On the far western extremity of Kachchh, right about where the land makes way for a complicated stream of waterways and creeks that divide Kachchh in India from Sindh in Pakistan, there lie the ruins of an ancient town. Its fort is almost entirely extant; the few breaks in the geometric precision of its walls provide a tantalising glimpse beyond, into the blinding bluish-white of the Rann of Kachchh, the salt-encrusted flat desert of clay and mudflats extending for miles north, and then to the north-west, where a deeper blue sea creeps up to join the Rann.

This is the town of Lakhpat, approximately 170 kilometres from Bhuj, the district capital of Kachchh, and more or less its geographical centre. Today Lakhpat has the appearance of being no more than a ghost town, the remains of a few low mud-brick houses emerging from an unremarkable spread of scrubby vegetation. The monotony of the landscape is broken by some magnificent ruins dating back a few centuries. The fort walls enclose what may well have once been a thriving city, and curious artefacts are littered about – bits of broken earthenware, and fascinating little fossilised remains – that may tempt the intrepid visitor to flesh out the site’s sketchy historical record. Apart from a handful of religious structures that stand as mute sentinels of the secular ideology of the Indian nation-state at its western edge (for there is a gurdwara, a temple, a mosque and two dargahs), there are only a few inhabited houses. Most of the adobe and mud structures date from earlier centuries and are in ruins.

It is easily understood why people would choose to not live here if they had any alternative. Quite apart from Lakhpat’s distance from Bhuj, there are no markets nearby; a single bus service connects it to Bhuj once a day, making the return journey the following day. Besides, livelihood options in this part of Kachchh are scanty.

It is not entirely clear when the town began to decline, or what the causes were. But there is a wealth of narrative accounts about Lakhpat, and this essay pieces together some of these from a variety of genres to discuss the nature of the frontier that Lakhpat forms between Kachchh and Sindh. My text will move between the present and the past to try and
come to terms with how we might be able to understand this frontier area today, and how movement across it has been understood over time.

There are elaborate references to Lakhpat in the writings of colonial officers as they sought to cross the forbidden frontier into Sindh prior to its conquest by Britain in 1843. Lakhpat also finds fond mention among Muslim pastoralists in this region, who recite poetic narratives redolent of a time when the customs post in Lakhpat witnessed the passage of trade items – opium, silks, perfumes, rice and ghee. Lakhpat also features in an imaginative popular geography that belies the present geographical distribution of people and natural resources. In contrast to these accounts, the modern state has converted Lakhpat into one of the outposts of the Border Security Force (BSF). Amidst the residue of the past, bored officers try and pass their time looking for ‘footprints’ – evidence of cross-border flows that defy the mandate of the state they represent on this distant edge. Interweaving different narrative strands, this essay seeks to historicise a frontier that has been converted into a ‘sealed’ border zone. For the agents of the state who are here to protect the border, any movement across it is a transgression, punishable by law. For locals, it is an elastic frontier that stretches the imagined region well past the border security posts. Ultimately my argument suggests that only by being attentive to narratives other than those of the modern state can we begin to think of alternate ways of inhabiting and negotiating contemporary political frontiers.

II.

Lakhpat is said to have acquired its name both because it was built by Lakhpat-ji, one of the rulers of Kachchh from 1752-61, but also as an allusion to its wealth, measured in lakhs of koris – Kachchh’s own distinct currency till it joined the states of the Indian Union in 1948. The right to issue its own money was granted to the kingdom of Kachchh by the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan in exchange for safe access to the sea for the empire’s Haj pilgrims. The seas off the Kachchh coast were known for being infested with pirates and bandits, and the area’s able seafarers had earned themselves a strong reputation for the strength of their fleet. An important dimension of Lakhpat’s orientation to sea-bound travel was the fact that during Mughal times it was a port of departure for pilgrims sailing to Mecca. Oral histories from the region also credit Guru Nanak to have done just this, and he is believed to have stayed at a house here before leaving for Mecca. The descendants of the owners of the house built a gurdwara on the spot later, and it continues to serve as one today, restored recently by UNESCO. Lakhpat was also the crossing point between Kachchh and Sindh for traders; a taxation and customs house was located here at the point where the Indus river had to be crossed by those entering Sindh.

Much of what is apparent as physical decline in Lakhpat today is likely to be the result of destruction during an earthquake that struck this region in 1819. This earthquake had a decisive impact on the physical and social landscape of the region, since it is seen as being at least partly responsible for an alteration in the course of the Indus. The shifting of the
river westwards reduced Lakhpat's access to the water that irrigated its fields of rice, a crop for which the town was reportedly famous.

III.

Popular accounts in Kachchh speak even today of the unfortunate turn of events that led to the desertification of Lakhpat. Although scientific accounts attribute much of the destruction in this region to the earthquake of 1819 and the resultant effects on the course of the Indus, the primary lifeline for the area and major source of the prosperity ascribed to it, the more common refrain relates to the 'evil' intentions of an 18th-century Sindhi king, Ghulam Shah. It is frequently asserted in Kachchh that the epic battle of Jhara fought in 1762 saw the armies of Kachchh and Sindh confront each other menacingly. After a prolonged battle on the hill of Jhara, a little to the east of where the Lakhpat fort stands, the Sindhi armies were defeated. At this point, Kachchhi historians and lay people alike mention the terrible act of revenge undertaken by Ghulam Shah. Unable to accept the fact that he had been defeated in battle, he crossed the Indus at Lakhpat to return to Sindh, but not before erecting a giant embankment across it. This embankment, it is ruefully recounted, is what eventually led the Indus water supply to dry up, thus enabling the collapse of Lakhpat's hitherto thriving economy. E. Rushbrook-Williams (1958, pp. 159-60), one of the first historians to consolidate the oral accounts available in Kachchh and publish them as an authoritative history of the region, writes of Ghulam Shah,

 [...] he also did his best to injure Kutch by raising an earthwork which diverted one of the branches of the Indus from the Lakhpat district, where it had been used for irrigating the rice crop. It is not easy to estimate exactly what damage he did, because his original undertaking has been entirely obliterated by seismic disturbances early in the nineteenth century. These had very serious effects indeed upon the entire water resources of the Abdasa district and a low mound, known as Allahbund, or God's Dyke, was thrown up; and the course of the Indus and of all of its waters was diverted right away from Kutch. Popular repute still saddles Ghulam Shah with the blame for the whole catastrophe, although in fact the worst part of it occurred long after his death through the operation of natural causes.

Rushbrook-Williams' history in turn has had a powerful impact on local accounts that he claimed to have codified in the first place, so this story of Ghulam Shah's revenge has steadily acquired more believers over the decades. However, there is another interesting aspect to the story of this embankment known as Allahbund or 'the embankment created by Allah'. A community elder of the pastoral nomadic Muslim Jatt community that straddles both sides of this border, a poet familiar with the Rann since it constituted the community's main pastoral route, associates the 1819 earthquake not with creating but destroying the Allah Bund. "The bund was created by God", he informed me sagely. "How can a person change the course of a river?" But according to him, the earthquake broke the dyke apart, leading to the formation of the Rann by flooding out the cities in the area. He continues,
“...the cities were ruined and divided into two, some on one side of the Rann, and some on the other. It is said that the Sindhi king was cruel, and Allah never condones injustice, which is why this destruction must have come about”.

Here the earthquake is linked with the actions of Ghulam Shah to account for the horror of Partition, of inaugurating an era of modern state-sponsored surveillance and sealed borders that must not be crossed. Before the contemporary geopolitical reorganisation of this border, pastoral groups crossed it freely, not merely with their animals in search of pasture and water but also because they controlled a large segment of the cross-border trade between Kachchh and Sindh.

But this narrative hinges around the destruction caused by the 1819 earthquake. At the time that this story was repeated for my benefit in 2001, Kachchh had only very recently suffered through yet another earthquake which destroyed vast swathes of habitation, especially in the area’s eastern sections. The Jatt pastoralists did not suffer materially in this earthquake; as a relatively mobile pastoral group that lived for the most part in temporary dwellings set up in the Rann, they would not have been affected in the same way as the inhabitants of densely populated towns such as Bhuj, Anjar or Bhachau. In the years following the earthquake, however, populations such as these have found themselves even more disenfranchised than they already were before the earth unclenched in terrifying spasms one wintry morning. In the flurry of aid and reconstruction, Kachchh found itself a place on the map of global disaster managers, and also etched its name more deeply on the map of Gujarat – a state with which it has had a somewhat tenuous political and cultural relationship. With the series of ‘developmental’ measures adopted after the earthquake, charted out with a view to boost the industrial potential of the state of Gujarat as a whole, many lesser players have been short-changed in the bargain. The pastoralists of the north are just one of many such constituencies, and it is in this context that I choose to read the Jatt elder’s remark about earthquakes wreaking mayhem, in the present as much as in the past. For their impact is felt not just in the physical landscape but has far-reaching social repercussions as well.

IV.

Before the boundary between Kachchh and Sindh was definitively sealed (at least as far as the official stance on boundary maintenance goes), initially with Partition in 1947 and further reinforced after the 1965 war between India and Pakistan, Lakhpat was an important gateway into Sindh from Kachchh. The northern route into Sindh from Kachchh. The northern route into Sindh would have involved crossing the uncompromising Rann on camel, but at least while the Indus flowed by Lakhpat, this seemed to be a more benevolent crossing point. It was here that the presence of a well-used customs post during the colonial period indicates some volume of trade between Kachchh and Sindh. As the customs rate was lower in Kachchh than in British Indian provinces, it was cheaper for caravans of traders to transit through Kachchh. There was also a robust trade between Kachchh and Sindh, the chief articles of which were rice and ghee.
In 1827, James Burnes, the Residency doctor at Bhuj and brother of Alexander Burnes, then assistant to the Political Agent at Bhuj, was invited to the court of Sindh to cure its ailing Amir. This was the first ever officially sanctioned visit of a foreign agent into that area, and Burnes’ diaries became the basis of subsequent British interest in that region. As he made the journey from Bhuj, riding westward into Sindh with mounting excitement born of his “feverish anxiety to cross the forbidden frontier, and particularly to view the classic river Indus” (Burnes, 1829, p. 11), he camped at Lakhpat as he awaited instructions from the other side. When permission to cross was granted, he made his way with his entourage across Lakhpat into Sindhi territory. As he crossed what remained of the eastern arm of the Indus following the earthquake of 1819, and landed on the other side of the stream, he notes “[…] about a hundred camels on the beach, which had come laden with ghee from Sinde, together with several merchants who were planning to embark for Cutch” (ibid., p. 31). Several miles further inland stood the customs gate where “[a] few Sindhian soldiers, not above eight or ten, whose only place of residence is an open wooden shed, and whose chief food is camel’s milk, are stationed at Lah to collect a tax on the merchandize which passes […]” (ibid., p. 32).

Other references to this trade link can be found in poetry recited today by Jatt pastoralists along the Rann. Many Jatts are experts in the qafi, a genre of poetry popular in parts of Punjab, Sindh, Rajasthan and Gujarat, especially among nomadic communities. A qafi is usually metred verse in four-line sequence, set to classical ragas or sung to folk tunes. One story that illuminates with vivid detail the trade and social ties that existed across the Rann is taken from the legend of Sassi-Punu, a tragic love story and perhaps one of the more famous compositions by Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai, a master exponent of the qafi in Sindh. The story of Sassi-Punu recounted to me is given below, within a larger contextualisation of Jatt history and cross-border trade. The basic trope of tragic passion, fidelity, the quest, the ordeal, separation and suffering is unchanged from its many renditions that occur in Sindh (Verkaaik, 2004), Punjab (Bhattacharya, 1995) and Kachchh. What alters in individual iterations are the contextual details within which the story is placed.

The poet, a middle-aged Jatt man living in a tiny hamlet in the middle of the Rann, who composes and transcribes qafis in an elegant hand, begins with the story of an earthquake about 200 years ago that destroyed the Allahbund, created the Rann and flooded out cities in the vicinity of Lakhpat. He goes on:

_I have seen the ruins of these old cities with my own eyes. If you walk in the Rann, you come across old artefacts – vessels of iron and other such things. I saw them as a child. I don’t know if they would still be there; perhaps when measuring and securing the border, the officials would have removed them; I can’t say._

At the time when these cities were flourishing, traders used to go back and forth. They would come here from Baluchistan and places up north, hawking their wares, perfumes, silks and opium. In Lakhpat there used to be a city called Bhambhor. It would be in Sindh now, but then it was all one land. In this city there lived a childless Brahmin couple. They
went to a seer who predicted that they would have a daughter but that she would end up marrying a Muslim. They were thoroughly distraught when they heard this.

Sure enough, after some time a baby girl was born to them. The wife said to her husband, “It is better that before she blackens our name [by marrying a Muslim], we set her free”. So she put the baby into a small trunk and floated her out to sea. A Muslim washerman saw this trunk floating by and thought it must surely contain treasure. So he opened it up. Seeing the tiny baby, he took her home and he and his wife brought her up as their own. She was named Sassi and grew to be extremely beautiful. Everybody envied her looks, but her father would not agree to give her in marriage to anyone.

About the same time, in the area called Makran in Baluchistan there was a Jatt king named Ari. He had five sons, of whom the youngest was named Punu. One day their minister, a Hindu of the Lohana caste, was going to Bhambhor on business. Punu said, “Now when you go to Sindh, you must find me a bride”.

The minister reached Sindh, and saw all the women who had come out to buy perfumes and silks from the traders passing through. He saw Sassi there and liked her immediately. He summoned Punu to Sindh, and Punu married Sassi forthwith.

However, when Punu’s relatives in Baluchistan heard what had happened, they were enraged, exclaiming, “How can a Jatt’s son marry the daughter of a mere washerman?” So saying, they loaded up their camels and rode into Sindh to fetch Punu back. In the dead of night they gagged him and carried him back to Baluchistan, leaving poor Sassi behind.

Sassi woke to find her husband gone. In anguish she pined for him for years, and wandered all over Sindh looking for him in vain. Wandering thus, she finally met with her death somewhere in the hills of Sindh, near where Karachi is today. She asked the earth to open up and receive her, leaving merely the tip of her scarf above ground.

When Punu finally received word of this, he came to look for her. On coming upon this scene, he was so overcomely with grief that he too died on the spot; and today their graves lie side by side in Sindh at the spot where they died, united finally in their grief.

As the present is the most powerful filter through which we recall events of the past, my interlocutor began by locating the popular folk tale within a landscape of a border and security guards who are measuring the land. When he mentions Bhambhor being in Lakhpat he may not be entirely correct, at least if one were to compare with written accounts that refer to Bhambor as a possible ancient site in Lower Sindh. For instance, Burton (1851, p. 389, f. 25) wrote,

[t]he town is supposed to have been built upon the plain and was destroyed by divine wrath in one night as a consequence of its ruler’s sins. To judge from appearances the place must at one time have been rich and populous: even now after heavy rains the people find coins, ornaments and broken pieces of metal amongst the ruins of the Fort.
However, the veracity of historical records is not set in stone – their truth claims owe much more to wider circuits of power and knowledge. In the Jatt poets’ imagination, Sindh and Kachchh remain tied together inexorably. When he says, for instance, “...then it was all one land”, again his narrative deviates from what we know of the geographical lay of the land, now or in the past. For Kachchh and Sindh, even before they nested within two separate nation states, were always distinct kingdoms and even in the past continually discussed how to demarcate their borders from one another. However, what does emerge from narratives such as the one above is that in the imagination of these migrant pastoralists, the land was one, for the state did not insert itself into their lives in quite the same way as it does now. Despite border disputes at the official level, pastoralists came and went without giving the question of a border much thought. Significantly, these narratives as they are recited today continue to reflect territory as it was thought of in the past, allowing for a persistent suspension of current geopolitical reality. By transposing the narrative logic onto everyday reality, the pastoralists of northern Kachchh are subscribing to a somewhat different notion of territorial inclusivity than that which is imagined in official narratives of the region, which draw a firm border between Kachchh and Sindh.

V.

From these rich and evocative descriptions of Lakhpat of times past, what we have left today is the abandoned ruined city within the fort walls, a lonely outpost of Kachchh keeping silent vigil over the sea and the Rann. But like the Rann and this border area as a whole, it continues to produce inspired prose within Kachchh, particularly in the local newspapers, and is faithfully repeated in teahouses. The two shortest overland routes into Pakistan from Kachchh would be through the famous black hills of Kachchh – the Karo Dungar area of Khawda (from where it is about 25 kilometres to Chad Bet, once Indian territory but ceded to Pakistan after the 1971 war); or through Lakhpat, about 35 kilometres from Pillar # 1175 that marks the boundary. One of the tasks of the border patrol officers is, as they state, to look for “footprints” – a significant physical indicator of cross-border transgressions. When such traces are found and identified as belonging to either humans or camels, they are assessed for their direction and intensity. Deep and heavy camel hoofprints, for instance, lead the agencies involved to pronounce unmistakably that they are heavily laden with “arms” or “lethal material”; they are supposedly trained by Pakistani intelligence agencies, and the men accompanying them are “thoroughly conversant” with the terrain and topography. Centuries of cross-border trade and social ties are now reduced to illegal “infiltration”, the import of “lethal weapons” and influx of “Pakistani-looking people”.

On my most recent visit to the border outpost in Lakhpat, the young patrolman on duty starts out asking officiously who we are and why we have bothered to come so far just to wander about; it is well off the regular tourist map of Kachchh. Besides, as it constitutes the official border, it is technically off limits, a “restricted zone”.

“Where does the restricted zone begin?” I wonder aloud.
“Right where you stand!” is the prompt response. We are perched on a rocky outcrop, just outside the sturdy fort walls. The rocks give way to a beach-like zone that is partly seabed, partly Rann. “You can’t step down, that is restricted area”, we are told. This is where officers comb the ground twice daily for the appearance of “footprints”, desperately seeking evidence of cross-border activity to fragment the searing monotony of another endless day on the salt expanses. Success on this score is far less spectacular than the reports that are regularly churned out for local consumption by the media. For the most part, these border patrol guards are waiting for the day when they will be transferred to a more hospitable part of the country, where they will be more familiar with the language and local customs, where they are not assigned to futile weeks and months of combing the Rann for elusive “infiltrators”, or tracking circuitous escape routes.

VI.

Much of the discourse around borders, especially if you happen to find yourself in immediate physical proximity to one, relates to the “restricted zone”. This refers to the space around the actual border that is off-limits to those without formal authorisation to enter; it is surrounded by all the aura and taboo related to a sacred space. It is not depicted accurately on the maps available for purchase by ordinary people; in fact, good maps of border districts are notoriously hard to come by. This near-sacred treatment of the border is necessitated because the relationship between maps or borders and the spaces they represent and/or enclose is not entirely metonymic. Borders, like the maps that they are inscribed upon, do not reflect spaces as much as create them. Like language, cartographies are performative; they generate what they represent, anticipating spatial representation and social practice. In addition, like language they are embedded in a community that believes (or rather, is made to believe) in them. Therefore, borders would be key instruments that work towards the creation of what has been called the “geo-body” (Thongchai, 1994) of the nation. Along with icons like the flag and the map, the border is a contemporary totem of the nation, a condensed symbol of collective representations that binds the national community together even as it allows it to be enunciated in the first place (Durkheim, 1976; Derrida, 1986). We might say that borders, as concrete symbols, are central to the technique by which nations “appropriate the experience of the sacred attributed to world religion and give it civic and territorial shape” (Balakrishnan, 1996).

Since borders of modern states are therefore not just about a convenient bounding of political space, the logical assumption is that they will be strategically utilised by states in their interactions with citizens; this in turn, to invoke the totemic analogy once again, enhances the sacredness of these symbolic creations. Particularly with regard to postcolonial nation-states, the new and often arbitrary carving of boundaries makes them particularly anxious and vulnerable over questions of national identity and long-term survival, embodied in what has been described as a form of “cartographic anxiety” (Krishna, 1996).
Border areas such as Lakhpat are apt examples of this kind of tension, for they are expected to perform the political/cultural function of naturalising – and nationalising – an often violent and arbitrary division of space and people. Narratives that produce structures of affect and practice challenging the hegemonising discourses of the modern state are sought to be neutralised, even suppressed. The restricted zone around a border has become “…a sign for the limit of Indian sovereignty and territorial integrity – a limit in the double sense of marking the territorial border of Indian interiority/exteriority and signifying the instability and indeterminacy of the margins of identity” (Axel, 2001, p. 107). The historical and geographical axes of Lakhpat calibrate precisely this unstable limit, where landscape, culture and people continue to be ambiguously distributed along a frontier between two nations that not very long ago were one.

Acknowledgements
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Notes
1. I discuss this more fully in a forthcoming monograph, Settlers, Saints and Sovereigns: An Ethnography of State Formation.
2. For a more detailed discussion on this, see Simpson (2007).
3. In “The Third Eye and Two Ways of (Un)knowing: Gnosis, Alternative Modernities and Postcolonial Futures”, Makarand Paranjape defines the category of “border gnosis” as knowledge from a subaltern perspective. This knowledge is conceived from the exterior borders of the modern/colonial world system; and “border gnoseology” as a discourse about colonial knowledge is conceived “at the conflictive intersection of the intersection of the knowledge produced from the perspective of modern colonialisms (rhetoric, philosophy, science) and knowledge produced from the perspective of colonial modernities in Asia, Africa and the Americas/Caribbean”. Border gnoseology is thus “a critical reflection on knowledge production from both the interior borders of the modern/colonial world system (imperial conflicts, hegemonic languages, directionality of translations, etc.) and its external borders (imperial conflicts with cultures being colonised, as well as the subsequent stages of independence and decolonisation”).

Border gnoseology may be contrasted not only with territorial gnoseology but also with epistemology, “the philosophy of knowledge, as we know it today (from Descartes to Kant to Husserl, and all its ramifications in analytic philosophy of languages and philosophy of science): a conception and reflection on knowledge articulated in concert with the cohesion of national languages and the formation of the nation-state…”

See http://www.tamilnation.org/aurobindo/paranjape.htm
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