

***The Line of Control, Travelling with the Indian and Pakistani Armies, Jacob, Happymon. India: Penguin Random House, 2018, 188.***

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Written by Happymon Jacob, *The Line of Control – Travelling with the Indian and Pakistani Armies* is a unique book in many ways. Associate Professor at the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, the author had the rare chance to personally visit the Line of Control (LoC) both in the Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK), as well as, the Azad Kashmir to investigate and get first-hand knowledge of the factors causing ceasefire violations. His journey to the LoC with the officers of rival armies and interaction with the people living near the LoC is not only an eye-opener but also makes one marvel the bravery and perseverance of these people.

The author explains his interest to know the exact causes that lead to ceasefire violations on the LoC. Visiting only the LoC in the IOK would have only been a half picture, hence, the author decided to visit the Pakistani side as well. In the first three chapters, the author explains the difficulties for two long years he faced in getting permission from Pakistan to visit its side of the LoC and how a number of his influential Pakistani friends and colleagues from Track-II diplomacy helped him in the realisation of his ambition.

Once in Pakistan, while roaming around the capital city of Pakistan, the author draws an interesting paradox. With China being Pakistan's strong ally, the people of two countries are alien to each other while on the other hand, India and Pakistan are worst enemies but the people could not be more similar. The author believes that the people of Pakistan are warmer towards India but people in India are more dismissive of Pakistan. While making this observation, the author seems to be ignoring the fact that Pakistan is a major election issue in India, whereas, India has never been an election issue in Pakistan. This trend

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shows how obsessed India and its citizens are with Pakistan. This observation also highlights the fact that the Pakistanis are a peace-loving nation and there is a genuine desire for peace in the region.

While narrating his efforts for getting permission to visit Pakistan's side of LoC, the author also discusses the help he received from his Pakistani friends who confided in him why any forward movement on the resolution of Siachen issue did not reach its logical end despite Pakistan's best efforts as the Indian position on the issue had become harder by 2005. He was also confided how the intelligence chiefs of the two countries met in undisclosed locations in Europe on a number of occasions to chalk out details of the ceasefire agreement of 2003. This ceasefire agreement was agreed by the political leadership of both the countries and was, thus, implemented.

During the early 1990s, soon after Kashmiris took up arms, it had become near to impossible for the diplomats to work in each other's countries. Ultimately, both the countries reached an agreement on a code of conduct regarding the treatment of diplomats in 1992. Still, the harassment of diplomats continued as was the case in early 2018. The author feels that if more people-to-people contacts are encouraged particularly between the Pakistani-Punjabis and North Indians since they have so much in common, Indo-Pak tensions can be resolved to a large extent.

While his visit to the LoC with Pakistan army, the author says that the troops' fire at each other "at will" (p.76) due to several reasons that range from boredom to a "military culture of establishing one's moral ascendancy" (p. 76). Firing for the sake of fun without intending to harm the other party is also common. Pakistan also believes that the Indian side also starts firing since they want to divert attention from human rights abuses in the IOK. Sniper fire is yet another factor that is taking a serious toll on the morale of forces. A soldier manning a post is always under a threat of being fired at by the sniper across the LoC. The author explains that on the LoC there are certain areas where India might be having territorial and tactical advantage while elsewhere Pakistan will have the territorial and tactical advantage. The Indian troops may fire where they have dominance while Pakistan would respond from its area of dominance. Nothing goes un-responded on the LoC. This enmity somehow completely evaporates on points where the LoC trade is taking

place. At these points, there is no concept of firing and both armies treat each other with utmost courtesy.

While explaining the hardships of the villagers living on the LoC, the author compares their life as “living in front of a firing squad” (p. 93). The author explains in detail his interaction with the villagers of Dharmsal village. These people get shot at and their livestock gets killed and their houses get destroyed on a regular basis due to ceasefire violations. The author goes on to explain that in the first three months of 2018, some 25 Pakistanis and 13 civilians on the Indian side of the LoC lost their lives.

Landmines are yet another problem, which were placed in 1947, 1965, 1971 and 2001. Although the mine sites are marked but sometimes these mines drift away from meshed areas due to environmental factors and have been responsible for several incidents.

The author’s visit to Pakistan Army’s General Head Quarters (GHQ) was unique in the sense that he has been, perhaps, the first Indian to have visited that place. His meeting with Pakistan’s Chief of General Staff emphasised the political factors behind ceasefire violation but there was agreement that in the absence of political factors, tactical triggers became the main reason for ceasefire violations.

The second last chapter of the book details author’s efforts in India and his requests to army headquarters for a visit to the LoC. His interaction with the senior army officers made candid admission that all ceasefire violations were not initiated by Pakistan as was projected by the Indian media and that most of the violations were the result of strategic and political developments between the two countries. The author also explains that there is a lack of clarity about the area of the LoC as it has only been delineated on the map and not on the ground. This not only results in the skirmishes for territory but soldiers and civilians also inadvertently cross over the LoC.

Jacob’s visit to Behroti village, which lies a kilometre ahead of the Indian fence on the LoC is yet another interesting tale. The villagers of Behrori have to enter India through one of the gates at a specific time and get their identity cards checked. Only a hundred meters from their

village is a Pakistani village where their relatives live but they cannot visit each other. Though Pakistan does not mind back and forth movement of villagers but India does not encourage such movement. With the Indian soldiers on one side and the Pakistani on the other, the life of these villagers is “like walking on broken glass every time you step out of your house” (p.153).

The last chapter of the book discusses the theory of the American historian, Charles Tilly, that “wars made states.” Once states fought a war and engaged in rhetoric of war to survive. Today, wars are fought for domestic political reasons. Countries that indulge in wars also sit around table for peace talks as “war-making and deal-making are an essential part of modern statecraft” (p. 170). The author feels that the problem begins when states involve citizens in war-making efforts by sensationalising war and by making citizens hate other party thereby nationalising wars. Once wars are nationalised, the citizens assimilate hate and make it a part of their identity. This has precisely happened in the case of India and Pakistan. The life of people living on the LoC is nothing less than a tragedy as they are the victims of national pride. Author questions about the future of the younger generation who has not seen peace in their lives and who is growing up thinking that running for the cover when there is firing and shelling is something very normal. He wonders what kind of human beings they would grow into. The job of soldiers manning this line is also not easy as they see and inflict death and destruction on a regular basis. While terming it a collective failure of the Indian and Pakistani nations, the author concludes his impression of the LoC as a “tragedy, hubris and hyper-nationalism all rolled into one, making it one of the most dangerous places on earth.”

Based on a personal account of the writer, the book presents a deep insight into the minds and lives of people both living and manning the LoC. The first-hand view of the plight of people living and divided between the LoC is what makes this book a must-read. This book also makes the reader realise the perseverance and determination of soldiers and officers from both the armies to serve their respective countries. It presents a unique opportunity to the reader to understand the true dynamics of ceasefire violations on the LoC. This book rightfully grabs the attention of students, members of academia, scholars or any common reader alike.

