

# Far away, so close

According to Willem Van Schendel, the South Asian sub-continent has been marked by the *Wagah syndrome*, “a show of aggressive territoriality based on frail sovereignty, developed to compensate for this frustration.”<sup>1</sup> Wagah is the border crossing between Amritsar, Punjab in India and Lahore, Punjab in Pakistan. Van Schendel breaks the Wagah syndrome into further forms including *Kashmirian* issues. This article is an attempt to consider the ways in which the Kashmir border is imagined by two communities from the Kashmir Valley.

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THE KASHMIR BORDER is one of the many sites where national sovereignty, especially of the Indian state, is enacted. The border between Indian and Pakistani administered Jammu and Kashmir, delineated by the infamous Line of Control (LOC), features regularly in regional media. Reports of shelling by opposing armies, or the killing of suspected infiltrators, are but episodes in the theatre of the Indian and Pakistani states. While the Kashmir border is a paradigm of sorts, it is marked by a tension, common to borders in general, between its use of state ideology and practices, and the arbitrariness of the latter's effects on everyday life.<sup>2</sup>

The Kashmirian paradigm emerged during the end of colonialism in India, in 1947, and the consequent conflict between the new states of India and Pakistan regarding the accession of the former kingdom of Jammu and Kashmir to either state. From 1989-90 onwards, the Kashmir valley in Indian administered Jammu and Kashmir has been caught in a conflict between a nationalist/secessionist movement – that finds expression in the form of a popular movement and activities by militant/insurgent groups – and the Indian state. I shall be looking at the period since 1990.

Due to geo-political formations in Kashmir, there has been a large presence of both Indian and Pakistani military forces in this region. In Indian administered Kashmir, military presence has expanded since 1989, ostensibly to maintain law and order, resulting in the highest soldier to civilian ratio in the world; with 1 soldier estimated for every 20 civilians.<sup>3</sup> This has produced what Haley Duschinski calls “destiny effects” in Kashmir,<sup>4</sup> which include, for example, constant frisking of civilians by soldiers, the possibility of being arrested without a warrant, or being forced indoors during curfews or strikes. Everyday life is thus transformed by extraordinary processes. I am especially interested here in communities that do not necessarily live on or close to a militarized border,<sup>5</sup> but whose lives are affected by processes of militarization and conflict that spread from borders to interior areas. Even at a distance, the border figures in their imaginations as a transformative factor in their lives.

## Writing from the valley

Since 2008, Kashmiri nationalist aspirations have been expressed through mass protests, spreading like wildfire across the valley. The figure of the ‘stone pelted’ – teenage boys and young men hurling stones and other projectiles at security forces and other symbols of Indian authority – has come to represent the face of Kashmiri nationalism. However, within the Indian mainstream, the dominant symbols of the conflict are the different militant groups that have been active from 1990. These militant groups, comprising Kashmiri men and foreign fighters, received training and support from the Pakistani state in camps and bases located in Pakistani administered Kashmir, or *Azad*

*Jammu and Kashmir* (AJK). Within the narratives of militancy and revolution, is the recurring presence of the border. *Sarhad paar* (the act of crossing the border) forms a trope in the Kashmiri imagination.

Kashmiris have been a part of border crossings in the face of conflict for some time.<sup>6</sup> Crossing the border was a fact of daily life for pastoralists like the Bakerwals who, with the militarization of the LOC, suddenly found themselves cut off from areas they would seasonally migrate to in search of pastures.<sup>7</sup> There have also been the occasional state measures to promote peaceful relations between India and Pakistan, such as cross-border bus services to facilitate trade relations and perhaps contact between communities on either side of the line.

However, during the early 1990s, the border came to signify something else for Kashmiri youths. It was by crossing the border that one could reach a camp to receive military training, and return to fight the Indian state as a revolutionary. The act of crossing the border was a source of excitement. This is evident in a memoir by Kashmiri writer Basharat Peer. One of the episodes he writes about features his cousin Tariq, who had crossed the border into AJK to become a guerrilla. Tariq's decision resulted in trepidation among family members, who would eagerly await news through a radio programme broadcast from Pakistan, known for playing song requests as a way to transmit coded messages. “One day after dinner, Shabnam (Tariq's brother) was lying on his bed, holding the radio like a pillow and listening to the show. I was talking to his roommate....And then a sudden, loud thump startled Shabnam's roommate and me; he had jumped off the bed and stood a few feet away, holding the radio in his hand. It is Tariq! Shabnam was shouting. It is Tariq! Basharat, he really is alive! It said Tariq Peer from Salia, Islamabad likes the show and requests this song.”<sup>8</sup> This message signalled to Tariq's family that he was indeed alive and well on the other side of the border. He eventually returned as a guerrilla. Family, friends and acquaintances would visit him to listen to stories of his travels to treacherous territories in dangerous conditions, which included the weather, terrain and the possibility of being caught by Indian soldiers. His return was a moment of excitement for those who listened to his stories, as if he was a ‘Marco Polo’ like figure.<sup>9</sup>

One text that gives a sense of the scene in the early 1990s is the novel *The Collaborator* by Mirza Waheed. Waheed's novel introduces us to the

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Jammu Cityscape.  
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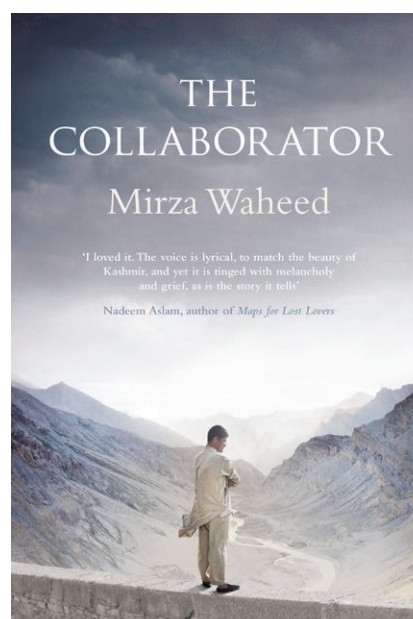
border through the eyes of his protagonist, a young Gujjar from a village close to the border on the Indian side. The protagonist is coerced to collaborate with the local Indian army unit tasked with eliminating threats from across the border, including young Kashmiri men returning to fight. One passage is especially revealing: “There was this time, not too long ago, just two or three years ago, when everyone wanted to go *sarhad paar*, to cross over and become a famous freedom fighter. Hordes and hordes went in the early days, everyone wanted to return and be a commander, a masked legend in their own right, a liberator of the Kashmiri, a hero. Busloads of city boys would be dropped off at the last bus stop in Kupwara, I got to know later – for months bus conductors in many towns were heard yelling their hearts out, ‘Pindi, Pindi, anyone for Rawalpindi?’”<sup>10</sup>

In other words, one crossed the border to become a militant, a revolutionary and a liberator. This transformation is brought about by crossing the border – first to get to the other side to receive training and skills and secondly, to return and fight the oppressors. If we treat this journey as akin to a transformative ritual process or a pilgrimage, as suggested in the work of the anthropologist Victor Turner, the border is a ‘liminal zone’.<sup>11</sup> It is by passing through the border, like initiates taking their rites of passage, that young Kashmiri men become revolutionaries.

Nation-states with their cartographic logic can only recognize discrete lines, causing communities who cross borders to remain in a position of liminality or in a state of “being neither here nor there”, a point raised by Liisa Malkki in her work on Burundian Hutu refugees.<sup>12</sup> Waheed's protagonist gives another sense of the border, especially when he is forced by the local army commander to scour the landscape for bodies of men killed as militants by the Indian army, scavenging for weapons and documents, while leaving behind the corpses and items like clothes, family photographs and anything lacking *strategic value*.<sup>13</sup> In Heonik Kwon's study of the afterlife of the Vietnam War, areas that were once battlefields, where countless people perished, are now home to the spirits of the dead. The spirits were Vietnamese, American and French, soldiers and civilians, who now inhabit these spaces together in a cosmopolis, respected by those who survived war.<sup>14</sup> Waheed's narrator, however, sees the dead as being trapped in a spiritual and physical landscape that has been transformed into a space of death. The dead lie, unclaimed and rotting, until at the end of the novel he liberates them by burning the bodies. Here the border traps one into liminality.

## A view from the displaced

My doctoral research explored the experiences of the Kashmiri Pandits, the Hindu minority of the Kashmir valley who had been displaced from their homes with the outbreak



# Imagining the border with two Kashmiri communities

of conflict. During the first year of the conflict, the vast majority of Pandits fled from their homes in the Kashmir valley to safe havens, such as the cities of Jammu and New Delhi. The exodus of the Pandits is a controversial chapter in the recent history of Kashmir. One set of explanations state that the Pandit exodus took place as they were targeted by militants and secessionists for their faith affiliation and their perceived support for the Indian state. Another perspective argues that the exodus of the Pandits was facilitated by the Indian state to discredit the movement.<sup>15</sup> Pandits are officially labelled as 'migrants', which is the official nomenclature for communities displaced by conflict and disasters in Jammu and Kashmir. My work paid special attention to Pandits who relocated to displaced persons camps in Jammu that were in existence from 1990-2011. Here I explore how the Kashmiri Pandits bring their own view of borders to the table.

During the time I spent conducting my research in Jammu, the city was seemingly in line with the Indian mainstream. As a Kashmiri acquaintance of mine had put it, "we in Srinagar are on this bank of the river and the people in Jammu are on the other side." However, the border lurks in the background, surfacing in snatches of conversations, and occasionally spilling into local papers. The violence of the border is largely represented in the conditions of villages and communities close to the border who are displaced from time to time due to the exchange of fire between Indian and Pakistani forces.<sup>16</sup> In some cases, villagers were forced to leave their homes and seek sanctuary in Jammu city; they carried with them their experiences. The violence on the border thus intrude into the city with the arrival of these 'border migrants'.<sup>17</sup>

There are other ways in which the border features in conversations with Kashmiri Pandits. In my work, conversations at first took place with reference to those who came from districts such as Kupwara and Baramullah, which lay on the border. For these Pandits, the border came alive through sightings of 'unknown men' with weapons. The border was the source of something incomprehensible and dangerous, and this perspective travelled with them to Jammu where they encountered reports of conflict along the border. Hence, casual reports of border politics merged with memories of the early days of the conflict in Kashmir before the Pandit exodus.

However, my first engagement with Pandit approaches to the border really emerged in a conversation with a middle aged man who wanted to know my ethnicity. When I informed him that I was Bengali, he started to speak of cross border movements between Bangladesh and India, which often figure in the Indian media: "All these Bangladeshis cross over. Illegally. You must know that. We see it in the news. You Bengalis are not doing your duty. You should be catching these Bangladeshis. Otherwise you will face what we have faced here. We know. We know what such people do!" Hence, while I conducted my research in a city away from the border, the border was still a part of their lives.

Pandits had to contend with borders in other ways, such as the presence of 'border migrants'. I once met with Neeru, a Kashmiri Pandit migrant, at her office.<sup>18</sup> While waiting for her to arrive, I chatted with her colleague, who belonged to the local Dogra Hindu community. He asked me where I had come from and I explained that I came to Jammu to do research on Kashmiri Pandit migrants. The following is from my field notes: "While we spoke, he asked me whether I am looking at all migrants or specialising only on Kashmiris. The moment I nodded ... he started to speak of border migrants in Akhnur ... He spoke of what little relief they get as opposed to the KPs (Kashmiri Pandits). He stated that this was unfair and that KPs get preferential treatment." When he noticed Neeru returning, he quickly told me not to tell her of our conversation and left the room.<sup>19</sup> The conversation that followed with Neeru interestingly included a discussion of a book that grouped both Kashmiri Pandits and border migrants together. She was critical of the book for, in her view, Kashmiri Pandit migrants and border migrants are not comparable groups. I faced similar encounters on other occasions, which revealed how one community's imagination of the border clashed with that of others. The border may be located miles away, but the effects are often difficult to predict or discuss.

## Relating imaginations

Other scholars have explored the lives of communities living close to the border in Jammu and Kashmir, who have been subject to violence perpetrated by both the Indian security forces and militant groups, and larger discourses of security.<sup>20</sup> This article tried to understand how different Kashmiris, even those living at a distance from the border, differently imagine it. For young Kashmiri Muslim men in the early 1990s, crossing the border served as part of a journey of transformation whereby they became liberators and revolutionaries. For Kashmiri Pandits, on the other hand, the border represented a source of danger that transformed their lives from its settled quality to one of dispersion.

Yet imaginations do not remain static. The nature of militancy in Kashmir has changed over the years with many



Above: Kashmiri Pandit migrant camp in Jammu. Photograph reproduced with permission by the Author.

groups that draw their membership from Kashmiris, such as the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), eschewing violence in favour of non-violent oppositional politics. In the absence of the figure of the militant fighter as hero, the imagination of the border or border crossing as heroic among Kashmiri Muslims in the valley may change too. Similarly, the Pandits find that their notions of the border compete with those of other groups with a comparatively recent history of border politics, as the brief conversation with the Dogra revealed. Local discourse in Jammu presents the Pandits as recipients of greater state recognition in contrast to other village communities along the border. The Pandits' imaginations of the border as a source of danger also fall in line with the Indian state's discourse. These different imaginations help us to consider how borders affect the lives and ways of thinking of communities affected by conflict. The border is never truly far away even if its effects vary from one group to another.

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## References

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- 2 Van Schendel, W. & E. de Maaker. 2014. 'Asian Borderlands: Introducing their Permeability, Strategic Uses and Meanings', *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 29(1):3-11
- 3 Kaushik, P. 2013. 'Kashmir, the never ending territorial dispute and the life of the common man', *The Huffington Post, United Kingdom*, 10 June, <http://tinyurl.com/preetamkaushik> - accessed 27 January 2015.
- 4 Duschinski, H. 2009. 'Destiny Effects: Militarization, State Power, and Punitive Containment in Kashmir Valley', *Anthropological quarterly* 82(3):691-717
- 5 Four districts of the Kashmir valley, namely Kupwara, Bandipore, Badgam, and Baramullah, are located along the LOC. Other districts such as Anantnag (also locally referred to as Islamabad), Kulgam and Pulwama, and most crucially the city of Srinagar, are located at a distance from the LOC.
- 6 An ethnographic study by Cabeiri DeBergh Robinson explores the political life of Kashmiri refugees in camps across Pakistani administered Jammu and Kashmir, which in turn supported Kashmiri nationalism. The border was critical in framing the identity of the refugee on the one hand. On the other hand, the camps for refugees were places of nationalist political activity; see Robinson, C. De Bergh. 2013. *Body of Victim*,

*Body of Warrior: Refugee Families and the Making of Kashmiri Jihadists*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

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- 9 Ibid., p.35
- 10 Waheed, M. 2011. *The Collaborator*, New Delhi: Penguin India, p.17
- 11 Turner, V. 1974. *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- 12 Malkki, L. 1995. *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 13 There has been some interest in the experiences of communities who inhabit areas adjacent to the LOC and are vulnerable to violence perpetrated by militant organisations and the Indian security forces due to their location, geographic and political. For a discussion see Dasgupta, S. 2012. 'Borderlands and Borderlines: Renegotiating Boundaries in Jammu and Kashmir', *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 27(1):83-93
- 14 Kwon, H. 2006. *After the Massacre: Commemoration and Consolation after Ha My and My Lai*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
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- 16 In October 2014, there were a series of artillery fire exchanged between Indian and Pakistani forces along the border. Both sides blamed the other for the violation of ceasefire. Casualties and displacements were reported in Indian and Pakistani administered Jammu and Kashmir. For example, see Al Jazeera, 'More Deaths in India and Pakistan Clashes', *Al Jazeera News*, 9 October 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/moreclashes> - accessed 20 November 2014.
- 17 'Border migrants' has been the term used specifically to refer to communities from villages located close to the border and who were displaced due to military action.
- 18 Name changed to protect the identity of the informant.
- 19 A case study on displaced persons in Jammu and Kashmir also stated an apparent privileging of Kashmiri Pandit migrants who received better and greater welfare benefits in comparison to border migrants and other displaced persons from the mountainous districts, such as Doda. However, this requires a sustained investigation of policies with regard to displaced communities in Jammu and Kashmir. See Bhasin-Jamwal, A. 2004. 'Auditing the Mainstream Media: The case of Jammu and Kashmir', in S.K. Das (ed.) *Media Coverage on Forced Displacement in Contemporary India: Three Case Studies*, <http://www.mcrg.ac.in/mediareport2.htm> - accessed 1 March 2011.
- 20 See Aggarwal, R. & M. Bhan. 2009. 'Disarming Violence: Development, Democracy, and Security on the Borders of India', *Journal of Asian Studies* 68(2):519-542