

The Line of Control: Travelling with Indian and Pakistani Armies, by Happymon Jacob, Gurgaon: Penguin Viking, 2018, pp. 201, Rs 499

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India–Pakistan relations have become more complicated in the aftermath of the Pulwama attack that took place in February 2019, on the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel in the most volatile territory of India, Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). That the diplomatic ties between the two countries are arguably decided by what happens in the state has never been understated—precisely why Kashmir has remained the focus of study for experts on the topic. However, Happymon Jacob’s book, *The Line of Control: Travelling with the Indian and Pakistani Armies*, has a different approach to understanding the situation in Kashmir in general, and on the Line of Control (LoC) in particular. It showcases the uncertainty of peace, and of life, at the LoC and the acceptance of this as a given by all those affected. It brings out the very dangers, with real-time emotions involved, to the likes of a probable feeling the CRPF jawans were put through when a car packed with explosives ramped into the envoy on 14 February, killing 40 of them instantly. A similar attack at Pampore in 2016 took place days after the author travelled through the same roads. The impact is unimaginable for anybody sitting away from ground zero. But the threat that exists is palpable at all times to people living their lives around the LoC. This is what Jacob’s book offers to

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the common man: a sense of being present at and understanding what a normal day looks like in the India–Pakistan conflict zone. Interestingly, it does so from both sides of the line.

Based on primary research and written very lucidly in the form of a travelogue, Jacob's book makes for a light read on an important topic. Despite the multiple visits the author made to Pakistan on various occasions since his early days as a researcher associated with the track-II dialogue process, or for seminars and conferences as a faculty of Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, the one-time opportunity to see the Pakistani sides of the LoC is described as an 'intellectual pilgrimage' that had a humanising effect on his research. It indeed reflects in his style of writing, which is a fascinating mix of fact and storytelling.

In the prologue, Jacob reflects on the severity of a single ceasefire violation (CFV) and goes on to magnify this to a level as that of 2017, by when India and Pakistan had reported 2,408 and 2,915 CFVs, respectively, since the Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) of 2003. He attempts to show what this actually means for commoners and soldiers living along the LoC by documenting a sense of the existential vulnerabilities they live in. This is best portrayed through an anecdote in Chapter 4 when, while travelling in a jeep in the Battal sector of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), the author is told how the Indian Army fired 'at will' and 'it will be a pity if you were to be shot by your country's army' (p. 76)!

The titles of the seven chapters comprising the book are interesting and intriguing to say the least. For one, three of them narrating his adventures in Pakistan have the word 'enemy' within its phrase. Yet, this does not equate to Jacob considering Pakistan as enemy no. 1. Barring a few instances about inconveniences caused while 'Inside the Enemy Territory' (Chapter 1), narrations about cordiality on the Pakistani side; the commonality among people of the two countries especially vis-à-vis the Chinese whose numbers in Islamabad have multiplied over the years; the historical connections that are still cherished by some in power; and his personal liking for many things Pakistani leave the reader wondering about the author's literary intention behind emphasising such a word.

Chapter 1, detailing Jacobs's experiences at the Muzaffarabad brigade headquarters (HQ) and the 12 Infantry Division of the Pakistani Army at Muree, and Chapter 2, largely in acknowledgment of those in India and Pakistan who helped him with his required permissions and recommendations, provide preparatory account of procedures and protocols attached to visiting the LoC for research. In Chapter 3, the

author adds thrill to his writing by penning down his own curiosity about how he landed up in the Pakistan intelligence's certain 'no entry list' for people; about why every time he visited Pakistan there invariably were men who tailed him around; and how every person he met or each place he visited was under the scanner. There are also sparse discussions about the Siachen dispute and Kargil War that rake up strategic nerves.

These episodes are followed by Chapter 4 titled, 'Guests of the Enemy Territory', where the heart of the book lies. It is testimony to Jacob 'travelling with the Indian and Pakistani armies' to the LoC. The humane angle is described well through his conversations with small boys from Dharmasal village, many of whom have even gotten shot and live to tell their tales very unapologetically, hoping their army will take revenge. From the perspectives of villagers around the LoC, who rather get killed than leave their homeland, to Indian soldiers inside their bunkers who fear death by a sniper's bullet, to Scandinavian officials of the United Nations Military Observer Group for Indian and Pakistan (UNMOGIP) who live a mundane routine, the author has made untiring attempts to capture life along the LoC with a hope for enduring peace between the two nations. On a more scholarly and strategic note, besides unearthing the triggers for a CFV, he explains the nuances of escalation dynamics and sectoral retaliation. Further, readers are given a glimpse of the rather symbolic cross-border barter trade that goes on at Tatrinite–Chakan Da point and the minimal exchange of goods at Chakothi point that provide an economical insight. Meanwhile, during fieldwork, Jacob got a clearance to visit the Army General HQ at Rawalpindi, the ultimate seat of power in Pakistan. Though his visa prohibited him from visiting restricted areas, his exciting venture into the garrison, a rare instance for any Indian, has been extolled in Chapter 5.

The counter stories of the LoC on the Indian side have been narrated in Chapter 6, interestingly titled, 'Among Brothers in Arms'. Though reaching out for permissions on the Indian side was less complicated, it was not without difficulty as Jacob's many requests of a probable visit to the LoC met dead ends at the Army HQ in New Delhi. Unlike on the Pakistani side, Jacob managed to experience 'life in a bunker' near the Bhimbar Gali brigade HQ on the Indian side. Much like his travel to villages on the Pakistan side of LoC, he describes the life of individuals in Behroti village in Poonch district that is inhabited by what he calls the 'nowhere people', a perfect example of 'the worst that modern state and nationalism can do to people' (p. 152). It is most fascinating when Jacob

brings out the irony that indeed there are stretches of land where no line per se exists, no fences are seen, and no rubicon is drawn. Such is the flaw in political claims over a nation-state territory.

After collecting data on CFV and its causes, through multiple interviews with army men over the years on both sides, and conducting his field visits, including to LoC, Happymon Jacob makes an analytical remark in Chapter 7, which concludes the book with many critical questions. The reader is drawn into the world of Charles Tilly's war logic and how the media, in its instrument capacity, invokes the idea of nationalism that, in turn, enables co-opting of the masses to turn into war resources. With a caution against hate and easy labelling of the other, the author ends with a note on the twisted logic of the LoC, which is itself harped onto the very failures of the political disposition of both countries.

The last chapter is followed by a formal acknowledgement page reiterating the author's gratefulness to many, notes that provide supplementary information and a long index that makes navigating through the book easier for the reader.

The tone of the book is deliberately thought-provoking, yet simple, to address an audience beyond the strategic and scholarly circles. To a non-expert on the subject, the readership the book hopes to engage with, the title of the book may, however, cause some confusion. This is because Happymon Jacob has a similar book, a sort-of sequel, published the same year, called *Line on Fire: Ceasefire Violations and India–Pakistan Escalation Dynamics*¹, that itself reminds people of General Pervez Musharraf's book, *In the Line of Fire: A Memoir*², not to forget the fictional book by author Mainak Dhar by a similar name, *Line of Control: A Thriller on the Coming War in Asia*.³ Yet, the fact that such a book based on first-hand experience by a researcher has come about is commendable for not having any predilections. The book offers food for thought to all those interested in understanding basic facets about what the LoC stands for in India–Pakistan relations. Furthermore, it provides glimpses into intense security matters in a dialogue form about why a CFV happens in the first place and the tactical or political reasons behind episodes of firing that raise the stakes of a fragile escalation dynamics. Anybody reading this book is undoubtedly tempted to pick up the more intense sequel by Jacob, and that is indicative of the mastery of any writer.

NOTES

1. Happymon Jacob, *Line on Fire: Ceasefire Violations and India-Pakistan Escalation Dynamics*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018.
2. Pervez Musharraf, *In the Line of Fire: A Memoir*, Pakistan: Free Press Publication, 2006.
3. Manik Dhar, *Line of Control: A Thriller on the Coming War in Asia*, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012.

