



Ethnic Identity: A case study of LoC, Poonch

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Abstract:

The disputed LoC in Jammu and Kashmir intricate with region's geography, culture and identity, apart from state's display of powers through guns, shells, and military instalments. This paper explores the people identities and challenges they are facing to maintain it. The narrative ethnography focuses on the influence of political initiatives, and challenges of the Poonch LoC villages from the people-centric approach. The narratives on social, military and political challenges to border identity provides further understanding of how state control the identities through strategic and conflict viewpoint, hence adding the identity-confusion in the region.

Keywords: Line of Control, borderlands, Jammu and Kashmir, identity, conflict

Introduction

Ethnicity is the collective identities, cultural practices, and vantage point that distinguish one group of people from another. It frequently stems from shared language, religious beliefs, cultural customs, or ancestry (Barth, 1969). Contrarily, identity is a more general term that encompasses how people or groups perceive and identify themselves, frequently in connection to others (Giddens, 1991). It may cover things like social class, gender,

ethnicity, and nationality. A particular facet of identification known as ethnic identity centres on a person's sense of attachment to and solidarity with their ethnic community (Phinney, 1992).

According to Brubaker and Cooper (2000), ethnicity and identity are socially produced, which means that social, cultural, and historical variables shape them rather than being fixed or innate. When tensions, prejudice, or violence break out between groups due to differences in ethnicity or ethnic identity, it can result in ethnic conflict (Horowitz, 1985). Migration, globalisation, and political events are only a few examples of the dynamic variables that can cause ethnicity and identity to alter over time (Waters, 1990). Thus, Identity and ethnicity are intricate ideas that greatly influence social interactions, conflicts, and the formation of both individual and collective identities. Comprehending these ideas necessitates taking into account their dynamic nature in addition to their social, cultural, and historical settings.

In a social setting marked by conflict, identity may be simplified and reduced to a specific trait, characteristic, or axis. Communities who identify with specific attributes, whether based on caste, clan, religion, language, region, or nation, often develop hostilities and engage in conflicts with one another (Jayaram, 2012). He further explains that disputes may arise within these settings, to maintain the assertion of identity, which consistently raises enquiries 'what we are?' in order to differentiate with clear limits of space, time and culture from other- 'what we are not?' (Jayaram, 2012).

Moreover, identity politics is significant in the conflict regions, intensifies the pre-existing conflicts, and memories. It may hinder the endeavours aimed to achieve peace, harmony and reconciliation. The identity phenomenon lies in the history, divisions, ethnicity, religion, and conflicted or settled collective memories or narratives in surrounding notions of belonging and identity (Stewart & Annan, 2008). In the borderlands of Jammu and Kashmir, the interconnected history with LoC impacts political, social and cultural dynamics across the region.

The borderland region, especially LoC has divided families and culture embedded with collective memories in elder generation and new orientations within the new generations are one of the positions explored in this paper. The region of LoC exhibited the wide range of ethnic and religious demography i.e. Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs resulting in a socio-cultural milieu. The identities in question are not solely products of social construction, but rather they are also deeply embedded within the political decisions resulting in the collective conflicted memories and lived experiences of communities.

Objectives and Methodology

The Line of Control (LoC) in Jammu and Kashmir, contested boundary has various aspects that affect the lives of people living in the border area, including culture and identity. The state's demonstration of force through ceasefire violations, induction of firearms, artillery, and military installations in the region has another direct and indirect impact on physical and psychological set-ups. This study intend to examine the various aspects of community identities and the difficulties encountered in preserving them in the LoC region of Poonch. The paper analyses the

stories of borderland residents through the prospect of inter-generational comparisons, establishes links between the difficulties they face and the theoretical concepts of identity and ethnicity.

With the use of narrative ethnography in the research methodology, the 30 participants, 15 from younger generation (18-40 years of age group) and 15 from elder generation (41 years and above) have been approached from the LoC villages. The unstructured questionnaire was framed and employed to examine the impact of political actions and the difficulties faced by the Poonch LoC communities from a people-centred perspective.

Moreover, this paper aspires to study the ethnicity and identity are significantly influenced by the dynamics of Political moves and challenges arising from contested LoC. The overview of the paper looks at important narratives of LoC residents and connect the challenges to the wider framework of ethnicity and identity. The paper investigates the connection between ethnicity, identity, and conflict; it provides the understanding of how state strategically control the identities and sometimes contributes to the identity-confusion.

A rural identity on contested LoC

The complex setting of contested LoC region in Poonch district is existed through the combination of militancy, military and civil affiliations, cross-firings/ceasefire violations, human and drone infiltrations, drug and weapon trafficking, and active security systems, all intersecting with the ambitions of civilian lives. Contemporary border studies examine security from various angles, emphasising its connections with discussions on security, legal frameworks, and laws. However, they often overlook the perception of security and the aspirations of people, residing in the sensitive border regions having unique identity and cultural significance.

Within the context of patriarchal norms and the militarization of LoC village life, the communities depict emotions as being within the realm of normalcy. Villagers actively seek safety beyond their domestic confines at borders, along with the prevalence of violence in front locations. When questioned about their understanding of security, villagers frequently provide contradictory or conflicted responses, reflecting the psychological distress produced by societal and political factors prevailing in the risky border regions. Villagers as a participants showed complete confidence in the military, which effectively protected them from the border situations like ceasefire violations. In addition to apprehensions regarding the LoC cross-fires, the participant have expressed anxiety regarding the rural lifestyle.

Residing on the peripheries of nation while managing the ordinary responsibilities of rural existence is not an easy chore. The majority of villagers in the hamlet are dependent on agriculture and cattle stock, assuming the responsibility of nurturing their children and managing domestic affairs.

The military confrontations do not happen regularly but the fear of border-conflict always persist, military installations, guard towers and regular patrolling of soldiers cannot go out of mind in the LoC village lives.

Despite a period of relative calm, the fear of the uncertainty continues to linger, stemming from the previous outbreak of violence that disrupted the ceasefire. The issue is exacerbated when it comes to the protection of women, especially pregnant and elders.

The alleged issues arise from the rigorous adherence to domestic responsibilities that has been passed down through four generations, after the establishment of LoC. Men typically perform outdoor tasks and responsibilities in village farms or in mainland, going through possible risk of direct and indirect victim of LoC conflict. On the other side, women often engage in domestic work that may involve potential threats to their physical and psychological safety. Thus, the hardships LoC residents often face and the worries they own remain unrecognised in the larger security discourses dealing with the Indo-Pak borders.

There is a consensus among all participants either elder or younger that women and children are disproportionately affected by violent conflict on borders. Although the study did not uncover any cases of sexual abuse or harassment committed by military personnel in the region, it did reveal that no effort has been made to emphasise women concern in the media or through political means.

If a state's borders are threatened by a conflict with another state, the rights, development, and other opportunities associated with statehood become less important. The indigenous inhabitants living along the border place utmost importance on their survival when faced with insecurity or hazardous situations, such as crossfire, that pose a threat to their life. They are particularly vulnerable to trauma and stress due to perpetual confinement to the villages and lack of access to alternate means of escape, such as regular employment opportunities. A person described his experiences of enduring a constant sense of anxiety over material loss,

Despite the presence of military stationed at the borders, we have never had a feeling of psychological safety for our crops and cattle stock. The villagers can escape from the direct loss sometimes but in case of farms and cattle we cannot do anything.

Definitely, there are certain cases of educational advancements and job opportunities that many youngsters from villages are pursuing, they are nevertheless compelled to return to the perilous villages where their families and properties are. The houses and other properties of people in communities near the line of control are constantly vulnerable to attacks. Ceasefire violations not only necessitate the evacuation of individuals to safer regions or the closure of businesses and schools, but also continuously disrupt everyday routines, rendering people's lives more unpredictable.

Moreover, the people living along the LoC are constantly under attack by militants trying to infiltrate from the next border, as well as from artillery and gunfire. Political events, speeches, and cricket matches can inflame tensions between the two nations, leading to breaches of a ceasefire (Jacob, 2018). People in the community, including the participants, remember and talk about many personal experiences connected to mine explosions and ceasefire violations, and their faces show obvious symptoms of shock and sorrow. Gunfire and artillery attacks

have caused injuries, property damage, and deaths to locals and their cattle over the years. Furthermore, those incidents could possibly be attributed to landmines.

Overlapping with Original Identity

Despite the fact that the Line of Control is a major contested range, it serves a far more practical purpose than just a disputed boundary when it comes to the assertion of the government's sovereign power and the emotional stakes for the people who live along it. In what was once a single princely state, the land and its inhabitants are today known as Pakistan and India, respectively, and have developed their own unique cultures and identities. During the tribal invasion and subsequent division, the LoC people witnessed relocation on both sides due to religious affinity and violence (Copland, 2001).

The majority of the Hindu families who were forcibly displaced from other side of border, now live and own land in the Indian side. An elder Sikh participant described the tense situation of forced displacement of 1947, *We came along with families in 1947 without any idea of destination or when to going back. Some of the relatives have been killed by Muslim neighbours at that side in riots, others were died of hunger. Gradually, the families built their shelters and accepted new land as their home. The time our people survived cannot be detailed in words. We have left our homes, properties and cattle stock there, with almost zero resources, we started afresh.*

Presently, people from the Hindu and Muslim populations in the LoC villages clearly have many social interactions, including visiting each other, talking, and sharing good and bad experiences as village communities. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that these communal events do not encompass interfaith weddings, and this is something that the younger generation is also taught.

In several instances, family members, especially Muslims have been split apart along the Line of Control. After being left behind on the other side of the divide, some Hindus tried to reconcile with their Hindu relatives decades later, after converting to Islam as conveyed by Hindu and Sikh participants. According to an elderly Muslim woman who recalled her interactions with the opposing side before the 1990s, she was five or six years old during the 1947 massacre.

Back then, I called the Moda Bechai village—now on the Pakistani side—home. It's not far from Surankote. After being married in Dersai village (Mendhar) around 1960, I resided there. My daughter was 2.5 years old in 1965. Although my recollection of 1947 is sketchy at best, the events immediately following the division are crystal clear in my memory. I usually remember how our relatives, neighbours, and other loved ones were confused about which side to remain on brings up a flood of memories. While some were making their way to the other side, others were making their way here. Yet, leaving behind homes, lands, and survival essentials was a very perplexing event.

Another participant, a Muslim woman who is over a century old, got married at a young age; she crossed over to the Indian side in 1965 because her in-laws had lived there before the division.

I remained on the other side of this LoC until 1965, I came to my in-laws because my wedding took place there before 1947. But my biological parents and siblings didn't come till much later. My in-laws had already made this place their home before the wedding, so it was mandatory that I come as well. These days, my offspring have no idea who they were or what they were up to, and they show little interest in pursuing connections with relatives at that side. Reason being: due to money problems, individuals are no longer able to maintain the relationships and connections they formerly had. I sometimes find myself daydreaming about the friendships and relationships I had in my youth, which are now nothing more than nice memories, even I can still name every location on that side.

Many people have been uprooted from their homes throughout the LoC's history because of marriage institutions. Those with Muslim ancestry and border ties made up the bulk of these people. As it turned out, the participant's grandchildren—who were in their twenties when the displacement occurred—had no idea how many relatives were on the other side or what year their grandparents migrated. The younger generation's emotions are less intense and more fragmented than those of the older generation, who experienced those events directly. When they learned about their original identities, familial connections, and memories that their grandparents held on to, they were reportedly taken aback.

Analysis and Conclusion

One section of the territory abruptly became linked with India and another with Pakistan during the accession and partition of the region, marking the first attempt at this shift. From the conversations that have taken place in the Muslim families divided by the Line of Control (LoC) and the Hindu families displaced by it, one thing is clear: the seven decades since the LoC was established have succeeded, in some way, in dividing the generations when it comes to the sentiments shared.

Members of the LoC switched to seeing the other side of the boundary as an independent identity, even though they shared a same location and, for some, were even related. Anderson brought up the idea of 'imagined communities' as a result of the administrations' consistent connection with them (Anderson, 2006). From the time of partition onward, the communities held fast to their respective national identities and urged the two states to keep the peace along the borders.

There was an assimilation of regional identity into a larger Indian identity among the separated families of the borderlands. The younger generation was able to embrace new cultural norms and behaviours due to a multitude of factors, including employment, education, media, migration, urbanisation, globalisation, technological improvements, and access to the mainland. Still, the elders have managed to hold on to their way of life, ethnic traditions, and family traditions.

Older adults' cultural and emotional expectations, broken families often find themselves adjusting to new duties and roles as they age, which might be very different from their childhood, their home country, and the relationships they had growing up. This caused a radical change to their sense of self and identity, which clashed with their emotions because they couldn't do anything to change it. In 1947, as a result of the changing political climate between Pakistan and India, Hindu displaced families and Muslim families residing on opposite sides of the border were separated and cut off. There has been a noticeable decline in family connections as younger generations have become more identified with their Indian heritage and less interested in keeping in touch with their ancestral roots, all because of the unresolved LoC dispute, which has led to confusion about the original identities of these families.

A separate political effort that combined the Scheduled Tribes with the Pahari Speaking people and established reservations greatly impacted the identity of the borderland population (Wani, 2024). The Hindu and Sikh families, having the same ethnic background who were forcibly uprooted from their homes during the state's split and accession are now eligible for Scheduled Tribe rights, just like the Muslim Gujjars, Bakarwals, and Paharis.

Officially, upon resolution of the LoC conflict, relocated and rehabilitated residents residing in LoC villages are still expected to return to their ancestral lands on opposite side. A new identity crisis has emerged in the area as a result of the state's efforts to promote and acknowledge ethnic identity. Because of their geographical, cultural, and political seclusion, the border areas of Poonch are home to 1947 displaced people who often struggle with issues of self-identity confusion.

The state's unevaluated moves or attempts to control the identity definitions add further into the conflict ridden communities like Hindus and Sikhs, including divided Muslim families. No doubt, these religious communities share language, ethnicity and Pahari as an identity but they have history of massacre, tensions and forced displacement. The LoC communities already going through identity-confusion in trail of future prospects to contested boundary line. In order to overcome the transition and identity crises, a comprehensive strategy is required that can strengthen their sense of belonging, include them politically, and protect their identity.

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