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Cross-firing and Social Life along the International Border of Poonch District of Jammu & Kashmir: An Analysis from January 2018 -January 2019

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ABSTRACT

Poonch is one of most secluded district of Jammu & Kashmir, bounded by Actual Line of Control (ALC) from three sides. The ALC is about 103 km stretch which is demarked boundary between India & Pakistan occupied Kashmir (POK). The social life of the people living nearby border area of Poonch is very miserable due to hostility between two nuclear powers; India & Pakistan. Not only on war times but even on peace time the life of people in this area is full of hazards. The periodic cross firing & shelling in this area is a normal phenomenon. It has immensely affected the quality of life of the people living in this area in different ways. Apart from human casualty, basic and social activities like education, festivals, and social gatherings are always volatile and vulnerable. People are more or less alienated from their own agricultural land and are living the life of fear & death. To understand the life across the actual line of control, we reviewed impact of cross firing in Poonch district from January 2018-January 2019 to have an idea about the life people are living across international borders.

Introduction:

Borders are not ordinary areas & cannot be compared to other areas where people live their normal life as per their wishes and conditions. These are the cardinal points which need to be secured and the security of peoples living in these areas has to be prioritized. In order to understand the impact on social life of people suffering from cross firing, a study of border areas of Poonch was undertaken between January 2018-January 2019. It was based on the perspective to understand the struggle and challenges faced by the residents living in this area. Before 1947 people were living comfortably in these areas but partition generated the atmosphere of violence where people are often caught in cross firing. This area has now turned into battle field apart from major wars between India & Pakistan in 1947,1948,1965,1971 the situation in this area is still like the war period.

We talked with MOHD AKRAM resident of UPPER GOHLAD (Poonch) about the situation of the area Akram quoted “It is not war like situation here but it is a direct war”. He further added that situation is sometimes peaceful and all the activities are supposed to be normal but all of a sudden shelling & firing from enemy’s side disrupts the whole atmosphere. We talked to many other residents of village Gohlad, Balakot, Sagara, Shahpur all of them claimed and concluded with similar statements, further they wish to request the authorities through this study and according to them they have already requested whosoever have visited them and

interviewed before for a peaceful resolution between India & Pakistan or relocate them and provide them shelter in safer areas during emergency. Cross firing has impacted the overall life of these people; some of the most affected areas are as follows:

Impact on education during January 2018 – January 2019.

Apart from human lives, education is another casualty in cross border firing areas of Poonch district. Firing & shelling from other side creates panic & fear among students as well as their parents, they first take their wards to safer places & are largely worried about their academic position & future, as most of the year they are moving between their homes to shelter camps.

Din Mohammad father of a student of 8th grade from Shahpur area of Poonch said that “Our children remains educationally backward because of continuous shelling & firing from Pakistani side. Blasting, shelling before them is now a normal thing. Now it seems to them as part of their life”.

On 18th of January 2018 an unexpected explosion has been reported in Poonch district along LOC. District Administration ordered for the shutdown of all educational institutes in the area surrounding Poonch as Pakistan violates ceasefire during morning hours[Hindustan Times: 19/01/2018]

On 20th January 2018 District Development Commissioner, Poonch ordered 120 schools in Balakot & Mankot to stay closed because of firing & shelling from Pakistani side

along Border. Mr. TANVEER who is teacher by profession in a Government School said “We are living in the shadow of death, shells & blasts drops like the rain both in our houses & Schools. (Figure.1 indicates the clear impact of firing on education institute). [DNA News Report: 20/01/2018].



(Figure. 1)

On 30 of January 2018 Pakistan violates ceasefire & targeted many areas located near Balakot sector. Authorities closed internet & shutdown all educational institutions surrounding this area [Greater Kashmir: 31/01/2018].

On 25th of October 2018 Pakistan once again violated ceasefire & targeted the indian army base in Poonch district along LOC, Authorities ordered for the closure of all educational institutes in the area[Kashmir Times: 26/10/2018].

Shelling along the line of control from Pakistani side has caused major disruption in

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educational institutions. In many areas the constant shelling & firing has also led to the problems like mental & physical health among the students. The constant threat among the students of these areas can lead to psychological impact on them and such closures may result in more school dropout at young age.

Impact on the family life

During cross firing and shelling from other side of border, people have to migrate towards safer zones. Displacement from homes has become a normal story of people living in this area. MOHD AZAM a Government employ of UPPER GOHLAD reported that “from January to December 2018 we have vacated from our houses two times. In the month of May, many villagers of this area fled to save themselves from heavy shelling by Pakistani forces and left their homes unattended. Many villagers told that they have never seen such intensive shelling and firing since 1971 and urged Prime Minister (PM) Shri. Modi to go for war with Pakistan in order to sort out the issue once for all. It seems that people are now worried about their future life. [Indian Express Report].

The shelling by Pakistani troops has the worst impact on these villagers living along International Border (IB) where they are forced to displace from comfort homes to migration camps. We entered in a village namely Hamirpur where we saw empty households with locked doors, suddenly an old man appeared and asked us do not go to top of roofs of houses as there is no

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guarantee when the shelling and firing will start. He asked take shelter behind this devastated wall; which was partially destroyed by shelling, he further reported that “we left everything and migrated from our homes to protect at least ourselves and our children”

Another lady namely DEVI of said village told us that in the month of May this year (2018) “we had a wedding ceremony of my daughter and suddenly shelling and firing started from Pakistani side; all our guests including our own family rapidly migrated to safer camps and the ceremony was finally carried out in the temporary camps.

On 11th of July 2018 Pakistani troops fired along LOC in Poonch villages which resulted the injury of two village workers of Shahpur area of Poonch [Greater Kashmir: 12/07/2018]



(Figure. 2)

On 12th of July 2018 Pakistan again violated ceasefire and killed five members of a family including three children and injured

two sisters of a single family along LOC in Mendhar area of Poonch, Figure 2 is the representative image of incident [The Economic Times/ Hindustan Times: 13/07/2018].

After the incident of 12 July 2018 in which five members of a family died, Chief Minister (CM) of J&K Mehbooba Mufti visited the area, while expressing her solidarity with the family she argued that peace between the two countries is the only way to move forward. [The Economic Times: 13/07/2018]

Residents of this area told that while government has made arrangements for our safety in safety camps and are providing us meals, but none have made arrangement to feed our cattle, as a result large number of our cattle already died and we are the sufferers from all the sides.

Impact on agricultural land

Although, India got independence in 1947 but the life along border areas like Poonch is more complex and fearful; as people living in this area have witnessed migration, instability and conflict which makes it extremely vulnerable all the time. Violence along this border area is a continued story since 1947. MOHD AZAM of Gohlad village said ceasefire violation is common during the harvest time as guns never remain silent in this area he further said “Goole aangay maara paaira waahn paaway” which means “Bullets dropped in front of our feet’s”.

MOHD MANZOOR of said village told that we are farmers by profession and earn our livelihood by selling our harvest if we are not able to harvest our crops on time, we would be left with no money to feed our family. He further added that there is no guarantee that we would be able to go for routine work in our fields as exchange of firing between forces of India and Pakistan disrupts the process of harvesting. Following figure is the representation of crop field showing the shells from Pakistani Side ruining standing crop and creating a fear for life. (Figure. 3).



(Figure. 3)

Border areas in this District (Poonch) are under heavy securitization, making them heavily militarized zones from both sides. It has various implications like people are alienated from their own land; vast cultivable land is used for mines by own army. There is a huge agricultural land covered under fencing and the residents of this area are not able to cultivate resulting in economic loss. The agricultural land turned

to be waste land due to restricted zones. Although, there are several gates build along this fencing meant for farmers entry to their fields for cultivation process but they are tightly scheduled and sometimes they remain closed for many days when there is threat of ceasefire violations from enemy's side. An old farmer of this area said we cannot remain in our field's whole day; sometimes we have to stop the watering in the middle of crop. It is obvious that Agricultural land is getting highly affected here. Most farmers told that Ceasefire violation in the last year during the harvesting season escalated our problems and resulted huge economic loss .The shells' laying on their farmlands ruins the standing crop and during shelling, they are supposed to move away from the place, no matter what season it is. The farmers are never sure in these areas whether their hard work is going to pay them or not and ideally the case is same with the farmers of both the sides. Although, most of the times there is an understanding of ceasefire during the harvest season but there is no assurance, when, how and why the environment of the boarder changes?

Another impact on agricultural land is the process of mining by own military forces since 1947, mining process across this border area is now a common. The residents of Shahpur, Gohlad reported that their agricultural lands were mined a number of times during year 2018, heavy mining in this area were mostly undertaken to check cross border infiltration. Residents further reported that land mines were planted even

in cultivable land of standing crop. No doubt that mines are planted in order to restrict the infiltration of militants from other side but it had a devastated impact on agricultural land as it is converted into mine fields and people are forced to stop working around the marked places. As per the officials of Army Headquarters (HQ) base Poonch the area under mining process is marked and fenced properly and locals are informed about the location of mines.

Conclusion

The present study was carried out to understand such issues of social life which seems to be abnormal and unimaginable in the advanced age. The difficulties like continuous displacement from one's own home and a fear for life make it an unpleasant place to live. Excessive militarization in this area has developed a negative psychological impact on the minds of people. Firing and shelling have neglected a thought of peaceful living from the minds of people, it seems impossible to them to have a normal life. Residents of many areas across the International boarder have urged for the talks between Pakistan and India to resolve the issue once. People

living close to International Border (IB) must be provided with special protection for improving the quality of their life, Measure's must be taken to relocate them permanently and adequate compensation should be paid to farmers for agricultural land which is covered under mining and fencing.

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