# Road to the Periphery

## An Account of Border-Making through Infrastructure

*Sherin Ajin*

**Abstract:** In the past two decades, everyday politics of infrastructure have garnered rich scholarly attention. A polysemous infrastructure that permeates everyday life, roads for long have emerged as effective sites of state craft. Employing the case of a road leading to the Sino-Indian border area of Tawang, this article argues that roads are critical to the project of border-making and management. Drawing from my road journeys to Tawang, I discuss the ways in which roads are strategised by the state to govern its border citizens. Often, visual proximity of roads casts the impression of the state which is near to its people. However, this article foregrounds that even through their conspicuous absence and disrepair, roads register the palpable presence of the state.

**Keywords:** border, border management, roads, security, state making, Tawang, waiting

"I don't consider the people living on the Indo-China border as ordinary citizens, I believe they are our strategic assets"(PTI 2019: n.p.).

Donning a crimson-coloured *alen khanjar*, the traditional coat of the Monpa tribe of Tawang, India's defence minister Rajnath Singh made the above statement while inaugurating the eleventh *Maitree Divas*[1] at Tawang. Mr Singh's speech made little departure from the conventional rhetoric that border communities constitute the 'eyes and ears' (Das 2010: 32) of the Indian state at its fringes. However, it succinctly conveyed two things. One, in the geo body of the state, borders constitute a territorially sensitive space. Two, this very spatio-political attribute of borders engenders a certain kind of metamorphosis which transforms its citizens to 'strategic assets'. But how does this transformation take place? In the specific context of the Sino-Indian border area of Tawang, I argue that, of the many modalities that undergird this process, roads are pivotal. Structuring movement and mediating one's experience of space and time, roads are critical arteries that produce borders and border subjectivities.

With its ideational origin in the period of Enlightenment, infrastructures[2] like roads meant freedom from friction and stasis (Larkin 2013). Infusing the life-giving vitality of circulation, they became closely associated with the notions of progress and modernity (Cresswell 2006). Firmly entrenched in the political discourses of their times, roads also became conduits of their patrons (Sinha 2017). For instance, in colonial India, roads became the active corridors of the empire (Ahuja 2009). Many a times, in north-east India, road-making under British rule involved the conscripted labour of the colonised (Dzuvichu 2013; Hasnu 2021; Sur 2021). If, like railways and canals, roads became the channels of extraction in colonial India, in socialist milieus, they became ideology-infused sites of social engineering (Dalakoglou 2017; Dawson 2020; Goswami 2004). As 'aspirational social infrastructures' (Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012: 463) capable of projecting speculative visions of progress, in the post-colonial context, roads have been co-opted as flagbearers of development. To appropriate

Henri Lefebvre, when it comes to the specific spatial dynamics of the border, roads become one of the many ways in which the state 'ensures its control of places' ([1979] 2009: 189).

Flanked by Bhutan in its south west and China in the north, Tawang – located in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh – harbours the contrasting worlds of a *Shangri La* and a volatile border. A nodal arena of the 1962 Indo-China war, Tawang endures a tenacious boundary disagreement between India and China. It is in its modest hamlet of Ogyenling that the Sixth Dalai Lama was born, making it one of the revered routes of pilgrimage in Mahayana Buddhism. Nestled in the scenic lap of the Eastern Himalayas, it is also one of the popular tourist locations of north-east India. In other words, Tawang offers a plurality of destinations to its diverse seekers. Once a forgotten hinterland cocooned in the erstwhile North East Frontier Agency, brisk road making in the early 1960s became one of the visible markers of Tawang's discovery as a significant borderland. Aiding the carving of bounded territorial spaces, in Tawang, roads became the powerful visual metaphors of 'seeing the state' (Corbridge et al. 2005: 15).

While contemplating the road leading to her field site in Ocongate, Peru, Penelope Harvey makes a significant observation that 'roads inevitably lead us to the state' (2005: 126). Taking cue from this and premised on the understanding that the act of traversing a road involves 'a powerful cognitive and bodily experience' (Dawson 2020: 70) of deciphering the processes of state making, in this article, I critically revisit my road journeys to Tawang between 2017 and 2019. In an effort to understand the salience of roads in the contouring of a border, I ask how does the temporality created by the road connecting Tawang with the rest of the country interact with and impact the border dwelling community? Along with my own experience of travelling the Guwahati–Tawang Road, I have also utilised supplementary secondary sources in exploring these queries.

## The Many Renderings of Roads

Until the early 1990s, exploring the idea and materiality of infrastructure entailed what Susan Leigh Star terms 'a call to study boring things' (1999: 377). However, since the last two decades, infrastructure has inspired a rich gamut of work on its multiple formats, such as water pipelines, oil wells, smoke stacks and roads (Anand 2017; Appel 2019; Dalakoglou 2017; Dawson 2020; Harvey and Knox 2015; Masque-

lier 2002; Schwenkel 2018). Like other infrastructure, roads are 'dense social, material, aesthetic, and political formations that are critical both to differentiated experiences of everyday life and to expectations of the future' (Appel et al. 2018: 3).

Roads are not inert infrastructures. Specificities of their making such as where, by whom and for what unfold the larger rationale that underpins roads. A 'material embodiment of relations' (Schnitzler 2018: 146) between the state and its people, roads accentuate differential access to resources. Laying out the route-map of distribution and access, they deepen the rural–urban, tribal–non-tribal binaries and end up buttressing the fissures of class, caste and race (Schnitzler 2018). As much as gleaming highways act as posters of development and pathways for the smooth transit of capital, roads also capture the socio-political striations of the terrain through which they pass (Chilson 2015). For instance, Adeline Masquelier's work on the roads in Arewa, southern Niger, reveals how roads evoke memories of conscripted labour among the local Mawris (Masquelier 2002). The imminent threat of violence marks roads as sites of anxiety in Arewa. However, it would be reductionist to claim that roads are infrastructures of passivity. Historically, roads across the globe have been powerful stages of protest. In a similar vein, roads in India constitute thriving sites of democratic dialogue and dissent. For example, in Manipur, road blockades by different ethnic groups have emerged as a persuasive means of negotiating with the state (Ziipao 2020).

If in colonial India, roads in the north-east were embedded in the matrix of resource extraction and forced labour, in the post-colonial milieu, imaginations of road infrastructure in this part of the country are guided by the imperatives of the Act East Policy. Central to this aspiration for enhancing India's relations with Southeast Asian neighbours is the reinvention of the north-east and its markets through renewed networks of road infrastructure (Bhattacharya and Deka 2021). At the same time, in states like Arunachal Pradesh, which share 1126 kilometres of boundary with China, border roads have little to do with transnational camaraderie. Given the complexities of relations between the two Asian neighbours – the enduring boundary dispute pertaining to the McMahon line and China's persistent claim of Arunachal Pradesh as South Tibet – roads along the Indo-China border, especially in Tawang, are largely driven by the calculus of security and competitive state-making.

## The Journey

From Guwahati in Assam, two check gates, Bhalukpong and Balemu, in the adjacent West Kameng district regulate access to Tawang by road. Both routes converge at the garrisoned town of Rupa, from where a solo road slithers to Tawang. Known as the Balipara–Chariduar–Tawang (BCT) road, the route through Bhalukpong is the oldest motorable road to Tawang. With neighbouring China growing belligerent in India's backyards, part of this BCT circuit constitutes one among the primary assignments given to Border Roads Organisation by Nehru in 1960 (Ishar n.d). Hence, the road leading to Tawang is intermeshed with one of the first chapters of independent India's border management through its roads. Only a few kilometres from Bhalukpong, the road becomes a moving canvas of a patriotic pilgrimage. Commemorating the Indian soldiers who had lost their lives in the 1962 Indo-China war, memorial pavilions and stones along the road inscribe and invoke the memories of national suffering inflicted by neighbouring China.

Inaugurated in 2016, the road through Balemu bears the palimpsest memories of an erstwhile trans-Himalayan trade route connecting Tsona in Tibet to Udalguri (via Tawang) in the now Darrang district of Assam (Jha 2006). The very replacement of an old trade route with an insulated border road is to be read together with the creation of the territory as 'a practised space' (de Certeau 1984: 117). With Tawang integrated into India in 1951, this brisk Himalayan trade route of musk, silk, ivory and many other fine commodities was altered to shift its trajectory so that its co-ordinates intersect with the limits of the nation-state. Except for the residents of Arunachal Pradesh,

entry to both these check-gates is regulated by an Inner Line Permit for the Indian citizens and a Protected Area Permit which is applicable to foreign nationals. The very obtaining and verification of these documents produces a palpable spatial transition, making the visitor aware of the restricted geography that she enters.

In 2017, when I had made the first field visit to Tawang, the road through Balemu was yet to be a popular route. Hostile climatic conditions and accelerated earth-cutting for the Trans-Arunachal highway had battered the BCT road with frequent landslides and resultant blockades. At the onset of the journey, a fellow traveller in the jeep, Yangchen (pseudonym), had explained how the road construction in this fragile belly of the eastern Himalayas disturbed the abodes of transcendental deities, resulting in landslips and fatal accidents. As an attempt to appease these wrathful deities residing on a border road, the locals had placed several Buddhist prayer flags, from tiny white to massive multi-hued ones, all along the way.

It took no less than three days from Guwahati to cover a distance of 510 kilometres. This road constituted the lifeline of Tawang, with goods, including rations reaching the district from the plains of Assam. As the journey progressed beyond Bhalukpong, the road largely remained a fiction, making its presence felt by conspicuous absence. Constantly shooting stones, every bend of the Himalayan road carried the threat of the descending chaos of landslides. A massive landslip at Fifth Mile in Bomdila meant an abrupt halt in the journey. A whole day was spent in anticipation of the road being restored by the Indian army, who are the singular disaster managers of this border.



**Figure 1.** Debris from the landslide being cleared *en route* to Tawang, Fifth Mile, Bomdila, 2017. Photo by author.

To my surprise, the native co-passengers were unperturbed by this contingency, as if they were accustomed to waiting for the roads to open. While we waited, they shared many stories of the ruination of the road that had paused their lives – in some cases ruling out hopes of reaching anywhere 'on time'. While tourists and other visitors had the choice of exiting the inconvenience of the route, this road of daily commutation acutely reminded the local community of their status as border citizens. Jeemut (pseudonym), an employee at a provisional store in Tawang, revealed to me the mystery of this differential experiencing of distance and time (Handel 2018). Drawing from his experiences of traversing this road for nearly two decades, he asked me to relate this journey to that of a *teerth yatra* (pilgrimage). He said, '*jab is road ka bhagvan man karte hein, tab hum pahunchenge*' [when the lord of this road makes up his mind, we reach the destination].

In this case, the temporal master of this border road happened to be the Project *Vartak* of the Border Roads Organisation. The terrain itself, the weather, seismicity, and the freezing-and-thawing effects of snow all posed hurdles to road-making. These enduring factors together join and co-produce a story of negligence and disrepair that dates back to the 1962 war. Akin to the deliberately disrupted border road maintained by the socialist Albanian state in the 1980s, the disrepair of this road constituted an unwritten strategy of the Indian state until very recently (Dalakoglou 2017). The apparent neglect of road-making in Tawang rested on the pre-emptive strategy of keeping the terrain difficult for Chinese intrusion in the event of an escalation of border tensions (Goswami 2012).

In his work titled *Speed and Politics*, Paul Virilio ([1977] 2006) introduces the term *dromocracy*[3] to capture the intimate connections between speed, agency and power. In a dromocratic world of accelerated movement, a poorly maintained road like the one leading to Tawang and its temporal twin, waiting, need to be read together with the power-permeated production of border and border subjectivities. While meticulously pursuing minimum road-making in Tawang, the state has successfully kept the promise of road alive through an everyday deployment of its paraphernalia of road construction such as the display of heavy machinery, regular allocation of funds, assignment of engineers, contractors and road construction labourers.

While the strategies of disrepair and waiting are officially projected as temporary inconveniences, for the Monpas of Tawang, anticipation of a full-fledged road has largely remained a Beckettian (1952) experience of *Waiting for Godot*. By orchestrating the pace of road-making, the state essentially controls the border community's access to resources and opportunities. Weaving in asymmetrical patterns of development and what Edward Soja (2010) calls spatial justice,[4] the disconnect, stasis and even the premature accident deaths caused by a tactically neglected road constantly remind Monpas of their identity as border citizens. As Shahram Khosravi (2018) argues, this 'stolen time' in waiting silently reinstates the fact that 'one's own time is less valuable than the time and worth of the one who imposes the wait' (Schwartz 1974: 856).

Each field visit to Tawang brought in new stories of lives claimed by the perilous road. This included the death of Tsewang Norbu in 2018 in an accident near Ze La. A meticulous Monpa historian and ex-Director of the Directorate of Research in Tawang, Norbu consistently highlighted the dangers of an unfinished road through his writings and other forums of discussion. An area that rarely captures the imagination of the media except for its tourist potential and sensitive geo-political location, this roster of deaths largely goes undocumented. Beneath the perceptible statistics of accident mortality lies an invisible category of deaths caused by a combination of inadequate medical facilities and a time-consuming, underdeveloped road. Except for the basic health care facilities provided by the army hospital and *Drowa Zangmo* district hospital, Tawang is ill-equipped to treat the critically ill. Availing advanced medical assistance requires travelling to distant destinations like Guwahati, Shillong and Itanagar. However, transporting seriously ill patients to these locations is rarely successful as these journeys demand the crossing of Ze La, a 13,700 feet high mountain pass bordering Tawang and the adjacent district of West Kameng.

There are two ways to reach Tawang, either by road or by helicopter. A region often dubbed as the 'second Bermuda triangle' (Kumar 2019: n.p.) for its notoriously fickle weather, Tawang's aerial history is interspersed with a litany of helicopter crashes. One of the casualties was Arunachal Pradesh's ex-chief Minister Dorjee Khandu himself (Talukdar 2011). While recalling the anxious search for the wreckage of the helicopter carrying Mr Khandu, Sonam (pseudonym), one of the respondents in Tawang, recollected another fatal Pawan Hans crash she witnessed in 2011. The sight of flames devouring the aircraft and its seventeen passengers had ever since convinced her to brave the miseries of the road rather

than trying her fortunes in the air. Like her, most of the locals prefer to travel by road than by helicopter, unless they are left with no choice.

Absence of reliable, alternative modes of transport and prolonged hibernation in road-making have left their marks in the form of religious structures seeking spiritual merit for the dead. Now, along the winding curves of the Kalaktang–Tawang route stand Buddhist *chortens*[5] as sites of catharsis, the bereaved prayerfully commemorating their kith and kin lost to road accidents. These *chortens* are visual registers of accidents and deaths otherwise untold and a reminder for the uninitiated traveller on the perils of this road. With ascending altitude, at Ze La stands a discrete plaque installed by BRO, a fading tribute to the unnamed personnel who had sacrificed their lives while making a road to a tense border. Cutting tracks in an Eastern Himalayan terrain comes with a hefty human cost that is seldom acknowledged in the annals of state-building and nation-making.

## Roads and Border Management

With China's aggressive road construction in Tibet in the late 1950s rupturing Sino-Indian ties, the 1962 Indo-China war has road-making lurking in its background. One of the immediate Nehruvian responses to this had been the hasty construction of roads in the hitherto remote terrain of NEFA. Cutting through the tedious slopes of the Eastern Himalayas, roads 'that would take 12 years' were built 'in a matter of 2 years' (Dalvi 1969: 111). A critical artery for moving troops, ammunition and rations, the nearly dysfunctional nature of this road paralysed India's chances of combating the Chinese aggression in 1962. One of the common threads that runs through the war memoirs of army personnel posted at the Tawang sector during the war is the 'horrifying prospect of being dependent on such a devilish route … in the event of hostilities with China' (Dalvi 1969: 112–113).

One of the immediate after-effects of the war in Tawang, until recently, has been a strategic neglect of its road infrastructure. Left to ruination and deferral, the road connecting Tawang to the rest of the country via Tezpur was carefully engineered as a disruptive infrastructure, deterring access to the enemy in the event of an aggression. The road to Tawang was to be diligently curated as a 'process … a thing in motion, ephemeral, shifting and elusive' (Gupta 2018: 62). As far as the border population of Tawang are concerned, this adjourned promise of the road carried with it the uncertain temporalities of waiting

and unequal access to resources and opportunities (Gupta 2018; Harvey and Knox 2015). Many a times, this exhausting distance has untimely claimed their lives, eclipsing the possibilities of a life lived with meaningful agency.

A populated border forming the first line of defence, in the shifting terrain of geo-politics, border roads also perform the function of a bulwark. They discourage border populations from abandoning their homes in search of better pastures elsewhere. Restricting movement within the interior circuits of the state, roads in border areas are often designed in such a way that they dissuade migration of border communities (ET Bureau 2014). In a border state like Arunachal Pradesh, a sparsely populated territory is perceived as a security threat by the Indian government, which if unchecked might act as an open invitation for the enemy to infiltrate. Hence, road-making constitutes a critical component of targeted initiatives, like the Border Area Development Programme (Ministry of Home Affairs), which actively 'encourage people to stay on in the border areas, leading to safe and secure borders' (Government of India 2020: 1).

## Conclusion

The trajectory of road construction to Tawang is heavily circumscribed by the spatial imagination of the border and the imperatives of national security. As is the case with other north-eastern states, processes of territory-making in Tawang involved the termination of old corridors of movement and grafting in of a novel imagination of self and belonging. Precipitated by a series of fresh tensions along the boundary with China, such as the Doklam stand-off, Galwan valley skirmishes and intrusion of the Chinese army in the eastern border districts of Arunachal Pradesh, there has been a spate of announcements promising the development of road infrastructure in Sino-Indian border areas, including Tawang (Dutta 2021; Gupta 2021; Joshi 2021; Panda 2017, 2020). However, driven by the necessities of national security, the recent spurt in road-making is not an aberration, but rather a logical continuum of furthering the securitisation of the borderland. Irrespective of the changing tempos of frontier road-making, bodies of the border societies become sites of biopolitics, with the territorial technologies transmuting them into valuable 'strategic assets' (PTI 2019: n.p.). Kept to 'oscillate between the dualities of hoping and doubting' (Janeja and Bandak 2018: 5), the road to Tawang demonstrates

the infrastructuralisation of state power[6] in a precarious border space (Chu 2014; Mann 1984).

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**Sherin Ajin** is a PhD student at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru, India. Her research explores the everyday processes that undergird state-making in North-East India and the Eastern Himalayas. She is also interested in understanding the flows and imaginations that contour place-making from below. E-mail: sherinajin@nias.res.in
ORCID: 0000-0001-8391-9191

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## Notes

1. Conceived in 2003 by the late Dorjee Khandu, then Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh, *Maitree* (friendship) *Divas* (day) showcases and celebrates the army–civilian relationship and camaraderie in Tawang.

2. In this article, I use the term infrastructure to refer to networks that are primarily designed to aid and regulate the movement of goods, people and their possessions (Harvey 2005; Larkin 2013). Products of technical expertise, infrastructures often project ameliorative visions of progress and development. However, engineering the speed and direction of movement, they can simultaneously create differential access to resources, furthering the fissures of socio-economic inequalities.

3. Rooted in Greek, *dromocratic* is a portmanteau of *dromos* (avenue or passage) and *kratia* (power or power over), roughly translating into power over the passage.

4. Premised on the fair and just distribution of resources, Edward Soja employs the term 'spatial justice' to denote spatial or geographical bearings of (in)justice.

5. Seeking refuge in the guardianship of Buddha, *chortens* are spiral crowned Buddhist religious structures housing sacred relics. There are different types of *chortens* including the ones that contain mortal remains (*kudung*) and personal belongings (*dungten*) of the dead. In this specific case, *chortens* were constructed to ward off danger and also for the spiritual merit of the deceased.

6. According to Michael Mann, one of the distinguishing strengths of the state lies in its ability to territorialise through the medium of infrastructure. In other words, the state spatialises and anchors itself through its infrastructures.