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Jammu and Kashmir Pays the Price for a War with No End

By: Anuradha Bhasin

For over 70 years, people in border villages of India and Pakistan have lived with uncertainty. Political decisions or tensions on the border can instantly disrupt lives. Yet, they persevere daily, adapting to the unpredictable rhythm of conflict, knowing their security is rarely a state priority.

On 7 May, mock drills with sirens and 15-minute blackouts were scheduled in Jammu and Kashmir. But on the intervening night of 6/7 May, Operation Sindoor was launched, triggering intense retaliatory shelling by Pakistan. As the firing began, many residents assumed it was part of the planned mock drills. Instead, they found themselves in the midst of real conflict, unprepared for the sudden escalation. The shelling resulted in 16 deaths and numerous injuries in Jammu and Kashmir, with five more reportedly killed in Pakistan-administered Kashmir. Neither side has so far been willing to discuss these events.

Tensions were already high in the border areas following the Pahalgam killings. When aggressive rhetoric turned into military action, people living along the borders—on both sides—knew they would be the first targets. Panic set in. Some rushed to clear out old, neglected bunkers, while others fled their villages in search of safety.

This cycle is not new. For more than seven decades, survival in these regions has meant learning to live with constant uncertainty. Political decisions taken in New Delhi or Islamabad, or acts of military provocation at the borders, can turn lives upside down in an instant. And yet, these communities continue with their daily routines—adapting to the unpredictable rhythm of politics, gunfire, and shelling—fully aware that their security is rarely a priority for either state.

‘Collateral Damage’

The four-day skirmish between 7 and 10 May left people in the border areas of Jammu and Kashmir deeply shaken. Unlike the occasional gunfire they were used to, this time they faced relentless artillery barrages and drone attacks. The noise was deafening, and the damage extended far beyond the usual conflict zones—shells fell not just on villages near the Line of Control (LoC) but also in towns and cities, including Jammu and Srinagar.

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Poonch town, located close to the border, was hit the hardest. At least 15 people were killed and many others injured in a night of intense shelling—some died trying to escape, others were killed in their own homes. Among the dead were two 12-year-old twins, a teenager who loved to draw, a schoolteacher, an ex-serviceman, and others. While Poonch mourned its dead, the government continued to celebrate the “success” of Operation Sindoor without publicly acknowledging the human cost of the violence.

One of the victims, Qari Mohammed Iqbal, a local Muslim cleric, was wrongly identified on television as a militant killed by Indian forces. His name and photo were broadcast widely. Only after his family raised objections was the false claim quietly dropped—without any apology.

Those who managed to flee and survive returned to find their homes reduced to rubble. The government has remained silent on the full extent of the damage—there is still no official count of the dead, the injured, or the newly homeless. After the ceasefire, Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed the nation, declaring his intent to “finish Pakistan” and promising to continue military operations on India’s terms. But he failed to acknowledge the suffering of the border residents who had become cannon fodder overnight. Civilian casualties are often dismissed by governments as “collateral damage”—rarely counted properly, let alone spoken about.

Three Wars and More

India and Pakistan have fought three wars—in 1947-48, 1965, and 1971. The first two were directly related to the unresolved issue of Kashmir. Despite the scale of these conflicts, there are hardly any official statistics available on civilian deaths, let alone data on the displacement and destruction they caused.

For people living along the India-Pakistan border, especially in Jammu and Kashmir, the violence has been more or less continuous since 1947-48. The first war, triggered in the wake of Partition and the unresolved Kashmir question, turned these border regions into permanent zones of hostility. Since then, regular firing, shelling, loss of life, and damage to property has become a part of daily life for many in these areas.

The 1965 war was rooted in Pakistan's "Operation Gibraltar", which aimed to infiltrate forces into Jammu and Kashmir to incite rebellion. It led to intense ground battles and aerial combat. Both countries claimed victory, though India was seen to have gained a slight advantage.

For those living near the LoC and international border, conflict remains an ongoing reality—long after ceasefires are declared and treaties are signed.

The 1971 war, primarily fought over the creation of Bangladesh, eventually extended to the India-Pakistan western border, severely affecting Jammu and Kashmir. Yet, when one searches for civilian casualties from that conflict, the focus remains on Bangladesh. Statistics for the number of civilians killed or displaced on the western front—stretching from Jammu and Kashmir to Gujarat—are virtually non-existent. In most official records, these losses do not even find a passing mention.

Importantly, the violence does not end when wars do. For those living near the LoC and international border, conflict remains an ongoing reality—long after ceasefires are declared and treaties are signed.

Although the 1999 Kargil War is often described as a limited conflict, its effects spread far beyond the Kargil region in Ladakh. The fighting led to frequent exchanges of fire along multiple points on the LoC—from Uri in the north to Akhnoor in the south—causing prolonged disruption in these areas. In Akhnoor, villagers were displaced and forced to live in makeshift tents for nearly a decade. In several villages, farm fields were littered with landmines, making it impossible to cultivate crops and pushing residents to the brink of starvation.

To secure the border, fencing was installed along the international boundary and the LoC. However, the fences were not always built right along the actual border. In many areas—especially those with uneven, hilly terrain—they were erected several kilometres inside Indian territory, possibly as part of a broader military strategy. As a result, entire villages, or parts of them, ended up on the wrong side of the fence.

For many villagers, this created severe hardships. In some areas, the fence cut right through the village—houses were inside, but fields were outside the fence. This meant they could only access their farmland with special permission from the army. Some villages were completely fenced out, making it necessary for residents to pass through army checkpoints to go anywhere. This process involved time-consuming checks, questions about their movements, and searches, even of wallets. Friends and relatives from outside could not visit freely, cutting off these communities from the outside world.

The fences turned many of these border villages into isolated pockets, cut off not only physically but also socially and economically. Even those who retained access to their land found themselves dependent on the army to open gates—often at times that did not match their agricultural needs.

Insurgency and Repression

When the first war over Kashmir ended, the region was split between India and Pakistan. This division cut across villages, separating families who could see each other across the border but could no longer meet. On the Pakistani side, the northern and western parts of Kashmir were reorganised into two entities—Gilgit-Baltistan (formerly called the Federally Administered Northern Areas or FANA) and Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK). On the Indian side, democratic governance in Jammu and Kashmir was often undermined. The Pakistan-administered Kashmir territories face severe restrictions on freedom and political rights, with political control tightly maintained by Islamabad. New Delhi controlled the region's politics through handpicked governments, deepening public discontent. This alienation was then exploited by Pakistan, which supported insurgent groups to destabilise the region.

The abnormality of a hostile border, militant violence, and a growing military presence has permeated into every part of the state.

Since the 1990s, Jammu and Kashmir has faced repeated waves of insurgency and state repression. The Pakistan-administered Kashmir territories face severe restrictions on freedom and political rights, with political control tightly maintained by Islamabad. Most Kashmiri Pandits and some Muslims have fled in fear, and many remain displaced. Those who stayed behind have often been caught in the crossfire between militants and security forces—killed either accidentally or on suspicion by both sides.

The Kashmir Valley and Chenab Valley in Jammu bore the brunt of the conflict. Meanwhile, the plains of Jammu, already affected by earlier militancy in Punjab, also became militarised zones. As militant attacks and security operations became routine, every region—from Kashmir to Jammu—was marked by violence and loss. In both cities, funerals occurred frequently, and mourning became a public demonstration of grief and protest.

The abnormality of a hostile border, militant violence, and a growing military presence has permeated into every part of the state. The ongoing conflict has caused widespread economic hardship, heavy civilian casualties, and constant fear, while also intensifying communal divisions. The region's social history would read like a saga of grief and loss.

Between 2002 and 2008, a “composite dialogue” between India and Pakistan fostered travel, exchanges, and trade. For the people of Jammu and Kashmir, this brought much-needed relief from daily violence. A significant, albeit unsigned, ceasefire in 2003 silenced the guns along the borders for a decade. With symbolic trade and travel routes opening on the LoC, border communities finally experienced some of the economic development they had longed for. However, this dialogue process was abruptly suspended after the Mumbai terror attacks on 26 November 2008. As recent events following the Pahalgam incident show, periods of peace on the border are often short-lived.

Although militancy declined after the India-Pakistan dialogue ceased, the restless population of the Kashmir Valley, yearning for a dignified and lasting settlement, resorted to street protests. These were met with a brutal response, which only intensified the demonstrations. The result was an endless sequence of suppression using bullets, tear gas, and pellet guns. Between 2010 and 2018, many young people in Kashmir Valley were killed, maimed, or blinded.

This period also saw the rise of a new generation of homegrown militants—less trained but highly committed—who became local heroes, especially in South Kashmir. This led to more bloodshed. On 5 August 2019, New Delhi abruptly revoked Article 370, a special constitutional provision that granted Jammu and Kashmir a unique status, to bring the region under its direct control. This move, predictably, brought increased surveillance and sweeping restrictions.

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While the guns have fallen silent for now, genuine peace remains elusive. Militancy has continued to simmer, even reappearing in the Jammu region after decades. The administration's crackdown on civil liberties since 2019—through persistent raids, detentions, device confiscations, demolitions, and property seizures—has tormented and brutalised the people's psyche.

After the Pahalgam attack, it was once again ordinary people—especially Kashmiris—who bore the brunt. Perpetually seen with suspicion, they continue to face collective punishment. This time, it came in the form of demolishing the homes of nine suspected militants, arresting between 1,500 and 2,000 people, and carrying out raids, interrogations, and constant surveillance. Media reports suggest more than 2800 detentions, though it is not known how many of them were later released.

Despite official claims from New Delhi, Jammu and Kashmir has not seen true normalcy in the past 75 years. India-Pakistan hostility and insurgency feed off each other. While the insurgency stems from the larger conflict, it also deepens the mistrust and antagonism between the two countries. Trapped in the middle, the people living near the borders in both nations are often treated as expendable by both sides.

Reviving Haunting Memories

In addition to the constant threat of war, people living along the border have now had a terrifying glimpse of modern warfare, especially the use of drones. This has only deepened the sense of dread that already pervades their daily lives.

In the border districts of Rajouri and Poonch—both severely affected by shelling—burnt villages and flattened homes reminded many of the events of 1965. That year, during Pakistan's Operation Gibraltar, guerrillas crossed the LoC to recruit and train locals. Some young

men joined voluntarily, while others, fearing harsh punishment from Indian authorities, fled across the border. Some returned later, but many remained stranded in exile.

Two decades ago, during a visit to a border village in Poonch, an elderly man who had served in the British Indian Army pointed to a hill across the LoC and said to me, “That house belongs to my son. He fled during the 1965 war and never returned.” After years of struggling to get a passport and visa, he was finally able to visit his son. He described the long, painful journey. “I travelled over eight hours to Jammu, six more to Amritsar, and crossed the border at Attari-Wagah. Then some more hours to Islamabad. Finally, I reached the place. And I waved to my village from there.”

Travel restrictions were later relaxed when a bus service across the LoC, between Uri and Rawalakot, was introduced in June 2006, but the permit process remained long and exhausting. That service, too, was suspended in 2019. A similar permit system had briefly existed between 1948 and 1965, but it was discontinued after the 1965 war.

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Living in a permanent state of conflict, people on the border suffer in countless, often invisible, ways. Nationalist posturing by both India and Pakistan—built on sustained hostility—has damaged the region socially and psychologically. Relationships, values, and trust have all been eroded.

In this shadow of suspicion and militarisation, some locals are sometimes co-opted by the army to act as spies across the border. Those with family on the other side are even suspected of being double agents. As one schoolteacher in a border village explained, “The army often knows these men work both sides. But that’s how it works—information is traded. Soldiers can take that risk. A civilian caught spying, though, has no way out.”

The extent of co-option and surveillance significantly deepened and spread throughout the state after the 1990s, although these elements had existed before. Terms like “informers” and “agents” were already part of my vocabulary during my childhood in the 1970s and 1980s. Divisions in the region go beyond communal or sub-regional lines—they are deepened by mutual suspicion over where people’s loyalties lie. In the eyes of the state, no one is above doubt—every individual must constantly prove their loyalty.

Manto’s Metaphors

Following the Pahalgam killings, the government ordered the deportation of all Pakistani citizens. Among those forcibly taken from Srinagar was 80-year-old Abdul Waheed Bhat, a bedridden man suffering from paralysis. Bhat was not originally a Pakistani national. He had been stranded in Pakistan for 15 years between 1965 and 1980 and had been forced to obtain a Pakistani passport simply to return home. On 30 April 2025, he died at the Attari-Wagah border, where he had been brought to be expelled to Pakistan.

His tragic story echoes that of Bishan Singh, who collapses and dies in the no-man’s land between India and Pakistan, in “Toba Tek Singh”, a poignant tale by Saadat Hasan Manto—one of South Asia’s greatest chroniclers of the human cost of Partition. Manto exposed not only the senseless pain inflicted on ordinary people but also the inhuman instincts awakened by arbitrarily drawn borders.

But it is another of Manto’s stories, “Teetwal ka Kutta”, that feels eerily prophetic. Set during the 1947-48 Kashmir war, the story revolves around a stray dog that wanders between two opposing military camps on either side of the border. The Indian soldiers name the dog “Chapad Jhunjhun” and send it across with a message that it is an “Indian dog”. In return, the Pakistani soldiers rename it “Sapad Sunsun” and declare it theirs. Caught between two sides blinded by hostility, the terrified dog is pushed back and forth between the camps—amid gunfire and shouted abuse—until both sides, suspicious of the animal’s loyalties, shoot it.

As the dog dies, one soldier remarks coldly, “He died a dog’s death.”

Whether or not Manto intended this story to be a metaphor for Kashmir, “Teetwal ka Kutta” has come to symbolise the tragic reality of the people of Jammu and Kashmir—caught between two hostile nations, treated with suspicion, punished as traitors, and demonised even in death.

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