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Living on the Line of Control:
changing family and kinship networks in Devipur Camp

On 26 October 1947 the state of Jammu and Kashmir acceded to the Indian Union, infuriating Pakistan and spawning one of the world's longest unresolved conflicts: Kashmir. India and Pakistan's half-century of perpetual conflict has been punctuated by four full-scale wars waged over the Line of Control, forcing villagers to hinterland refugee camps that have fundamentally changed the structure of the families living in them.

Abha Chauhan

The Kargil War of 1999 forced 25,000 families from their homes in Jammu district alone. Of those, 8,500 migrated to camps in the Akhnoor sector and ongoing fighting has transformed their status from temporary 'migrants' to 'settled' residents. Families have lost breadwinners, houses, fields and crops, and farming cycles have been disrupted. With little hope of return and little to return to, families have persisted in the camps by forming new strategies and kinship networks, securing food, shelter, livelihood, health, education – a future – as best they can.

From village to camp

Devipur, 24 kilometres from the Line of Control, is Akhnoor sector's largest camp: 1,000-1,200 tents shelter 1,390 families. The Jammu and Kashmir state government and NGOs provide basic amenities such as hand pumps for drinking water, schools and a dispensary. Otherwise, camp life hardly resembles village life with its spatial and social boundaries. Devipur's population hails from ten different villages while camp life forces families of different religions and castes to reside in close proximity under similar conditions. Most Devipur Camp residents are Hindu – *Rajputs*, the majority Scheduled Castes (ex-untouchables), and about 20-25 *Brahman* households; there are four or five Sikh families, one Christian family and no Muslim families. But migration from village to camp changed the very definition of 'family'.

In the village, patrilineal joint families resided together. Typically, after the marriage of the second or third son, the extended family became too large to manage, yet the family and its property remained undivided until the eldest male, usually the father, decided to partition it, or died.

In Indian villages, every family or household living together under one roof has the right to a government ration card, good for acquiring wheat flour, rice, sugar and cooking oil from nearby depots at cheaper rates. When families migrated from their villages to the Devipur Camp, they were allotted tents on the basis of these ration cards: one tent per card. But the tents were too small to accommodate all those listed on a single card. To obtain more tents, families succeeded in acquiring new ration cards listing only husband, wife and their unmarried children, fragmenting the extended village household among multiple tents. Examples in Devipur Camp include a father and mother living in separate tents with different children; a husband and wife living in entirely different locations or without their children; and widowed grandmothers living with their grandchildren.

Based on 1988 Central Intelligence Agency map. Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection, University of Texas at Austin

Over the years new families formed within the camp as men and women of different families met, married and had children. Such families moved out of their previous tent(s) and were allotted new tents of their own. Thus, within the camp, each new marriage created a new household. This differed from new household creation in the village, which took considerably longer.

Changing family and gender relations

The system of tent distribution, and the nature of the tent itself, has led to changes in household structure and relationships. Privacy and security are limited because tents cannot be closed properly or locked; life remains exposed, open and vulnerable to external intrusions. People worry that traditional restrictions and taboos, especially regarding the young, cannot be maintained as they were in the village. People fear youths might choose their spouses irrespective of caste and kinship rules or indulge in sex unbound by village tradition. This fear is exacerbated because marital alliances are already difficult to achieve. Now that village customs are eroding and sexual mores loosening, people are afraid of character assassination, such as when a daughter is perceived as shaming a family when accused of having engaged in pre-marital sex. This has made camp life tough and finding spouses even tougher.

Take Ram Singh, a retired army man with two sons. He and his wife live in one tent and his younger son and his family live in another one nearby. While his son is at work outside of camp, Ram Singh stays with his son's family to watch over them. Meanwhile, Ram Singh's wife stays with their elder son and his family in a settled colony 20 km away, where the son serves at an army post and his children require their grandmother's presence. According to Ram Singh, back in the village he did not have to worry about his family members' security and his wife did not have to leave her home to be with the elder son's family because they all lived under the same roof. His case shows that while his household has fragmented, his family ties are as strong as before.

Thus the camp has changed the role of the father or family patriarch and the family's division of labour. In the village, each family member had a certain status and performed tasks based on gender and age. The joint-family also understood that certain areas of the house were for the couple alone or for women only. Because the authority of the patriarch or male elders is not exercised directly within the tent, gender relations within the family have loosened and, as a result, women and adult children have more say in family matters. Young women in particular reign over matters related to education and the marriage of children.

Increased freedom has also made women more vulnerable, because it has eroded gender boundaries and overall security traditionally provided by the structure inherent to the joint-family household. This may be one reason behind female solidarity in the camps. New women's social activities have transcended traditional boundaries, as the 2002 formation of *Mahila Mandals* (Women's Groups) demonstrated. Three such groups exist in Devipur; women share views and problems, discuss family health, hygiene and children's education issues, and organize recreational activities that unite women irrespective of caste or village origin and foster ties based largely on gender.

In the villages, family was an identity expressed through sharing, cooperation and common lineage, which wider ties of kinship extended. The camp, however, inaugurated inter-village ties that grew into a single camp consciousness and identity that took precedence over village and family identity. For example, migrants formed the New Migrant Association comprised of camp representatives who lobby the government for additional settlement facilities. A camp culture akin to a large extended family has developed in Devipur: relationships are bound as much by the ties of marriage and blood as by the primacy given to the overall well-being and problems of camp dwellers.

Changing marriage and kinship rules

The diverse backgrounds of the Devipur population have influenced gender relations between families. Traditionally, rules of kinship and marriage govern social life; village exogamy is not the rule and marriages are arranged between individuals both within and beyond the village. Religion and caste endogamy and *gotra* (clan) exogamy are maintained. *Brahmins*, *Rajputs*, *Mahajans* (business community), *Jats* (peasants) and the Scheduled Castes all traditionally follow caste endogamy. The difference of status between wife-giver and wife-taker families – the family taking the wife is customarily considered to be of higher status than the family giving her – is not very significant in the camp. Exchange marriage – the marriage of a man to his sister's husband's sister – was once common in the village; if a brother or sister was not present, then the marriage was arranged through cousins. While exchange marriages have not disappeared, they have declined drastically.

Some women, given the greater context of crisis and conflict and the uncertainty that goes with increased freedom, still feel more secure pursuing marriage through kinship relations. But more often today people prefer to reach beyond kinship circles. War has increased the number of widows, yet the number of widows who remarry has decreased. Marriage of a young widow is welcomed, but not of an elderly woman who has adult children. The pressure on the wife of the deceased to remain an unmarried widow has increased owing to a widow's entitlement to a pension, employment and the glorification of her spouse's death as a martyr. In the village widows lived in their in-laws' household, but in the camp most widows remain single and live alone or with one or two relatives with whom they feel most comfortable.

A girl's father might be willing to give his daughter to a prospective groom living in the camp if the latter has a good government job, as he might one day be able to leave the camp and settle in a better place. But the reality for most in the camps is grim. Agricultural activity has declined and 80% of young men are unemployed; some suffer from alcoholism and succumb to gambling. Girls, though engaged in household chores, also have ample time on their hands. The recent government decision to shift schooling back to the border villages further increased the already high drop-out rate of 50%. This has reinforced the belief that the camp is home only to the poor, the elderly and the widowed – those who cannot find better alternatives. Whereas the village is sanctified by its traditional methods, rules and social controls, the camp's perception as a place where unmarried boys and girls are doomed to stay makes outsiders reluctant to arrange a marriage with anyone living there. The average marriage age has risen because satisfying traditional caste and kinship rules and overcoming disadvantages of camp life have combined to make matchmaking exceedingly difficult.

Escaping the camp through marriage has therefore become an elusive ideal: to arrange marriage with someone outside the camp and to settle in his village. If the latter is not possible, then another area is chosen. This has revived the *maile*, a gathering where members worship the clan deity, eat together and discuss intra-clan problems, issues and marriage alliances. Every clan has its *maile*; the frequency of such gatherings and the number of people who attend them have increased. The feasts provide opportunities to gain new information, necessary to find a suitable bride or bridegroom.

Microcosm of social change?

The traditional extended family has morphed into a new kind of 'household' in Devipur Camp: it can be a married couple with their unmarried children; a single person (a widow); a *dyad* (widowed mother and her daughter) or a *triad* (grandfather, daughter-in-law and the grand-daughter); a mother staying with her daughters and her daughters' children. Many family members and kin no longer live together and have formed new neighbourhoods of people related through little more than war and happenstance. Family activities now involve a much wider network, increasing openness and diminishing traditional hierarchy. Women exercise more decision-making power within the family and enjoy more freedom outside it, though some sense uncertainty and anxiety as well; increased female mobility and their newfound collective identity have proven female identity can be bolstered by more than blood alone. And so, too, the notions of family and kinship. <

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