

Introduction

Freedom in Captivity

The traversals of freedom and subordination, sovereignty and subjection, and autonomy and compulsion are significant markers of the dilemma or double bind of freedom.

—Saidiya V. Hartman¹

Every year in the month of July, the otherwise sleepy town of Drass, a key site of confrontation in the fourth war between India and Pakistan, buzzes with activity. By this time of summer, the streams are gushing with snowmelt, and the mountainsides and pastures are a verdant green. Construction work has resumed for the season, and residents are busy tending to their fields of barley or travelling to Srinagar for errands that winter brought to a halt. Besides the greater traffic of tourists stopping for a cup of tea in the Drass bazaar on their way to Srinagar or Leh, the Indian army and district administration of Kargil are also gearing up to organise the annual Vijay Diwas celebrations to mark India's victory over Pakistan in the Kargil War (1999). This was the first war to be mediatised, beamed through national television directly into people's homes in India. Fought on the high mountain battlegrounds of Kargil – located along the *de facto* border in the far northwest frontier of Indian-controlled Kashmir – the Kargil War continues to have a long affective afterlife in the national imagination. Images of soldiers holding aloft the Indian flag on Tololing and Tiger Hill, the two peaks on this treacherous terrain which the Indian army recaptured from Pakistani incursions in 1999, are today household names. The war captivated the nation, and like legends told and retold, its enchantment has been sustained through Vijay Diwas celebrations.²

The tenth anniversary of the war demanded even greater pomp and splendour. Heavy security arrangements were in place for the high-profile nature of the event in 2009, for the guest list included army generals, the kin of martyred soldiers, Bollywood stars and the national media. Against a backdrop of rugged mountains with patches of melting snow, a hill slope etched with ‘Tenth Anniversary, Op. [Operation] Vijay Divas’ ran down to a vast ground prepared for the event with the neatness and precision of a cantonment area. Marquee-like tents had been erected for the dignitaries to watch a horse-polo match, a traditional sport in the region, and a cultural show. Sortie displays and a paragliding show by the military reinforced the region’s reputation as a war zone in the national imagination. Vijay Diwas was reminiscent of the national Republic Day parade celebrated every year in India’s capital, reiterating that the exercise of power is always inseparable from its display.³

A few days before the event, I had bumped into a young Kargili journalist at a tea stall in the Kargil bazaar. When I asked him, ‘What’s the latest in the news?’, Vijay Diwas came up, and he complained about the difficulty he was facing in obtaining a pass to enter the venue while the national media was to be flown up especially for the event. Resentful and annoyed in that moment, he let slip that Kargili reporters always had covered army programmes despite being warned against this by separatists in Kashmir, and yet such treatment was the reward for their allegiance to India. The journalist was echoing a common refrain among the people of this region about the insufficient recognition of their patriotism: Without them, they asserted, India could not have won the Kargil War. Civilians in this region have been written out of state narratives of heroic nationalism despite their sacrifices during the war.⁴

I was privileged to be able to access the venue a few days later with the help of the Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages. It had organised cultural troupes from different ethnic groups of the region, which, along with the horse-polo teams, were the only officially solicited local participation. Others ringed the perimeter of the area as a paraglider descended to the ground (Figure I.1), while army *jawans* (foot soldiers) served refreshments to the dignitaries sheltered from the sun and dust.

Backstage, before the cultural show commenced, teenage boys in traditional costumes shared brief moments of jest with *jawans*, taking photos with and of them. Each troupe took to the stage in turn, performing song and dance, conforming to state-endorsed formats of collective ethnic representation. A Shina-speaking troupe dressed in cream-coloured *pathan* suits and their signature woollen cap, more commonly worn in Gilgit and Chitral in Pakistan, sang a song with a striking chorus: ‘We don’t want money or fame, we only want Hindustan/We don’t want



Figure I.1 Vijay Diwas, 2009

Source: Photograph by the author.

Islamabad or Lahore, we only want Hindustan.’ I had heard similar paeans to India in the poetry of the many established and budding poets in the region at the *musha’ira* (poetry gatherings) held by the Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages. These performances of patriotism and expressions of the desire to belong to India did not reflect the backstage disappointments with the Indian state that I had heard in everyday conversations, such as the one with the young journalist I recount here.

The journalist’s comment exceeded the feeling of routine frustration with the bureaucracy entailed in entering a highly securitised national event. It had a double valence. It simultaneously gestured to the desire for recognition by the nation state and the awareness among the people of this region of their potential to challenge its sovereignty. His all-too fleeting reference to resisting pressure from separatists in the Valley suggested awareness of a power held but not exercised. It reminded me of a stray comment by another young man who expressed his frustration with the state’s failure to build a motorable road to his village: ‘We could have easily taken up the Kalashnikov, but we did not.’ The rhetorical flourish of this remark

might appear out of proportion to the regular demand for roads by mountain communities everywhere. But in a village close to the Line of Control (LoC, the *de facto* border), it expressed a charged unrequited emotion – disappointment with the state for not returning the love that they, the guardians of the nation state’s sovereignty, had extended to it.

Against the backdrop of these resentful emotions, how do we interpret the routine staging of patriotism along a heavily militarised, fraught frontier of Kashmir? Are such performances just another scene of subjection, of citizen-subjects on the peripheries of the nation state paying obeisance to it? Or does the backstage tell a story that is more complex than one of either resistance or submission? How do people make lives liveable when they do not consider resistance to state sovereignty a viable option and yet never feel wholly recognised by the state? Is it possible to sustain a measure of political agency, cultural and intellectual autonomy in non-resisting borderlands?

In contrast to the calls for *azadi* (freedom) from India by the majority of Muslims in the Kashmir Valley,⁵ the people of Kargil have sought belonging in India. A Shi’a majority district in the trans-Himalayan region of Ladakh, Kargil has never extended support to separatist movements in the Valley. Yet it always sought to remain attached to Kashmir under the protection offered by Article 370 of the Indian Constitution that had granted Kashmir partial autonomy until 2019.⁶ Muslim Kargilis never endorsed Ladakhi Buddhist demands for union territory (UT) status first raised in the early 1990s, but they also remain deeply anchored in Ladakh. Located thus in an interstitial space, the predominantly Shi’a Muslim inhabitants of Kargil have been struggling for recognition of their distinct political subjectivity and cultural identifications.

Pondering what constitutes a “viable life”, a life that is worth living’, Ghassan Hage proposes the concept of ‘bearable life’, a life that hovers ‘between the viable and non-viable’.⁷ For Muslims in the Kashmir Valley, life under Indian control is non-viable and unbearable; dignity is denied to them even in death. In contrast, people living in Kargil had just enough space to continue to search for lives that were more than ‘just-bearable’. State benevolence as a reward for fidelity to the nation is articulated within a liberal discourse of citizenship rights, one which Muslims in the Kashmir Valley have refused, but which the Shi’a Muslims of Kargil have sought. They have embraced small freedoms and continue to seek liberty and protection of democratic rights within a state of siege. This book explores what ‘freedom’ might mean for those who do not equate it with a quest for national sovereignty.⁸ It shifts the gaze away from top-down security concerns to examine how borderland dwellers themselves negotiate regimes of state security and their geopolitical location in everyday life.

A Captive Borderland

I characterise Kargil as a captive borderland because the licit and illicit *cross-border* movement of goods and people that vitalise life along borders in other parts of South Asia and the world scarcely can be found along this frontier of Kashmir. The pervasive focus on physical border crossings in borderland scholarship did not offer me comparative conceptual resources to understand the dynamics of life in this region. Instead, the analytic of ‘captive’ has been more productive to think with. It enables me to foreground how people living along impermeable geopolitical borders choose not to transgress them but rather consciously and tactically negotiate relations with the nation state.⁹ Unlike the violent, invasive presence of the military in the Kashmir Valley, which has turned it into an open-air prison, people in Kargil do not encounter state brutality at every step in daily life. Rather, their entrapment is generated by this frontier’s importance to a carceral state whose security relies on the docility of borderland dwellers to protect its sovereignty. This necessitates the sustenance of a particular relationship with the inhabitants of this region such that they accept living under the conditions of ‘freedom in captivity’. If freedom, as Hannah Arendt has argued, primarily exists in action,¹⁰ then how might we consider the politics of those who choose to act within captivity? How can we ‘recuperate the category of “freedom”’ to think about creative and improvisational politics?¹¹

Forms of Captivity

In the wake of the partition and the three subsequent wars (1965, 1971 and 1999), India’s *de facto* border with Pakistan has experienced growing militarisation and closure. From checkpoints, army cantonments, military vehicles and soldiers in the bazaar to Bofors guns on display along the national highway, infrastructures of militarisation are ubiquitous across Ladakh.¹² Each war rendered the border less porous. The harsh mountainous landscape aided the military on both sides to deter border crossings.¹³ Offering a view from the other side, Cabeiri Robinson, too, points to the danger and difficulty of crossing the border in Azad Kashmir (a semi-autonomous region administered by Pakistan) after 1971, when the LoC was demarcated.¹⁴

It is important to note that encapsulation is a process. Borderlands are not homogeneous spaces. Villages located close to the LoC experienced inclusion into the nation state at a different pace from those farther away.¹⁵ While 1947–48 was a foundational time in the biography of this frontier, it did not cast the ceasefire line in stone.¹⁶ Villages (or parts of them) lying on the Pakistani side were abruptly incorporated into territory claimed by India during the 1965 and 1971 wars.

Despite territorial capture, these villages remained suspended in a liminal state for long after. Their stories show how belonging is negotiated on differential terms within a borderland. Histories of the encapsulation of particular villages into India after 1947–49 also open up the partition archive to its silent *longue durée* on the frontiers of Kashmir.¹⁷ Narratives of cross-border settlers in Chapter 5 lend insight into processes of encapsulation in India through an ongoing dynamic between connection and disconnection that characterises freedom in captivity.

The direct overland route between Kargil and Skardu in Baltistan was already sealed in 1948. This made the entire Ladakh region almost entirely dependent on the Kashmir Valley for essential supplies, higher education, advanced medical care, bureaucracy and politics. The Zoji-la pass that connects Kargil to the Valley became its lifeline. Heavy snow, however, makes the pass untraversable for nearly five months of the winter every year, disconnecting Kargil, as Kargilis put it, ‘from the rest of the world’. By the month of March, when winter stocks have run out, people become dependent on the army to airlift even basic commodities such as onions, tomatoes and eggs. An acute deprivation borne from this disconnection was affectively expressed as ‘being jailed’.

Cross-border mobility at other places along this section of Kashmir’s frontier is deterred not just by military presence, but also by the absence of the desire to go across illicitly. Growing sectarian violence in Pakistan since the 1980s, including in the neighbouring region of Gilgit–Baltistan, considered a bastion of Shi‘i orthodoxy, also crucially underpinned Kargili belonging to India. An awareness of the persecution of Shi‘as in Pakistan, the lack of political representation in Gilgit–Baltistan and prosaic material realities of life across the LoC formed a prism through which life on the Indian side was constantly refracted.¹⁸

Besides the confinement engendered by a heavily militarised border and the politics and practices of state security, Kargil has also been rendered captive by discursive representations of the region in the national public sphere. Physical cross-border immobility engendered by a state of siege has been consolidated through the discursive practices of a security state that are reproduced by popular media in India. Kargil has been suffocated by a ‘cantonment perspective’.¹⁹ It has been produced as a ‘territory of desire’²⁰ for the Indian public, but very differently from the Kashmir Valley. In contrast to the erasure of military presence and state violence in popular, orientalist representations of the Valley as a sylvan paradise,²¹ Kargil represents the ultimate vanquishing power of the Indian state. Indian hegemony is legitimised through a particular dynamic of militarisation: Kargil is positioned as ‘peaceful’ in opposition to the ‘insurgent’ or ‘violent’ Kashmir Valley.

Tourism has been another tool used by the state to encapsulate the region physically and discursively in a seemingly benign way. Since the late 2000s, a steady

traffic of ‘domestic tourists’, as Ladakhis refer to Indian travellers, has plied to Kargil to see the War Memorial in Drass and borderland villages that no longer required an Inner Line Permit.²² After the delineation of Ladakh into a separate UT in 2019, border tourism has been given a massive fillip by the Indian state. Ever-more integral to the politics of state security, borderland tourism is an unrecognised site within ‘imperial fields of force’.²³ As participants in tourism infrastructure, borderland residents knowingly and unknowingly become conduits of information without directly working for the security apparatus. Tourism further depoliticises the region by conflating people’s quest for recognition of their political subjectivity with their desire for economic development.²⁴ Encouraging Indian tourists to consume the spectacle of war through travel to the borderland also echoes colonial projects of mobility and the fixity engendered within them. Jingoistic tourists yearning to view Pakistan and experience the thrill of the border reproduce the national frame by reifying the border and fixating on borderland residents as ethnic objects.

Historically, Kargil had been subject to another kind of discursive captivity, when few tourists ventured there. As a junction between Leh, Zangskar and the Kashmir Valley, it was a dreaded one-night halt for travellers. Colonial depictions of a *mofussil* ‘Mohammedan’ town infested with bed bugs lingered for long after. Kargil evoked little interest, and Ladakh became synonymous with its Tibetan Buddhist inhabitants and culture. It was the veritable Shangri-la, for tourists and scholars alike.²⁵ Kargil was also neglected in academic scholarship on the region until the 1990s.²⁶ Long years of invisibility in image and text contributed to a yearning for recognition among the inhabitants of this region.

Despite the impossibility of physical cross-border mobility and growing entrapment, people living in this borderland nonetheless manage to sustain senses of place and modes of selfhood that are anchored within wider horizons that transcend its geopolitical boundaries. To understand the processes of creative calibration and negotiation that sustain these horizons, which I describe in this book, I argue that borderland studies need to go beyond the ‘infrastructural perspective’ that dominates this field to appreciate how the life-worlds of borderland dwellers are nestled within cartographies of ideas.

Cartographies of Ideas

Anthropological scholarship on negotiating border security has predominantly focused on movement and curtailments to mobility across national borders and contested boundaries between nation states. This focus can be traced back to studies of the US–Mexico border, which set the template for scholarship in many ways.

Decolonisation, post–Cold War fragmentations and post–9/11 ‘War Against Terror’ displacements leading to the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe intensified statist concerns with hardening and securing borders. Explicit and implicit in this scholarship is an *infrastructural perspective* on borders and borderlands. This made important contributions towards expanding quotidian understandings of infrastructure beyond cement, brick and mortar to include a variety of materialities that are visible and invisible. Border(land) infrastructures range from barbed wire, electric fences and walls to prevent mobility, to checkpoints and documentation regimes to track legal and detect undocumented mobility, to agents of policing ranging from border guards, military, police and corporatised surveillance complexes and accompanying technologies.²⁷ Ethnographic attention to ‘border work’ along the edges of newly created states has lent insight into the complex, messy and contested processes entailed in putting these infrastructures in place to spatialise the state.²⁸

Alongside these state infrastructures and impersonations of the state that materialise borders, scholarship has also focused on the infrastructure deployed by those who seek to cross borders, from vehicles (migrants on boats) to routes (smuggled in trucks or arduous journeys on foot), documents (passports and identity cards) and networks (agents, middlemen, kinship). This infrastructural perspective on borderlands is fundamentally grounded in the porosity of borders, underpinning both the desire to move (to seek refuge, to labour, to aspire for a better life) and the desire to curtail that movement through various bordering practices.

The effects of many of these infrastructures – checkpoints, border guards and passports – on the lives of Kargilis cannot be underestimated. An infrastructural perspective that confines scale to cross-border mobility, however, does not afford space to understand other routes through which people living in a captive borderland navigate closure and disconnections imposed by security states.

In his seminal work on borderlands, Willem van Schendel urged scholars to break out of area study silos and ‘jump scale’ to ‘develop new concepts of regional space’.²⁹ He suggested that one way of doing this is to cross regional borders to study interregional linkages and proposed the concept of ‘Zomia’ – to refer to the highlands of the Southeast Asian massif – as one iteration of this re-scaling.³⁰ The study of borderlands and transnational flows of objects, peoples and ideas, and their collective overlap, he argued, would be two principal themes that would further this project. The burgeoning literature on migration and mobility in borderland studies has contributed immensely to expanding scale to cut across continents and underscore the value of the transregional. Yet its infrastructural perspective also firmly tethers it to *terra firma*, where demarcations by agents

of state policing inevitably delimit scholarly horizons to studying bodies and commodities attempting to move across borders. In contrast to this approach, this book foregrounds the movement of ideas and ideologies that shape borderland dwellers' negotiations of belonging. I suggest a hermeneutics of borderlands as cartographies of ideas, cutting across spatial scales.

Reimagining borderlands as cartographies of ideas is an invitation to think about how borderland dwellers exercise agency without engaging in acts of resistance or cross-border transgressions. It is in the space between the border and the broader horizon, a space of friction, that negotiations of belonging take place through careful and creative acts of calibration. These acts – as ways of making life viable within captivity – belie analyses framed by dichotomies of legal–illegal, insurgent–subjugated, mobility–stasis that pervade borderland studies.

In places where cross-border mobility is practically non-existent, 'third-places' become key sites of flight. These are contact zones where people living on two sides of an impermeable border exchange objects, ideas and memories. Connections reactivated or forged in third-places lie outside the frames of long-distance nationalism, diaspora or exile. Third-places may enable only temporary face-to-face contact yet sustain horizons of belonging that nation states attempt to shrink. Seminary cities and pilgrimage sites in Iraq and Iran and the Hajj are important third-places where Muslims arbitrarily separated by borders can meet. These third-places are crossroads for the traffic of ideas and ideologies that feed into selfhood and politics back home in Kargil.

The anthropology of borderlands has examined cross-border cultural forms and networks that forge affective connections and sustain belonging across borders. However, barring some notable exceptions, the travel of transnational religious ideas and ideologies critical to shaping political and ethical subjectivities in post-colonial borderlands has hardly been explored.³¹ Partition appears to have also effected a rupture in South Asian borderland scholarship which has not built on the rich histories of Muslim internationalism and trans-border traffic of ideas connecting South, Central and West Asia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.³² Furthermore, it is typically the figure of the cosmopolitan Muslim who draws upon Islam as an intellectual resource or progressive, Islamic socialists who have garnered interest for discussions of emancipatory politics forged through transnational connectivity. The tendency to dismiss 'orthodoxy' broadly construed is also reflected in the scholarly focus on connections wrought through Sufi networks, ideas and values.³³ A perhaps unintended effect of this has been that modernist discourses propagated by Islamic reformist movements scarcely feature in a positive way in discussions on the shaping of affective attachments, political imaginaries and ethical claims-making along post-colonial borders.

In the case of India, there is a latent assumption that Islamic ideologies along its frontiers either provoke ‘fundamentalist’ resistance and insurgency or are suppressed or dissimulated when there is an investment in the nation state. Kargil tells a story to the contrary.

Contours of Fieldwork

When I embarked upon fieldwork in Kargil in 2008, friends in Delhi and Leh expressed reservations. ‘Isn’t it a dangerous place?’ folks in Delhi asked, while Buddhist friends in Leh warned me about the ‘conservatism’ of the Shi‘as and the dirt and bedbugs in Kargil town. These reactions only affirmed the problem of representation that had sparked my interest in the region. I visited Kargil for the first time in 2005 to participate in a conference organised by the International Association for Ladakh Studies (IALS). Although I had been working and travelling in Ladakh for non-governmental organisation (NGO) research for some years, I had not ventured beyond the Lamayuru monastery, which marks the implicit border between Buddhist and Muslim Ladakh. Like most visitors to Ladakh, I too had ended up travelling mostly in Buddhist Ladakh. At the IALS conference, a prominent intellectual from Kargil town rightly chastised me for titling my paper ‘Traditional Irrigation Practices of Ladakh’, peeved that I had generalised my findings to Ladakh even though the research was conducted only in villages in Leh district. People in Kargil, particularly the elite, were acutely aware of the representational lacuna that besieged Kargil. I was thus welcomed with open arms when I started long-term research. One of the highlights of the conference was the excitement and joy surrounding the presence of a well-known poet from Baltistan, Hasan Hasni, who was among the small delegation of Baltis that had managed to visit Kargil for the first time since 1948.

It was during this trip that I first encountered turbaned and cloaked Shi‘i clerics in the bazaar. I was also struck by images of Ayatollah Khomeini, and his successor Khamenei (Figure I.2), and Ayatollah Sistani openly displayed across the militarised landscape.

A neighbourhood called Bagh-e-Khomeini and Khomeini Chowk in the bazaar of Kargil town, the district headquarters, further sparked my curiosity. Why are these figures, globally associated with ‘fundamentalist’ Islam, tolerated by an insecure state along Kashmir’s frontier? In a place where people are under heightened surveillance and their extra-territorial links immediately ignite suspicion and interrogation, why do the Shi‘a Muslims of this region not feel the need to dissimulate their religious connections? I wondered what routes, media, and negotiations facilitated this immersion of Kargil in a wider constellation of places.