupied

Jammu region; he is one of the few people left of his generation who remember how a localized conflict between Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir and his people transpired to become such a big tragedy.

When war broke out in 1947, he had to run along with his family and other members of tribe to the side where Muslims were taking shelter. With wet eyes, he exclaimed how Sheikh Abdullah, the first Prime Minister of Jammu and Kashmir at that time, begged them not to leave their homes. Pamphlets were dropped by airplanes warning people against tribal invasion and asking them to

stand united. Sharif Khan now believes that all the people who left their homes, relatives and properties made a terrible mistake. Division of territory may be undone but the separation of people, once it starts, becomes an epidemic that can't be stopped as has happened in the case of Kashmir.

Today, there's a lot of hustle and bustle on the LoC because of trade and travel. Sharif Khan is really optimistic that these initiatives will bring peace someday and he will fulfill his lifelong wish. Saaen Das and Sher Singh were two of his friends who were displaced and later killed in the

goods between Hajeera (a small town in Azad Jammu and Kashmir) and Mendhar. Sharif Khan sees this trade and travel initiative as a continuation of his deceased friend's legacy.

It was a difficult conversation. He would occasionally burst into tears, asking me to help him get a permit so that he can go back to his ancestral village. He doesn't know if he has any relatives left on the other side, his nostalgia is less about people and more about the place that he believes still belongs to him. For him, this nostalgia is;

Sharif Khan has a sentimental affiliation for the cross-LoC travel & trade. His friend, Saaen Das who was a trader, used to move goods between Hajeera (a small town in Azad Jammu and Kashmir) and Mendhar. Sharif Khan sees this trade and travel initiative as a continuation of his deceased friend's legacy.

mayhem that erupted in 1947. His lifelong wish is to visit their graves on the other side. He has been praying since last seventy years for that day to come.

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***'Like a flower to its perfume,
I am bound to my vague memory of you.
I live with pain that is like a wound;
If you touch me,
You will do me irreparable harm.'*** ❖



Gurdawara Ali Beg, Mirpur, Azad Jammu and Kashmir. Photo Credit: Arif Urfi

“A Tale of Two Cities:” Rajouri and Mirpur

Sabahat Abrar is an academican at the University of Management Sciences and Information Technology, Kotli, whose family migrated from Rajouri (Indian occupied Jammu region) to Mirpur (Pakistani administered region) in 1947, after the war, broke out. This story is not of a single individual, rather it revolves around two cities and one family that got displaced and separated, and many decades passed before some of them could finally reunite. Sabahat records early impressions of her childhood as,

Her grandparents and the other clan members were given the choice to accept evacuee property consisting of houses/shops left by Hindus on the Pakistani side when they were forced to flee. They refused so that they could live close to Rajouri near the LoC, the place they had originally migrated from. They were hopeful that things will get better soon and they will move back to Rajouri instantly. She recalls how her grandmother never allowed her sons to build permanent houses in Mirpur away from the border. She never felt at peace in Mirpur and

'I had always seen my grandmother yearning for going back to her ancestral place, Rajouri. Once, one of her nephews got married across the divide and we were able to get hold of one or two snapshots of the groom and bride after some three months of marriage. As we were eagerly going through the photos, our dadi ma started weeping and kissing the photo, she had located the main door of her mother's/parents' home in front of which the newly married couple was standing in the picture'.

despite it being a prosperous city, she always considered Rajouri her real and the only home.

Another reflection is of Sabahat's uncle, who was left behind in Rajouri till 1965. He would sneak through occasionally as LoC was quite porous those days. After the 1965 War between India and Pakistan, no visit remained possible for him although he applied time and again for the visa. He was stranded on the Indian side of Kashmir in 1947; however, during the war of 1965, he was on the Pakistani side and again he had to go through the same painful experience of being away from his land and relatives, though on a different side this time.

A somewhat successful peace process between India and Pakistan in 2005 provided him the opportunity to go back. At

to visit, stayed there for weeks and came back safely. In his own words;

“I went because I wanted to feel the air and soil of my ancestral place and I had walked on those pathways so much that I knew where the alleys, the trees and the stones were. I don't need eyes to walk on these paths.”

Another story is of Sabahat's aunt whose in-laws and husband migrated to Pakistani administered region but she was left with her parents as she was the only sister of very influential brothers (one being a minister). She could not bear the separation of her husband and later she had to leave everything behind and migrate to Mirpur with her husband. She didn't want to leave her brothers behind and this trauma of separation and dilemma of

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that time, he was already in his nineties and had lost his eyesight completely. Sabahat recalls how someone in the family would daily read newspapers to him and he was always more interested in news coming from across the divide. In Sabahat's own words,

“When I read this news to him that the bus service has finally started between the divided parts of Jammu and Kashmir, he literally jumped up from the chair in excitement. It was like his second childhood, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans everything. We felt sorry for him as we thought he will never be able to go.”

But even with his blindness, he visited his birthplace just to feel the same air again. Sabahat recalls how every member of the family was so against his going back to Rajouri. He had lost his eyesight and there was no one to guide him yet he managed

making the right choice continued for forty years. It was only after 2005 that she got the opportunity to visit her family in Rajouri but by the time she went back, her mother had already died. Her permit was delayed for four months and that delay caused her unimaginable loss and pain. In her own words;

'For the Governments on both sides, it may be an issue of procedures and legalities but for common people, it is about family ties. Why would people respect any law that stops them from meeting their loved ones?'

This back and forth movement of Sabahat's family between Mirpur and Rajouri is still going on and there are thousands like them whose only hope lies in a healthy relationship between India, Pakistan and Kashmir. A hostile environment in the two countries makes people suffer immensely and go through scathing tragedies. ❖

The Line that Cuts through the Hearts

When violence erupted in the Valley of Kashmir in 1990, hundreds of young men from Azad Jammu and Kashmir crossed over to the Indian side to fight alongside their brothers. This gave birth to many stories of separation, torture, killings and amongst them, some stories of compassion, love and dedication to a particular cause.

One such story revolves around Sajida Bahar's family who is currently serving in the education department in Azad Jammu and Kashmir. Her family migrated from district Baramulla on the Indian side of Kashmir to the capital of Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Muzaffarabad. Her father, she recalls, was a young student activist at the time of partition when he was expelled from Sopore High School in Baramulla for protesting against Sheikh Muhammad Abdulla for taking oath as an emergency administrator. As there were cases registered against him, he had to run and seek shelter on the other side of the divide where some of his family members were already residing.

The migration that young Bahauddin Bahar (Sajida's father) went through was expected to last few months but it went on for decades and by the time India and Pakistan agreed on a travel facility for the people of the divided Kashmir, he had left for heavenly adobe. Sajida recalls her

father's yearning during the last period of his life as he really wanted to go back but couldn't do so because he detested the idea of going back to his own country on a foreign visa. Sajida, who had absorbed even the scintilla of her father's pain of separation and division, pledged that she will dedicate her life for Kashmir, and won't opt for professional career and personal choices. Later on, she married someone deeply involved with the Kashmir struggle only to stay focused on her work.



Photo provided by: Sajida Bahar

'If there was no armed struggle and if my husband hadn't been a part of it, I am certain that I wouldn't have married and may be had never gone across the divide but I'm thankful that I went there with my daughters. My resolve and commitment towards the Kashmiri people have

“ It was a mixed feeling as I'd never missed my father that much. On 13th May, 2013; when I crossed Uri and entered Baramulla, I felt myself as the master of my destiny. This was something that I'd never felt before, the hollowness inside me suddenly disappeared and at that moment, I felt liberated. ”

increased manifolds after my visit and I wish everyone could go there'.

She remembers how her daughters, Ayesha and Fatimah, young and oblivious of what had happened in the family and in Kashmir, used to worry about her falling health and at times quite critical of their mother's love for a place she'd never seen. In 2013, when Sajida Bahar finally got her permit to visit her ancestral place in Baramulla, she was overwhelmed with the mixed feelings of joy and sadness:

and why her heart was always stuck in Kashmir. One of them remarked;

'Back then it was only about our mother, we wanted her to let Kashmir go. Now that we've seen Kashmir, it's difficult for us to accept the status-quo and go on with life. Normalization of life of the Kashmiri people isn't possible if there's LoC, this line isn't only on ground but it passes through our hearts'.

For Sajida Bahar, the humanitarian angle of

'Back then it was only about our mother, we wanted her to let Kashmir go. Now that we've seen Kashmir, it's difficult for us to accept the status-quo and move on with life. Normalization of life of the Kashmiri people isn't possible if there's LoC, this line isn't only on ground but it passes through our hearts'.

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For her daughters, it was the time they realized why their mother couldn't move on

Kashmir conflict hasn't had the attention it deserved and because of that, the epidemic of frustration and alienation is now being transferred to the coming generations. This can only be controlled by softening the borders and allowing people to meet frequently until a solid political solution arrives. She suggests that the travel facility must be expanded to all the state subjects on both sides of the LoC. ❖



Acquainted with night

The long dark night of separation in Jammu and Kashmir has had many victims; one amongst them being Justice Shareef Hussain Bukhari. Originally a resident of Baramulla, he found himself stranded in Lahore on the eve of partition and like many others, he too had expected that he would go back home soon. At the tender age of 14, he was separated from his mother. His pain of separation wasn't of the type that reduces with time. On the contrary, it increased and crossed all thresholds on special occasions e.g., when he passed the matriculation exam, when he got elected to the Legislative Assembly of Azad Jammu and Kashmir, when he became a judge in the Lahore High Court, and when his children and grandchildren were born. In his own words;

'I am not unfortunate, life has given me everything- from status and fame to money

Kashmir. That promise, he says, was the one that he contemplated over every day and even cursed himself for being so adamant to make it, yet he could never cross that barrier and hence, couldn't go back to his birthplace.

In 2005, when the bus service between divided parts of Kashmir finally started, he was the first one to apply for a permit and became the first Kashmiri to cross the Line of Control legally after 58 years of separation. In his own words;

" I used to think that the only way we can reconnect with our lost homeland is if it gets united and independent. I could never fathom my reunion with Kashmir happening without the conflict being resolved but the moment I went across, I realized how powerful the dialogue is. It can make things happen in a way that you don't even realize what has actually happened until you have



I always knew that only my mother could fill that void, I used to meet her in my dreams but those meetings never lasted long. I became acquainted with night so that I could sleep and meet my mother'



and happiness but all along this journey, I've felt a deep sense of loneliness inside. I always knew that only my mother could fill that void, I used to meet her in my dreams but those meetings never lasted long. I became acquainted with night so that I could sleep and meet my mother'.

Mr. Bukhari belongs to that league of Kashmiris who could never comprehend and accept the division of their homeland. He recalls how he became envious of his Pakistani friends who, despite the partition, had chances to visit India and meet their relatives but for some unknown reason, there were only some Kashmiris who couldn't go back. He had promised himself that he would never apply for a visa to visit

arrived somewhere."

Bukhari, now in his late eighties, frequently writes about Kashmir and is of the opinion that this generation of Kashmiris is far more honest and eloquent in their response against human rights abuses than the previous ones. He is a great supporter of dialogue and collaboration between the three parties of conflict. He is of the view that the Kashmir problem is such a complex one that it cannot be solved overnight. Solution would come in phases and the process, he believes, has already started with Kashmiris getting their fundamental right of trade and travel. Other rights will follow, he believes.❖



Sun setting over River Poonch in Indian Occupied Kashmir. Photo Credit: Arif Urfi

The Refugee

Hafiz Muhammad Khan lives on the eastern bank of River Poonch, located on the Pakistani side of Kashmir. This river is an undiscovered body of emotions rolling down through the heart of erstwhile Jammu and Kashmir State for the last five thousand years. This river has seen many turbulent times and is a witness to the miseries of divided families as now for the people living around it, it is considered as the Line of Control that can never be surpassed. Hafiz's family is one such family that used to live on the west bank of river (now in Indian administered Poonch) and migrated in 1947 to the eastern side of it.

For Hafiz, this word 'migration' is incomprehensible. In his own words,

"we used to cross this river daily as our land and cattle was on the other side. On one unfortunate day, we crossed and were told that we could not go back, we were

Refugees. I still can't understand what on earth can make me a refugee on my own territory and why should I accept it".

Hafiz's family is living so close to their ancestral place that their village and home on the other side of the River is clearly visible from the Pakistani side. Hafiz is an imam (one who calls for and leads prayers) in a local mosque. He remembers how in the eventful days of his youth, he used to call for prayers from this side and expect people on other side of LoC to follow his call as he was one of them back then.

"In the holy month of Ramadan, it was a custom for the people of his locality to end fasting when Azaan was called from the other side. These were little gestures of love and reunion that these people could afford back in the time."

Despite being at a stone's throw from his ancestral home, Hafiz's family had no

contact with any of his relatives. In 2008, when some people from the Indian side came to their village, Hafiz got to know that his relatives were alive and waiting for them. It was a dream come true yet he had to wait three years for his permit to cross the LoC and it was only in 2011 that he went to his village Darra Dullian on the other side of the divide.

Hafiz is very supportive of the initiatives like the Cross-LoC travel and trade but in his opinion, the mechanisms of such initiatives are very complex and time consuming. For the ordinary folk like Hafiz, this is not about politics but people who are deprived of their cultural and linguistic identities. An empathetic approach is needed to resolve such problems. He recalls the period from 1990 to 2005 as the worst time in which his house was destroyed twice because of the

shelling due to which the family went through three migrations in one decade. For him, the communication between the divided families is of utmost importance, as he mentioned towards the end of his interview:

"Now that we are in touch with our relatives on the other side, the nature of conflict has changed altogether. Now it's not just about our lives, we are equally concerned about them on the other side. One can say that this travel facility has improved our relationships but has also made us more conscious about the lives on the other side. The communication has improved so much that now when we are under fire, we call our relatives and tell them to communicate to the soldiers on the other side to please 'spare us', fire indiscriminately but don't 'target' us, and they do the same."

"In the holy month of Ramadan, it was a custom for the people of his locality to end fasting when Azaan was called from the other side. These were little gestures of love and reunion that these people could afford back in the time."

Story of a Poet

Fateh pur is a small village in Neza-Pir sector near the LoC in district Haveli. It is widely reported in the media for being a point of extraordinary clashes between the Indian and Pakistani Armies. At a height of 8000 feet from the sea level, it overlooks Poonch city on one side and Uri (the gateway to Kashmir Valley) on the other side. This place is unique in the sense that its residents have relatives extended all the way up to Banihal town in South Kashmir and are spread across Jammu as well.

Sufi Muhammad Shareef is one of those people whose story of separation is spread

all across the widespread area of the divided Kashmir. Being a distinguished poet of Gojri and Urdu, he is equally popular on both sides of the LoC. He has no memories of partition and separation now, the only thing he remembers is that until 2005, they were thinking that all their relatives had been killed and they've no one to look for on the other side.

His relatives across the divide were also not aware of his whereabouts but after communication and travel routes got resumed in 2005, his books and audio cassettes of poetry in Gojri became popular

on the other side of the divide also. This was how one of his relatives, his wife's brother, got to know about him and he came straight looking for his sister's husband. They finally met in 2008. Sufi Shareef thinks that it is the strength and pain in his poetry that has reconnected him with his lost homeland and family. When asked about the difference between expectations and reality that he saw on the other side, he said;

" It was more than I could've ever imagined. The whole village of Loran turned up to see me. On 22nd May, 2008; the deputy commissioner of Poonch, along with other members of administration, welcomed me to the city and I was the chief guest in numerous poetry galas that were held in my honor. I will never forget the love and

respect I got from my brothers across the divide".

Sufi Shareef stayed there for 28 days and during the last seven years, almost every member of his family has come and gone by, moving back and forth across the LoC. In his book "Dillan di Gal", he has written beautiful poems about cross-LoC travel and on the importance of peace between India & Pakistan. The following poem is about Nala Betarr which flows across the divided Poonch, and in the background of its gushing water, he also talks about peace and connectivity;

بہیٹھوں یوہ لگتور ہے۔ کدے چپ کرے کدے گھنگتورہ

دندے کھل تے کچڑا تہو تارھاں تھاری یاد آوے ہمروتارھاں ہ

In the end, Sufi Shareef has a message for India and Pakistan

“

منوتے جلنوا من سب توں چنگو

کدے ہوں دیتو یوہ باڈرر ہو پنگو

(Peace and Union, the best option we have

In presence of borders, only destruction we'll have). ”

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Time is with Us

'Time took really long to be with us' remarked Amir Aziz Khokhar, a prominent political activist and a sportsman of district Haveli in the Pakistani administered Kashmir. In his late twenties, he and his family have been through many upheavals of fate, surviving through a torturous period from 2001-2003 when India and Pakistan were at the brink of war and cross-LoC shelling had



The team sitting in the lap of famous Gullmarg Mountains

the 'wrong' side?

Amir's family was lucky in a way that they had political connections on both sides and members of the family remained in touch

through letters but travel and meetings were not possible even for them. Once the insurgency in the Kashmir Valley started, all means of communications were blocked for a long period of time and the relatives finally came in touch after 18

“A de facto union of families has already taken place because of travel facility and social media. Now most of the important decisions of marriage, business and education involve a process of consultation between the divided families. Even the competitions within families as to who's a better cook or a better player, who sings well and writes well, and who's in love with whom are discussed regularly on face book and other social media apps, among people of the divided families’.”

reached a crescendo. He has a special relationship with his maternal grandmother who is originally from district Baramulla, tehsil Tanmarg in the Indian administered Kashmir. She was married to one of her cousins on the other side of Gulmarg Mountains, at a distance of only 3 km from her home in Tanmarg. Little did she know that one day, these mountains will serve as the LoC between divided parts of Jammu and Kashmir and she will be stranded on

years in 2005 when the bus service was started.

He remembers how his closeness with the grandmother made him consider all the legal and illegal options of crossing the LoC only to get some information about his relatives. His grandmother, towards the end of her life, had only one wish i.e., to get buried on the 'other' side but it could not be fulfilled. Amir has a collection of letters dating back to decades, the ones written to

her grandmother from relatives across the divide. He remembers how she used to read them daily just to feel closer to her home. I saw those letters and for someone interested in poetry and literature, those letters were a delight, loaded with intense emotions and sentiments beautifully woven in words. It was in August 2009 that Amir, along with four members of his family, went across the LoC and visited their ancestor's home. During the last seven years, almost all members of his family on either side of LoC have gone to the other side but for the people of his village, the case was not the same. In Amir's own words,

'Even with all the necessary documents and procedures fulfilled, there are thousands of applicants whose permits aren't issued. This is a concerning situation

that they will someday make this LoC irrelevant. He shared that it is not just his family but the whole village which now uses social media to stay in touch with relatives across the divide and this has led to a huge sensitization of people on both sides of LoC. In Amir's own words;

'A de facto union of families has already taken place because of travel facility and social media. Now most of the important decisions of marriage, business and education involve a process of consultation between the divided families. Even the competitions within families as to who's a better cook or a better player, who sings well and writes well, and who's in love with whom are discussed regularly on face book and other social media apps, among people of the divided families'.

“ Even with all the necessary documents and procedures fulfilled, there are thousands of applicants whose permits aren't issued. This is a concerning situation as some bureaucratic and unseen hurdles are killing the very spirit of cross-LoC travel initiative. For this initiative to succeed, it is important that the procedures are made simple and the outreach as well as the time period of residence is increased to six months, at least’.

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as some bureaucratic and unseen hurdles are killing the very spirit of cross-LoC travel initiative. For this initiative to succeed, it is important that the procedures are made simple and the outreach as well as the time period of residence is increased to six months, at least'.

He was of the opinion that this generation of Kashmiris is technologically so adept

These developments are very positive and constructive but when the security situation worsens inside the Kashmir Valley and on the LoC, all these avenues of connectivity are also shut down and it causes huge trouble for the people there. The feeling on the ground is that any initiative, no matter how creative it is, cannot sustain itself till the LoC becomes permeable and safe for the native people. ❖

Conclusion

The impact of confidence building measures and work for peace building has always been under doubt. As the peace process is not moving forward in any direction today, people do raise questions about its sustainability. Nevertheless, in order to understand and gauge the impact of this work, one needs to focus in the right direction. The opening of routes across the divide did not only create economic opportunities in the region but also made many dreams of reunion come true. These initiatives have reduced the war potential on the Line of Control which is the real impact that has always been overlooked.

If Islamabad and Delhi sit together at a table, deconstruct the dynamics of this problem, and focus more on the humanitarian angle of this issue; the dreams of hundreds and thousands of people would be realized who are still yearning to meet their loved ones.

Out of all the stories that are documented in this report, a few below- mentioned consensus points have emerged that can serve as an outline for the future peace initiatives between India and Pakistan, especially about Kashmir.

Key Messages

During these conversations, a number of people underlined the following key points to be implemented by the authorities operating on both sides of the erstwhile State of Jammu and Kashmir to make travel hassle free and improve cross-LoC connectivity.

All the state subjects of erstwhile Jammu and Kashmir shall be allowed to visit their homeland and people across the divide. The outreach of travel facility must be expanded to other people who are not from the divided families but are state subjects.

State subject certificate should serve as the travel document, and the procedural hurdles in certification and travel shall be minimized.

The time period of stay for people across the divide on either side should be expanded from two months to at least six months.

Other ancient routes of connectivity such as Kargil-Skardu road and Nowshera-Khuiratta routes should be opened to facilitate the travel activity.



About the Author

Qaiser Khan is an independent researcher working as a consultant with Center for Peace, Development and Reforms. He is a Commonwealth Professional Fellow on Leadership and Peacebuilding and frequently contributes for various print and online publications. He has been a member of Youth Parliament Pakistan and has extensive experience of political activism in conflict zone of Jammu Kashmir. He has worked with numerous student and youth organizations on methods of non-violent resistance, peacebuilding and conflict transformation practices in both Pakistan and Azad Jammu Kashmir.

About the Organization

Centre for Peace, Development and Reforms (CPDR) is a nongovernmental, nonprofit and nonpartisan research, training and advocacy organization dedicated to promoting peace, development and reforms through dialogue and reconciliation. Founded in 2010, the CPDR is registered with the Government under the Societies Act 1860 (Act XXI of 1860), having specified Memorandum of Association. Working on capacity building of young people, promoting cross-LoC linkages and political empowerment of Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan.



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