

**'It's worse than 1971': border villages stunned by intense 'enemy fire'**

Pockmarked by shrapnel: The wall of a village on the border at Suchetgarh. Sushil Kumar Verma

Cross-border hostility, which residents of villages along the India-Pakistan International Border have been facing since Partition, is now "worse than it was during the 1971 War".

Residents of adjacent villages at Suchetgarh and near similar settlements at the villages of Badri Gulabgarh, Avdal, Kapoorpur and Kushalpur — located 11 km from Sialkot and 141 km from Lahore — say they have become "new targets". Villagers living in the villages of Samka and Shahbad Tankan Wali, which lie 5 km from Suchetgarh, say they increasingly find themselves in the crosshairs "like never before".

The mostly agrarian population of around a dozen such villages 30 km from Jammu is, admittedly, used to routine evacuations followed by a few days of a nomadic existence or community camping before a return to "normalcy". But the intensity, frequency and unpredictability of "enemy fire" on their homes, livestock and fields have spiralled since August 2017, they say.

**Shell-shocked**

"In 1971, there were just two shells that were dropped here. Since last August, there have been 250-300 artillery shells that have been used to target 170 families — every house has been shelled. Even if there is a knock on the door of a house, children ask if that was the sound of firing from across [the border]," says Swarn Singh, a retired Army man, now the sarpanch of Shahbad Tankan Wali.

With open defecation still practised by some residents, it's another avenue for danger for men and women in this village where the space between adjacent bomb shelters serves as a cricket pitch for children. Beena Devi, a resident, says while most homes have toilets in the courtyard and only a handful of residents need to go to adjacent fields, both were risks these days.

"There was heavy shelling on January 24 which began at 9 p.m. as soon as I made my first *roti ka peda* (ball of dough). We had to sleep without dinner because the shelling was continuous. One of the shells exploded through the roof of our bathroom. That is why we, both men and women, choose not even to pass urine during firing, whether we have toilets or go in the fields," she said.

Most walls have shrapnel marks. Pakistani flags hoisted on look-out posts are visible in the distance.

Things are a far cry from the ceasefire of November 2003, and have deteriorated immensely since last August, says Sarika Sona. " *Ab Pakistan ka koi bharosa nahin* [We can't trust Pakistan at all these days]. I got married and came to this village in 2004. The first time I witnessed shelling was in 2006. Alerts from the Army to evacuate our village and shift to camps were more accurate back then, which has not been the case since August," she said.

On January 18, for instance, Ms. Sona said, "There was no alert about possible shelling. Artillery shelling began at 6 p.m. and continued till early in the morning. Our house was among the ones hit. Everything made of glass, from our windows to cutlery, was broken. A portion of the concrete railing on our terrace was also hit," she adds.

"This is the first time that shelling has taken place as much as 3-4 km towards Nawanshahr on our side and targeted all the villages from Suchetgarh to Kushalpur," says Balwinder Singh, a resident

of the latter.

## **Mood swings**

“It depends on their mood: the time of day, the number of shells, everything. Sometimes, there are inputs asking us to evacuate, leaving all these villages abandoned for days, sometimes there aren’t. At least they were nice enough to let us live in peace after the 24th of January, in the run-up to Republic Day, when they decided to shift their guns towards Rajouri.”

Mr. Balwinder points to a Pakistani flag fluttering in the distance beyond a fenced field adjacent the Border Security Force (BSF) camp, denoting the Suchetgarh border, indicating their proximity to hostility.

Devender Singh, a resident of Suchetgarh village, was tending to a buffalo calf which cried out in pain after sustaining shrapnel injuries, when another 81mm artillery shell landed in his courtyard on January 19. He had to rush to the Jammu Medical College for treatment.

Mr. Devender returned home with his broken right arm in a plaster cast after his acquaintances assured him the “action” seemed to have shifted. Two days of peace on January 24 and 25 were followed, however, by the attack on an Army installation in Rajouri, which claimed the lives of four Indian Army personnel.

**END**

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