



Families at the Frontier: A Qualitative Study of Border Conflict and Everyday Social Life in Border Villages

Sohrab Sharma^{1*}, Mridula Sengar Sharma²

¹*Department of Sociology, Hemvati Nandan Bahuguna Garhwal (a central) University, Uttarakhand-246174*

²*Department of Sociology, D.A.V. (P.G.) College Dehradun.*

*Corresponding Author's email Id: sohrab.9645@gmail.com

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Abstract: This qualitative study shifts border-conflict research beyond strategic and security-centric perspectives to examine everyday social realities in conflict-affected border villages of Rajouri district, Jammu and Kashmir. Based on in-depth interviews in Jhangar and Sarya villages, the study shows that prolonged border violence functions not as an occasional disruption but as a structural condition shaping daily life. Families continuously adjust routine activities—work, farming, schooling, and social interaction—in anticipation of shelling and ceasefire violations. The presence of government-built underground bunkers near homes and schools illustrates the normalization of militarization within civilian spaces. At the household level, chronic insecurity fosters both resilience and distress: while family solidarity and collective coping are strengthened, psychological strain, emotional exhaustion, and long-term social constraints—particularly in marriage and inter-community relations—intensify. Community cohesion is reinforced within border villages through shared vulnerability but weakens beyond them, increasing social and spatial isolation. Children’s education emerges as a critical yet fragile domain, marked by frequent school closures, disrupted learning, and emotional stress, despite parents’ strong aspirations for education as a pathway to future security. Overall, the study highlights how persistent border violence reshapes social relations, aspirations, and cultural identity, underscoring the need for policies that integrate socialization and educational support with security-focused interventions in border regions.

Keywords: Borderland; Armed conflict; Structural Insecurity; Militarization; Educational Continuity.

Introduction

The Partition of India in 1947 and the subsequent creation of Pakistan fundamentally reshaped the sociopolitical landscape of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). Since Independence, border villages in the region have remained persistently vulnerable to cross-border conflict, exposing local communities to repeated violence, displacement, and insecurity. Due to their proximity to war zones, border villages face distinctive social, economic, and psychological barriers to development, making everyday life far less secure than in non-border regions (Haselsberger 2014; Aguirre & Simmers 2008). These communities experience not only physical threats but also prolonged uncertainty that deeply affects social relations, livelihoods, and human development.

Borders in conflict zones are often misunderstood as fixed physical demarcations. Scholars such as Gelbman (2008) and Haselsberger (2014) argue that borders are complex, multi-layered constructs that extend beyond cartographic lines to encompass political, social, and cultural meanings. In regions like Rajouri, prolonged border conflict has reshaped everyday life, compelling residents to



continuously adapt their social interactions, community rituals, and local practices in response to recurrent ceasefire violations and instability (Sharma 2025). Border conflict thus functions as a lived social reality rather than a distant geopolitical issue.

Jammu and Kashmir has experienced armed conflict since 1947, beginning with incursions by armed tribesmen and forces from Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province (Zutshi 2010). The signing of the Instrument of Accession by the Maharaja of J&K on 26 October 1947 led India to approach the United Nations Security Council, resulting in a ceasefire in 1948 and, later, the formal establishment of the Line of Control (LoC) in 1972 (Anand 2001; Banerjee 2010; Jacob 2017). Despite these agreements, residents of border villages continue to face risks of injury, death, and displacement due to frequent ceasefire violations (MHA, 2018, 2019). The repeated breakdown of diplomatic arrangements has normalized cross-border firing, posing serious threats to children's safety, education, and overall development (Chowdhary 2012; Jacob 2017).

The Jammu border region presents a distinct conflict environment. Although it is administered through democratic institutions, the region experiences periodic population displacement as hostilities escalate and ceasefires collapse. Temporary relief camps often become shelters for affected families, where children are forced into disrupted or makeshift schooling arrangements (Chowdhary 2012). While structural damage may sometimes be limited, the unpredictability of violence—manifested in school closures and constant safety concerns—poses severe risks to children's academic progress and emotional development. Educational disruption, rather than physical destruction alone, becomes one of the most enduring consequences of conflict.

An underexplored yet critical issue affecting education in border regions is forced migration. Families frequently relocate to safer areas during periods of intensified conflict, leaving children without access to formal schooling for weeks or even months. Research from other conflict-affected contexts demonstrates that displacement leads to reduced classroom time and lower educational quality (Shemyakina 2011; Akresh & de Walque 2008). In J&K, repeated displacement results in educational discontinuity, leaving children academically disadvantaged despite the presence of functioning schools (Chowdhary 2012). Although many children migrate with their families, the absence of structured non-formal education programs exacerbates learning gaps and hampers intellectual development.

The psychological consequences of displacement further compound educational challenges. Separation from familiar environments and uncertainty about safety contribute to stress, anxiety, and depression among children, directly affecting learning outcomes (Cox's Bazar Education Sector & Child Protection Sub-Sector, 2017; UNICEF, 2016). Even when families remain together during migration, the lack of planned educational support systems results in cumulative developmental deficits. These experiences underscore the need for targeted educational interventions in conflict-prone border areas.



Childhood is a critical developmental stage, and exposure to armed conflict during this period has profound and lasting effects. Children living near the borders of Jammu and Kashmir face continuous physical and psychological threats that undermine their health, education, and social development (Anand 2001; Chaudhary 2012). International frameworks such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC 1989) guarantee children's rights to life, health, and education; however, persistent border violence significantly obstructs the realization of these rights. Teachers struggle to maintain continuity in instruction amid displacement, insecurity, and infrastructure disruptions (UNICEF 2016; Machel 2002).

Research consistently shows that children in conflict-affected areas encounter multiple educational barriers, including frequent school closures, inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, and limited learning materials (GCPEA 2018; Sinclair 2001). While J&K generally has relatively good educational infrastructure and high female enrollment, escalating conflict makes sustained academic engagement difficult. Students who miss school frequently struggle to keep pace with coursework, diminishing future opportunities and long-term prospects (Harroz et al 2015). Even when schools remain operational, constant shelling and loud explosions severely impair concentration and learning environments (Sinclair 2001).

Economic instability further compounds these challenges. Conflict disrupts livelihoods, reducing household income and forcing parents to prioritize basic survival needs over education. As a result, children in border areas face greater obstacles in accessing quality schooling compared to peers in peaceful regions, slowing their cognitive and emotional development (UN, 2016). Studies from other conflict zones confirm that exposure to violence increases school dropout rates due to fear, financial constraints, and disrupted routines (Chamar Bagwala & Moran 2011; Mayo & Nandy 2013).

Beyond education, armed conflict profoundly reshapes social and community life. Persistent gunfire and militancy generate psychological stress, disrupt daily routines, and erode social cohesion in border districts such as Rajouri (Choudhury 2012; Anand 2001). Prolonged instability undermines trust within communities, weakening social networks essential for collective resilience (Sharma & Sharma, 2024). While residents often rely on informal support systems and adaptive coping strategies (Haselsberger 2014), chronic insecurity fosters isolation, particularly among women, children, and the elderly who face barriers to accessing services and participating in community life (Mayu 2012; Nandi 2013).

Conflict also intensifies economic hardship. Restricted mobility, damaged property, and disrupted markets limit income-generating opportunities, making households increasingly vulnerable (Ferris & Winthrop 2010; Sharma & Sharma 2024). These economic pressures strain social relationships and can heighten competition over scarce resources, further weakening community bonds (Akresh & de Walque 2008). As livelihoods decline, families struggle to afford education and healthcare, reinforcing cycles of deprivation.



The inability of children and adolescents to attend school regularly or access safe recreational spaces hampers normal social development, leading to long-term behavioral and emotional challenges (Fiesel & Stein 2002; Winthrop & Kirk 2008). Fear of violence restricts participation in cultural and social activities, diminishing social capital and altering everyday decision-making (Sharma & Sharma 2024). Families often prioritize immediate survival over long-term aspirations, withdrawing from communal engagement due to anxiety and uncertainty (Jacob 2017). The constant oscillation between normalcy and emergency profoundly shapes communication patterns, cultural practices, and social relationships (Chaudhuri 2012; Zutshi 2010).

Despite these challenges, border communities display remarkable resilience. Non-governmental organizations and informal networks attempt to support education, mental health, and livelihoods, though persistent security and financial constraints limit their effectiveness. Addressing the complex realities of border conflict requires a comprehensive policy approach that integrates security measures with mental health services, livelihood support, uninterrupted education, and strengthened social cohesion. Only such holistic interventions can improve quality of life, empower individuals, and foster sustainable development in conflict-affected border regions (Mayo & Nandy 2013; Sharma & Sharma 2024; Ferris & Winthrop 2010).

Research Gap

Much of the research on border disputes focuses on general aspects such as geopolitics, security measures, and government responses, especially in places like Jammu and Kashmir. These studies provide a lot of context. But they provide a limited understanding of the impact of protracted border conflicts on the everyday social life of residents in border towns. Research on the impact on urban populations usually focuses on sector-specific outcomes. Such as education, migration, mental health, or economic loss, they often analyze these impacts in isolation. The family, although being the primary location where insecurity and uncertainty are experienced and managed every day, remains underexplored in border conflict studies. Few qualitative research has explored the ways in which prolonged conflict reshapes family relationships, social roles, everyday routines, and community interactions. An exclusive reliance on quantitative data and policy-oriented approaches limits our understanding of lived realities, as it overlooks the meanings people attach to their experiences, as well as the coping practices and adaptive strategies that emerge within households over time. In conflict-affected regions such as Rajouri, insecurity and militarisation are not occasional disruptions but are woven into the fabric of everyday life. Yet, research at the village level that looks at families as the core unit of everyday experience remains largely missing. This gap limits a thorough sociological understanding of how border conflict is rooted in everyday social life, hence demanding a qualitative, family-centred examination of border communities.

Research Objectives

1. To examine how border conflict shapes the everyday social life of families.



2. To analyze the effects of persistent insecurity on family relations and community cohesion,
3. To explore how border conflict influences children’s education and schooling practices within families.

Material and Method

Study Area: The study was conducted in District Rajouri, especially in Block Nowshera, situated on the border area of Jammu and Kashmir. The villages of Jhangar and Sarya were chosen because of their close location to the international border and their repeated exposure to cross-border conflict. These settlements are examples of typical border communities. Where chronic insecurity affects daily life, family interactions and educational activities.

Research Design: A qualitative research approach is used to gain a deeper understanding of respondents' experiences, coping mechanisms, and perspectives. This will facilitate a comprehensive exploration of the challenges faced by families of border dwellers in conflict zones.

Respondents: Study uses purposive sampling to select 18 permanent residents who best represent the primary area of interest described in the research objectives. The distribution of respondents across the two villages is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: The distribution of respondents across the two villages

Research focus	Village	No. of Respondents	Profile of Respondents
Examine how border conflict shapes everyday social life of families.	Jhangar	05	Adult family members managing daily routines and household practices
	Sarya	03	
Analyze effects of persistent insecurity on family relations and community cohesion.	Jhangar	04	Heads of households and active community members
	Sarya	02	
Exploring impact on children’s education and schooling	Jhangar	02	Parents of school-going children and local teachers
	Sarya	02	
Total Respondents	--	18	--

(Table 1: Distribution of respondents)

Data Collection: Researchers collected data through semi-structured interviews, which let participants talk about their experiences, opinions, and ways of coping in their own words. Interviews were conducted in local languages- Dogri, Pahadi, and Hindi, so that respondents felt comfortable and could speak freely. The interviews lasted between 35 to 50 minutes, and the participants agreed to have them recorded to keep them accurate. In addition to this, detailed field notes were taken to record non-verbal cues, situational details, and the overall setting of the interviews. This added depth and context to the qualitative data.

Results:

The study’s findings are organized according to its three research objectives, which aimed to examine the experiences, perceptions, and coping mechanisms of families residing in the border villages of Jhangar and Sarya in the Rajouri district.

People in the villages of Jhangar and Sarya said that violence along the border makes it difficult for



them to carry out their daily tasks and live their lives. The respondents said that being alert at all times is an important part of life. Many households said they changed their daily plans to avoid times when there was heavy gunfire or military activity. People often planned to do outdoor work, such as farming or fetching water, when it was safer. When they were worried, they did household chores and took care of the children. The respondents said they had to reduce their participation in community events, festivals, and social visits because they feared the firing and shelling on the other side of the border. In particular, parents indicated anxiety about sending children outside for school or recreational activities. One responder added, *“Even going to the market feels risky; we always check with neighbours about any reports of danger before stepping out.”* Moreover, families stated that several cultural and social activities were gradually damaged, there were fewer religious and community meetings, and they were held at home instead of in public places. This adaptive response illustrates the impact of the border conflict on both physical security measures and social norms and relationships.

The findings show that prolonged border instability significantly affects family dynamics and interpersonal relationships in the border villages of Jhangar and Sariya. Respondents highlighted that the constant crossfire, shelling, and the possibility of unexpected violence create a perpetual atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, which can have serious consequences. It affects family roles, responsibilities, and relationships.

Shifts in Household Roles and Daily Responsibilities: A lot of people said that when there is a fire or a lot of trouble, they have to stop what they are doing. Adults, especially men, often work extra hours to protect their homes and families. Women, on the other hand, do many things. To keep the children safe and the house clean. A woman from Sarai said, *“I have to calm the children, when there is a fire and to make sure our pets are safe, We live in doubt every day”*. People talked about how the government has built underground shelters near homes and schools to keep people safe and help families plan their daily lives. Families said that making plans for possible movements in the bunkers had become almost second nature. Children learn to recognize signals and get to these shelters right away. Parents plan meals, homework, and other important things to do with the idea that they might have to leave at any time. Being ready all the time messes up meal times, school, free time, and the flow of everyday life.

Community Cohesion and Collective Coping: Although things were tense and chaotic, Respondents also said that having strong social ties is an important way to deal with the situation. During fires, villagers often help each other by sharing supplies, coordinating the use of shelters, and checking on the most vulnerable people, such as children and the elderly. One community leader in Jhangar noted, *“When shelling starts, we all escape to the nearest bunker. Families that live alone are directed by neighbours. This is how we survive together.”* But the constant fear of conflict has also made social networks bigger outside of small groups. Many families said that they were less likely to visit other



villages, especially those that were thought to be less affected by the border issue. This is most clear in how people act in marriage. A lot of parents said it was harder to plan weddings for their children. Families who don't live near the border are careful about getting to know families who do because they think it could be dangerous and hurt their future. *"Even though we are well-known in our culture, many people are afraid to marry their girls to our sons because our village is always on guard,"* said a father from Jhangar. Many men in the town marry women from the town or nearby areas. This gradually leads to the breakdown of social relationships and networks. This model shows how the ongoing border conflict affects not only short-term security issues but also long-term social relations. As time goes on, people start to feel more isolated. and the close ties that once connected the communities of the region begin to weaken.

Psychological and Emotional Effects on Family Relations: Border conflict affects the routine life of the people. Insecurity and stress affect the emotional dynamic within the family. Parents reported feeling more stressed and anxious. Conflict, stress, and anxiety can sometimes lead to conflicts between siblings and spouses. According to the respondents, those who live in constant fear are more alert, and families often establish strict schedules to feel in control. But this heightened awareness can also unite generations through compassion, mutual care, and solidarity. Family members work together to cope with the challenges of living on the border. Children, in particular, can sense how their families are doing. Parents were afraid for their children. The father of a ten-year-old girl said that his daughter was saying, *"I didn't want to go outside to play,"* and they were afraid of loud noises. Locals and teachers also help empower children by providing them with a stable education and teaching them how to stay safe in case of a fire.

Adaptive Strategies and Social Innovations: The research revealed that families and communities have developed various adaptive strategies to maintain family life and cohesion. In addition to bunkers, these are:

- Adults take turns doing chores to keep the house safe and running smoothly.
- Communication networks run by the community that can quickly spread news about gunfire or shelling.
- Unofficial networks of neighbours who help with child care and elder care in case of an emergency.
- Careful ways to handle social negotiations and conflicts about marriages and unions in nearby communities.

These efforts show how strong and creative the people who live on the border are. They show that insecurity can bring people together, even though it makes things hard. It helps people get along. Promote shared accountability. More research has shown that the violence along the border is having a lot of different effects on the education of children in the border villages of Jhangar and Saria. People in the community, including parents and teachers, always said that more than just physical



barriers like gunfire and shelling affect schools in these areas. Not getting an education is also a problem, but it is also exacerbated by stress, worries about safety, and family plans that help keep kids safe on the way to school.

Disruptions to Schooling and Learning Routines: People who answered said that firing and shelling across borders happens a lot and always has an effect on education. Schools often have to close for short periods of time when there is a conflict at the border. Even when schools stay open, attendance fluctuates based on the security situation. A father from Sarya explained: *“We send our children to school only when we feel it is safe. If there is firing at night, we keep them at home the next day, even if the school is open.”* Teachers shared similar complaints, noting that academic calendars are unpredictable and class preparations are often delayed or shortened. Many teachers mentioned that consistency in teaching becomes challenging if students quit courses or arrive late owing to safety concerns. This unpredictability undermines children’s learning rate and academic confidence.

Role of Bunkers in Shaping School Experiences: Government-constructed underground bunkers near schools were viewed as a vital safety measure but also as a defining feature of children’s educational experience. While these bunkers provide physical safety, they interrupt the learning environment.

Parents also claimed that children link school with fear and uncertainty, as classrooms serve as emergency shelters. Younger pupils, in particular, were reported to display astonishment and fear during such situations, which hampers their capacity to concentrate even after returning to classes.

Psychological Impact on Children’s Learning and Motivation: A frequent theme among the interviewees was the psychological impact of the conflict on children’s educational participation. Parents noticed that children whose homes were repeatedly set on fire were nervous, frightened, and easily startled. Loud noises often sound like gunshots. This causes distraction and mental distress. One mother from Jhangar shared: *“My child studies, but even small sounds make him alert. He continues wondering whether gunfire will commence again.”* Teachers discovered that such anxiety affects children’s attention span, involvement in class, and general excitement to study. Some children were noted as becoming reclusive, while others displayed indicators of restlessness and anxiety. These emotional responses, however, not normally visible in academic records, greatly alter learning performance.

Family-Level Adaptive Strategies to Support Education: Despite these limits, families actively participate in adapting ways to protect children’s education. Many parents reported supporting learning at home during school closures or unsafe periods. Home-based schooling and peer learning within safe houses were typical techniques.

A father from Sarya said, *“When schools are closed, we teach our children at home. Even simple reading and writing help them to stay committed to studies.”* The violence has also affected family ambitions regarding schooling. While parents exhibited considerable devotion to learning, many



recognized that safety considerations frequently override academic aspirations. A woman from Jhangar noted, *“We want our children to study well, but we cannot risk their lives. Education is necessary, but safety is more important.”* This contradiction between educational objectives and survival demands reveals the challenging decision-making process families traverse in conflict-affected border towns.

Discussion

This study examines how sustained border violence reshapes everyday social life, family relationships, community cohesion, and children’s education in the border villages of District Rajouri. The qualitative findings indicate that conflict in these frontier areas is not a temporary interruption but a persistent condition that restructures daily routines, social relationships, and future aspirations. When situated within existing scholarship on border conflict and everyday life, the findings highlight the distinctive lived realities of families residing in conflict-affected borderlands.

The study reveals that the constant threat of violence profoundly influences daily social interactions in villages such as Jhangar and Saria. Routine activities—including farming, household work, childcare, and socializing—are carried out with continuous attention to safety. This underscores that borders are not merely territorial demarcations but lived social spaces shaped by authority, surveillance, and uncertainty (Aguirre & Summers 2008; Haselsberger 2014). The presence of underground bunkers near homes, schools, and public areas illustrates how militarization has become embedded in everyday civilian life. Rather than experiencing uninterrupted warfare, residents encounter what Chowdhary (2012) terms “extended violence,” characterized by periods of calm abruptly disrupted by shelling or firing. This unpredictability compels families to remain constantly prepared, shaping how they manage time, space, and social relations. Social interactions are largely confined to close family members and trusted neighbors, reinforcing narrow support networks while limiting broader community engagement. Similar patterns have been documented in other conflict-affected border regions, where fear and uncertainty normalize caution and self-regulation in daily life (Anand 2001; Jacob 2017).

Long-term insecurity affects family dynamics and community cohesion in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. During periods of heightened stress, families often demonstrate stronger interpersonal bonds, shared decision-making, and mutual dependence, reflecting coping strategies observed in other conflict settings (Banerjee 2010). At the same time, prolonged exposure to insecurity generates anxiety, emotional fatigue, and persistent worry, which can strain family relationships. A strong sense of shared vulnerability binds border residents together, distinguishing them from populations living in safer areas. Respondents frequently noted that those outside border regions fail to understand their daily struggles, creating social distance. This divide is particularly evident in marriage practices: families reported limited marriage prospects for men in border villages, as families from safer areas are reluctant to form alliances in zones of chronic violence. Consequently,



marriages tend to occur within the same or neighboring border areas, narrowing social networks and reinforcing isolation.

These findings add an important dimension to research on conflict and social life, which often prioritizes trauma and displacement while overlooking how prolonged violence transforms enduring social institutions such as marriage and kinship (Chowdhary 2012; Zutshi 2010). The erosion of wider social ties demonstrates how conflict constrains not only present social relations but also future mobility and aspirations. Trust and solidarity thus function unevenly—strong within small, close-knit groups but weakened across broader social boundaries.

The study further highlights the significant impact of chronic conflict on children's education. Frequent school closures during shelling, parental fears regarding children's safety, and the proximity of bunkers to schools illustrate the difficulty of sustaining education amid constant insecurity. These findings align with global research showing that armed conflict disrupts learning environments, reduces attendance, and undermines educational continuity even when school infrastructure remains intact (Sinclair 2001; Burde et al 2017). Parents place strong hope in education as a pathway for their children to escape the border region and secure a more stable future. However, these aspirations are often undermined by irregular schooling, psychological stress, and limited access to quality learning resources. While bunkers provide physical protection, their presence near schools reinforces a sense of perpetual danger, negatively affecting children's motivation, mental health, and concentration. This supports existing research emphasizing that education in conflict zones must address both academic needs and psychosocial well-being (Machel 2002; UNICEF 2017).

Educational disruption in Rajouri differs from contexts of mass displacement. Families often return once ceasefires are restored, preventing large-scale permanent dropouts but creating cyclical interruptions that accumulate over time. These repeated disruptions complicate learning trajectories and raise concerns about long-term educational attainment (Akresh & de Walque 2008; Maio & Nandi 2013).

Overall, the Rajouri case exemplifies a distinct form of border conflict in which administrative and social institutions continue to function alongside persistent insecurity. By extending border studies beyond geopolitics to include family life, community relations, and education, this study highlights how households and communities negotiate conflict in everyday settings, offering a more nuanced understanding of life in contested borderlands.

Conclusion

This study explores the long-term social consequences of border violence in the villages of Jhangar and Sariya in Rajouri district, with a focus on family life, social relations, and children's education. The findings demonstrate that border violence is not a temporary disruption but a persistent condition that shapes social structures, relationships, and future aspirations. For families living near the border,



insecurity is a routine yet distressing part of everyday life, influencing how people work, socialize, plan, and imagine their futures.

Daily social life in these villages is characterized by constant fear and preparedness. Shelling and gunfire regularly interrupt routine activities and collective interactions, leading to the widespread presence of underground bunkers in residential and public spaces. While these structures provide physical safety, they also symbolize the normalization of violence in everyday life. As a result, social interactions are largely confined to close family members and trusted neighbors, limiting broader community engagement and weakening wider social networks.

At the family level, prolonged exposure to violence produces mixed outcomes. On one hand, shared risk strengthens family bonds and collective coping mechanisms, as members rely heavily on one another during periods of stress. On the other hand, continuous uncertainty generates psychological strain that can erode emotional well-being and strain relationships. At the community level, a strong sense of belonging emerges among border residents due to shared experiences of risk, though this solidarity remains largely confined within the border area. The study also highlights the often-overlooked impact of conflict on social institutions such as marriage, where insecurity restricts social ties and opportunities.

Children's education is among the most affected aspects of daily life. Frequent school closures, safety concerns, and the proximity of bunkers to schools disrupt learning continuity and harm children's emotional health. Although parents value education as a pathway to a safer future, repeated disruptions and stress undermine academic progress. Overall, the study emphasizes the need to understand border conflict through the lens of everyday social life and calls for interventions that combine security with psychosocial support, educational continuity, and social development to enhance long-term resilience.

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