

Across the *Line of Control*: Transnational Initiatives for Peace in Kashmir

Project Description

Introduction

For seventy years now, Kashmir has been a serious issue of dispute between Pakistan and India and divided into Indian- and Pakistani-administrated parts by a ceasefire and military control line. This closed and almost impermeable *de facto* border, called the *Line of Control* (LoC), has in considerable ways prevented Kashmiris from beginning and sustaining relationships and exchanging commodities, experiences and ideas across the LoC.

Some years ago, international organisations, such as the UK-based *Conciliation Resources* (2018), in collaboration with local groups and NGOs from Pakistani- and Indian-administrated Kashmir, began to take initiatives that aim at changing this adverse situation (Khan 2018). Under the banner of “peacebuilding”, these initiatives intend to overcome the social divisions imposed by the Kashmir dispute and to enable and promote relations and collaborations between groups of journalists, traders, filmmakers and youngsters from both sides of the LoC (Conciliation Resource 2018). What seems to me most striking about these initiatives and aspirations for peace is that they so carefully avoid “politics” while operating across one of the most politicised and militarised borders in the world, aiming to bring together people that Pakistan and India are keeping apart for the political purpose of consolidating their respective power in Kashmir. Against this background, my project studies the transnational politics of “non-political” aspirations for peace in Kashmir, exploring their entanglements with global and local political processes and power relations in Pakistan, India, Kashmir and the UK.

Before discussing theories, research questions and methods, I contextualise the project by providing insights into the current state of anthropological and historical research on local and translocal politics relating to Kashmir and Kashmiris.

Kashmir and the Kashmir dispute

Jammu and Kashmir (in short: Kashmir) was formerly a princely state of British India ruled by a local Hindu Maharaja under the auspices of British colonial rule. Both Pakistan and India regard Kashmir as an integral part of their respective nations and territories. When the colonial rulers left, they partitioned British India between Pakistan and India. Whereas Pakistan, understanding its formation as the long-awaited creation of a homeland for otherwise discriminated-against Muslims in South Asia, claims Muslim-majority Kashmir on religious grounds, India regards Kashmir’s integration into the Indian nation state, with its Hindu majority, as a touchstone of its secular foundation. In the turmoil of partition in 1947, Kashmiri Muslims in the northwest started an armed uprising against the Maharaja. To suppress the uprising, the Maharaja turned to India for military assistance and, under circumstances that are still contentious today, declared that Kashmir was joining India (Zutshi 2004; Snedden 2012). The resulting war between Pakistan and India ended in 1948 with a UN-negotiated ceasefire line that later became the LoC.

Apart from secret crossings by freedom fighters and refugees and sporadic firings, movements of things and people across the LoC are rare and limited to some symbolic trade relations and family reunions (Bali and Akhtar 2017; Khan 2018). The closed *de facto* border between Pakistani- and Indian-administrated Kashmir has obstructed the relationships of social and political groups in and of the region in substantial ways. The political hostilities between the two states continue to impose difficulties on Kashmiris from both sides of the LoC who wish to visit and establish relations with “the other side”. Visa restrictions also make it difficult for them to travel to parts of Kashmir across the LoC and to India or Pakistan via their ordinary international border crossing in Punjab.



Map of Pakistani-administrated parts of Kashmir (Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan) and Indian-administrated Jammu and Kashmir.

With these measures, Pakistan and India aim to prevent suspicious and dangerous categories of people – militants, spies or refugees – from entering and destabilising Indian- or Pakistani-controlled parts of Kashmir. Their governments also fear cross-border political mobilisation and the possibilities it entails of propagating politics of independence for Kashmir as a whole or of parts of it. Because independence politics challenge existing power relations and the Kashmiris’ marginalised position in negotiations about what the governments in Islamabad and New Delhi claim, and the United Nations confirms, is a bilateral dispute, whose solution lies in Kashmir as a whole joining either India or Pakistan, this kind of politics is largely suppressed on both sides of the *Line of Control*. In Pakistani-administrated Azad Kashmir, for instance, politicians and senior officials are required to confirm their desire for Kashmir to join Pakistan. This requirement, established in Azad Kashmir’s constitution, has regularly prevented candidates from pro-independence groups contesting elections in Azad Kashmir. Although Pakistan has granted the region some degree of political freedom, the government and administration of Azad (=free) Kashmir are largely dependent on, and dominated by, Pakistani politicians and bureaucrats. Through formal constitutional and bureaucratic arrangements but also more informal measures such as the manipulation of elections and Pakistan’s armed forces’ and intelligence services’ monitoring and pressuring of politicians and political groups, Islamabad makes sure that Azad Kashmir’s leaders pursue pro-Pakistan (and anti-India) politics and refuse the idea of independence (Snedden 2012). In even more pervasive ways, New Delhi controls politics in Indian-administrated Kashmir and represses political dissidents, most notably in the Kashmir Valley, where a large majority of Kashmiri-speaking Muslims live. Many of them oppose “Indian occupation” and demand “freedom” (*azadi*) for Kashmir, with some preferring the region to join Pakistan and others wanting it to gain independence. From the beginning, during the first war over Kashmir and after UN-led negotiations between Pakistan and India ended it and determined a ceasefire line (now the LoC), India has ensured that Kashmiri Muslim leaders and parties who came to power were pro-India (and anti-Pakistan) and rejected independence. India had initially granted Indian-administrated Kashmir some political autonomy. However, since the early 1950s, New Delhi has steadily diluted Kashmiris’ autonomy by subordinating them more and

more to the Indian government (Zutshi 2004). This dilution, combined with severely manipulated elections and the high unemployment rates of young and well-educated Kashmiris, incited widespread political protests against the “denial of democracy” in the Kashmir Valley in 1988. The brutal repression of these protests by Indian security forces and the anti-India militants fighting the forces back, often supported by Pakistan from across the LoC with training, arms and ammunition, ultimately turned the anti-India uprising violent. Since the uprising began, militants and Indian security forces have killed some 50,000 Kashmiris. Over time and as Kashmiris’ weariness of the war and their disillusionment with Pakistan and pro-Pakistan militants increased, Indian security forces stabilised the Kashmir Valley. Although anti-India protests still erupt sporadically, most Kashmiris appear to be resigned to the fact that India will not meet their aspirations for “freedom” (*azadi*) but retain Kashmir, going so far as to use brutal and arbitrary violence against its people (Snedden 2015). As a result of the Kashmiris’ failed uprising against India, Azad Kashmiris, who despite democratic shortcomings engage relatively peacefully with Pakistani domination, also came to realise that Pakistan would not be able to liberate “their brothers and sisters” across the LoC from Indian rule – neither by waging an open war nor by infiltrating the Kashmir Valley with militants.

Considering the seventy years of hostile relations, including several wars, between Pakistan and India, a peaceful resolution of the Kashmir dispute seems improbable, because the governments in Islamabad and New Delhi are facing no political pressure, nationally or internationally, to enter into serious negotiations with one another. For most Indians and Pakistanis, political incidents and the dispute in and about Kashmir, located in the remote and mountainous north of India and northeast of Pakistan, are “‘out of sight’ and ‘out of mind’ and not a matter of ‘life and death’ that demands resolution” (Snedden 2015: 275). Besides, no international organisation or powerful third party supports Kashmiris in opposing India and Pakistan, politically or militarily. Therefore, the Pakistani and Indian governments can ignore the desires and views of Kashmiris regarding the political future of their region. Because of the physical and social division imposed on Kashmiris, they remain politically unimportant for Pakistan and India and in the Kashmir dispute (Snedden 2015).

This limited understanding of the Kashmir dispute as only a conflict between Pakistan and India and, along with it, Kashmiris’ political marginalisation has not gone unchallenged. In Britain, where an estimated 500,000 Kashmiri migrants, most originating from southern Azad Kashmir, live, political activists from groups such as the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) regularly campaign for support from the British government for their “Kashmiri” solution to the dispute – that is, Kashmir’s independence from India and Pakistan. The JKLF, a secular-nationalist organisation, established in 1977 in Birmingham by political activists from Azad Kashmir, operates transnationally and across the LoC, maintaining and connecting party branches in Azad Kashmir and the Kashmir Valley. With the support of Pakistan, the JKLF started the armed uprising in Indian-administrated Kashmir in 1989, and was able to mobilise many Kashmiris in Britain, Azad Kashmir and the Kashmir Valley for the political solution of independence in the Kashmir dispute. Later, Pakistan changed its strategy and started to support only pro-Pakistan militants and, thereby, weakened the pro-independence JKLF. From the early 1990s on, the organisation, which had also never gained the international support it desired, was plagued more and more by internal conflicts and, ultimately, split into various factions. The idea of independence has remained relatively popular among Kashmiris in Britain, Azad Kashmir and the Kashmir Valley (Sökefeld 2016). However, to designate the idea of independence as *the* Kashmiri solution to the Kashmir dispute would be seriously misleading, as it reflects the desire of particular groups of Kashmiris mostly in and from Azad Kashmir and the Kashmir Valley. In contrast to them, the people of Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistani-administrated Kashmir had always refused to be ruled by the foreign Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir. Therefore, they did not and still do not consider themselves Kashmiris (Sökefeld 2018). From the beginning of partition, the region has demonstrated a strong desire to join Pakistan. This has encouraged Pakistan to subjugate Gilgit-Baltistan more radically and directly to Pakistani rule than it has the region of Azad Kashmir (Sökefeld

2005). Most of the people of Jammu and Ladakh in Indian-administrated Kashmir also reject the idea of independence. What dominates politics in these parts of Indian-administrated Kashmir is the Hindus in Jammu and Buddhists in Ladakh wanting Kashmir to join India or their regions to become independent from the Muslims of the Kashmir Valley (Snedden 2015). These inconsistent political aspirations of the different Kashmiri social, religious and linguistic groups make the resolution of the Kashmir dispute improbable, encompassing as it does conflicting interests and grievances not only of Pakistan and India but also of the people who, by choice or not, belong to this region.

Research Questions

The peacebuilding initiatives mentioned in my introduction avoid propagating political solutions to the Kashmir dispute such as those of the JKLF. Instead, the aim pursued seems to be more modest – to enable social and economic relationships to emerge and prosper across the *Line of Control*. But for what reasons do these people, groups and organisations aspire to such cross-LoC relationships? And what are the implications of such relationships?

In other words, what “peace” should and do these aspirations and desired cross-border relationships create? Does and should this “peace” not, despite everything, aim to prepare the ground for a Kashmiri political solution to the Kashmir dispute? Given that international organisations such as *Conciliation Resources* are collaborating predominantly with Kashmiris from the Kashmir Valley, Azad Kashmir and the UK (originally mostly from Azad Kashmir), the question arises as to how their peacebuilding initiatives are entangled with pro-independence politics and political groups such as the JKLF and its factions in these places.

These main questions demand that two research strands be pursued. First, the initiatives for peace and cross-LoC collaborations lead to the question of how they relate to the Pakistani and Indian governments and authorities, which are restricting movement and political mobilisation across the LoC. In a meeting in January 2018, journalists from both sides of the LoC formed the Jammu and Kashmir Joint Media Forum with the aim of fostering the exchange of news and information. The meeting was held in Bangkok (!) (Kashmir Image 2018). By refusing to issue visas to Kashmiris, Pakistan and India complicate such cross-border meetings, as this example demonstrates. Second, the relations between the people, groups and organisations taking part in these initiatives and cross-border collaborations need to be explored. What are the aspirations of local groups and international organisations? How do they differ? How are common aims and values negotiated and contradicting interests brought in line? What conflicts and inequalities, opportunities and changes result from these transnational and cross-LoC collaborations?

Theoretical Considerations

I theorise “peacebuilding” considering anthropological perspectives on international development, of among others, David Mosse (2005) and Tania Li (2007). Mosse (2013) defines international development as “social processes that are inevitably transnational, intercultural, and multiscale and involve the interaction and intermediation of extensive actor networks, with different logics and life worlds” (Mosse 2013: 228). Reflecting this idea, I understand peacebuilding initiatives as translocal assemblages of institutional practices, artefacts, forms of knowledge, values, interests, social relations, local groups and professionals.

Exploring these assemblages, I engage with ethnographic meanings of peace as a “category of practice” and a “practice of politics” (Li 2007). I argue that peacebuilding initiatives, entangled with differing ideas of peace, translate designs, elaborated mostly by professionals in international organisations, into the diverse interests and meanings of their partners and other groups that these initiatives bring together (Mosse 2013: 233). These processes of translation are contentious and demonstrate how initiatives for peace – desired, designed, contested and (re-)negotiated – also emerge

as arenas for struggles over politics and power relations in different places and among and between “local” and “professional” actors.

In the case of Kashmiris, peace initiatives are connected with, among other things, aspirations for “freedom” (*azadi*) – in a broad sense – and practices of resistance to democratic shortcomings and political suppression and violence. Some years ago Sherry Ortner (2016) argued (again) for ethnographic studies, exploring possibilities for resistance to unequal power relations in the world. In this sense, my research project also contributes the anthropology of, and for, peace that Birgit Bräuchler and Philipp Naucke (2017) call for. The ethnographic research about initiatives for peace in Kashmir is then “important not only for understanding the extraordinary range of creative ways in which challenges to the existing order can be constructed, but also for understanding the alternative visions of the future embedded in such movements” (Ortner 2016: 66).

Methods and Research Strategies

To explore transnational initiatives of peace across the LoC, I plan to conduct multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in the UK, in and with international organisations and peace professionals and their Kashmiri partner organisations in Britain, Pakistan, India and in Azad Kashmir and the Kashmir Valley. Inspired by George Marcus’ (1995) methodological considerations, which have prompted anthropologists ever since to study transnational processes by following social actors, things, stories or conflicts to the many places they are connected with, my research departs from peacebuilding initiatives of international organisations such as *Conciliation Resources* and follows them and their diverse social actors to various social and political contexts and locations. My ethnographic fieldwork will concentrate, as a first step, on international organisations and Kashmiri groups in Britain, and include attending meetings and events and conducting interviews. Later it will be complemented with research in Pakistan and India and in Azad Kashmir and the Kashmir Valley. With regards to Azad Kashmir and Azad Kashmiris in the UK, I already have contacts to local NGOs from previous ethnographic fieldwork in Azad Kashmir. Among others, I worked with the journalist organisation *Press for Peace*, which has been committed to cross-LoC relations between Kashmiris, but after the earthquake turned for some years to other social and political issues in Azad Kashmir, such as the delay, caused by Pakistani authorities and politicians, in the reconstruction of the capital Muzaffarabad (Schild 2015).

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