ISSN 2624-9081 • DOI 10.26034/roadsides-20190024

Expeditions Along the Precipice:
Circulations that construct India's Border Roads

Anu Sabhlok and Noor Sharma

"Infrastructures comprise the architecture of circulations." (Larkin 2013: 328)

And circulations comprise the architecture of infrastructures. Roads as infrastructural assemblages are constituted by geological, technological and human circulations. These circulations blur the perceived boundaries between that which is geological, atmospheric and/or social. Sedimented mountains are blasted open using explosives, resulting in a landscape strewn with boulders, rivers dumped with debris and an ambient dust that creates haze. Human hands are called upon to break up boulders into smaller rocks that will form the base of the roads. Road construction labourers inhale these geological remnants suspended in the air and return home to the plains carrying with them a bit of the mountain and a bit of the road.

Tracing the travels of migrant road construction labourers stretches the infrastructural assemblage to distant villages and opens up the horizon of circulations in a much broader way. Anu has been following these roads for the past six years and accompanying road construction labourers in their circuitous journeys. A brief entry from the field diary below illustrates the embodied labour of road construction.

"Do you know how to split this rock with the hammer and chisel?" asked Mohammad, handing me a small wooden-handled hammer with an indecipherable smile on his face.

"Yes, I think. It looks easy" I answered, looking around and seeing everyone else bashing away with their hammers, breaking larger pieces of stone into smaller chunks as they conversed with each other. They seemed to be doing it with such ease – arms rising up, a short glance at the rock and the hammer coming down on the chisel. Again, the arms rise up...

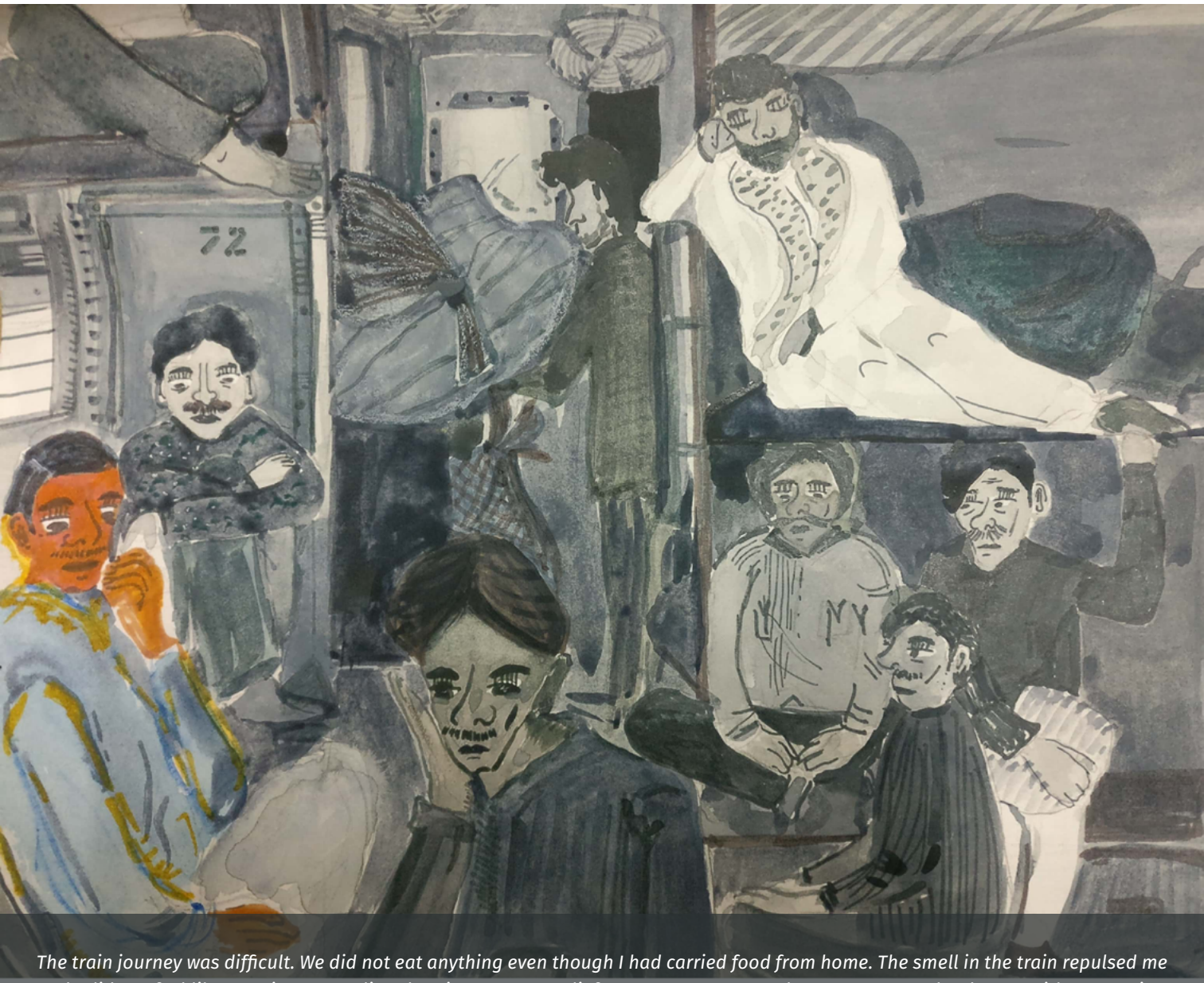
I held the hammer in my hand and had a go at this task, applying all the force I could muster... and the stone broke in one try. I almost looked up at Mohammad for him to acknowledge my handiwork, when a splinter came rushing up and barely missed my eye. It took me about a minute to recover from the sharp blow on my cheek and then I looked up with watery eyes. Mohammad smiled that same smile again, took the hammer from me and showed me how to hold the chisel with a slant, hitting at an angle so as to avoid the splinters coming into my eye. I continued to practice, sometimes missing my fingers (and the chisel) by a few millimetres and at other times managing to break the rock. We were all squatting on the rocks that we were breaking. It was certainly not the most comfortable position to sit in. If I tried to lower myself down onto the ground below, I would have to squat back again almost immediately. The stones were too sharp. All around me, the sounds of hammers hitting the rocks created a kind of rhythm and, after a time, my strikes too became part of that beat (Fieldwork diary, 2015).

The mate asked me to come along with him this year for work on the road in Himachal. It would be good if I go as I need to earn money to buy time on the water pump so I can irrigate my farm. I have everything here – fresh air, small farm, rice but no cash. If I save enough, I can also buy a mobile phone (Rajinder Kuma ,19 years old).

Each year snow destroys the roads in the upper Himalayas and more than 100,000 labourers, including men from central and eastern India and families from Nepal, travel to construct and repair these mountain roads and bridges. The seasonal journeys undertaken by those employed as road labour make all other circulations on these Himalayan roads possible.

Dumka district in Jharkhand has a long history of migration for road work. In the 1960s, when the Border Road Organization (BRO) was formed with the mandate to secure India's borders, Indian military officials scouted the poorer regions of the country for labour. The story goes that these uniformed officials would beat the

drums at town crossings in Dumka, calling out to young, able-bodied men to join in this endeavour of securing the border. In the beginning the Imported Casual Paid Labour, as the BRO called them, were given climate-appropriate clothing and the travel passes. At that time, Dumka was a district in the state of Bihar. However, as soon as Dumka became part of the newly carved out tribal state of Jharkhand there was political resistance to 'allowing' labour to be recruited for work outside the state and the army stopped entering the state to recruit.



The train journey was difficult. We did not eat anything even though I had carried food from home. The smell in the train repulsed me and I did not feel like opening my potli and eating. It was a relief to stop at Jammu and see a vast open landscape with mountains. My first time here (Bhola, 21 years old).

Yet, even in the absence of direct recruitment and the perks associated with it, the circulations of labour continued in their well-established routines. A system of labour gangs led by a mate is in place, where the mate receives a letter from the BRO around April each year asking him to report to a particular road construction company with a specified number of men (usually forty per gang) by mid-May. The mate then starts his rounds of neighbouring villages, convincing young men to come along. Stories of snow-clad mountains, geological wonders and apple trees along the way lure many. Tales of the border, of the momentum of Chinese road-building activity and of India's need to secure its territory circulate in Dumka's rice fields. As men and women harvest rice in paddy fields, these stories frame the narratives that set in motion the circular passages to the upper Himalayas.

Notions of masculinity and brotherhood in the gangs associated with this trip to the borderlands make it very difficult for women to be part of the journey. While women stay back home and take care of the children, elderly, farms and the cattle, men set off in crowded trains with their labour gangs, a small bundle of clothes and food, along with their imaginations, aspirations and fears. The men's contracts end in November and they will be home for the rice harvest in their fields. Trains are often so crowded in May that many have to stand for most of the three-day journey to Jammu or Ambala in the north. Making your way to the bathroom in these crowded trains becomes a process of embodied negotiations – another reason often cited for why this trip is not meant for women. Narratives of labourers' travels to the upper Himalayas are replete with highly corporeal descriptions of bodily stench, anxiety and nausea.

On reaching BRO recruitment camps, where thousands have gathered to be enlisted as labour for the next six months, men are checked for identity documentation, able-bodiedness and endurance. Those that are recruited climb onto military trucks to be transported to the various road construction sites along the Himalayan highways. There is a labour tent located every two miles or so along the highway under construction. Their abodes for the next few months consist of tarpaulin tents or shelters constructed using tin sheets flattened from tar barrels using road rollers.

Each labour gang adapts according to the landscape around them – those at slightly lower altitudes are able to source firewood and build a fire outside to cook. Those in the high-altitude terrains above the treeline cook using kerosene stoves, usually inside the tents. Their pressure cookers, carried from home, become prized possessions and here in the upper Himalayas they often rely on canned foods. In the evening they can be seen reminiscing about fresh produce from fields in Jharkand. The mate facilitates conversations with those back home by letting the men call from his cell phone for a charge. Financial transactions in general are often routed through the mate, who makes cash available to family members in Jharkhand in case of need.

Of course, he will ask for repayment at an exorbitant interest rate. Saturday night drinking sessions are accompanied by tales of heroism, masculinity and an occasional opportunity to watch a Bollywood movie. Once the road is ready, it appears as an inert and lifeless object making its way through the mountains – all these stories are buried deep inside its many layers. They do, however, surface in Jharkhand far away from the Indo–Tibetan border roads, where on their return the labouring men tell tales of dangerous lands, heroic journeys and the urgency of securing the nation against China. Geopolitical stories and geological materials mix here in unpredictable ways.

At high altitudes, cooking takes double the amount of time it does in Jharkhand. One of us is deputed to cook while the rest (about thirty-five people) work on the road. We are all together in this tent. It is crowded but fun. All of us men happy to be away from nagging in the household. I feel like a hero living here in these dangerous mountains (Vilayati, 27 years old).

After the blasting, larger rocks need to be carried and eventually broken up into smaller pieces. We live on the road, work on the road and breathe on the road. The road comes back home with us in our memories but also inside our bodies (Sushil, 23 years old).

Roads appear as smooth and shiny ribbons making their way among the high mountains. But appearances are deceptive and infrastructures are never simply the "frictionless surfaces of modernity" (Tsing 2005) that they aspire to become. Roads as infrastructures accumulate histories and sedimented stories of geological pasts, labouring journeys and technopolitical ideologies. Many of the labourers who have worked with the BRO will plan on returning the next year, bringing with them a whole new set of recruits. These circulations, it appears, endure the test of time and politics.

References:

Larkin, Brian. 2013. "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42: 327–43.

Tsing, Anna. 2005. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Copyright:

Cite as: Sabhlok, Anu and Noor Sharma. 2019. "Expeditions Along the Precipice: Circulations that construct India's Border Roads." *Roadsides* 2: 88-95. DOI: https://doi.org-10.26034/roadsides-20190024.

Authors:

Anu Sabhlok has been following the journeys of migrant road construction labourers for almost a decade now. Her work is rooted in the disciplinary areas of feminist and labour geography and critical infrastructure studies. She uses tools from these areas to broadly look at the mutual construction of identity and space. This work endeavors to blur the lines between teaching, research and activism. Anu is currently an Associate Professor at the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research Mohali. Her blog can be accessed at www.migrantlabourers.wordpress.com

Noor Sharma is currently pursuing a degree in art and design at the Srishti Institute of Art, Design and Technology in Bangalore. Her key areas of interest are illustration, comics and print-making. She has a passion for sketching and painting and loves to experiment with mixed media. Apart from making art, she enjoys reading, going for long walks and listening to music. You can check her art page on Instagram by the handle @noorie_o__o

Roadsides is an open access journal designated to be a forum devoted to exploring the social life of infrastructure.

Visit us at: ***roadsides.net***
E-Mail: ***editor@roadsides.net***
Twitter: ***@road_sides***

Collection no. 002 was edited by: Galen Murton
Managing editor: Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi
Copyediting: David Hawkins
Layout: Chantal Hinni and Antoni Kwiatkowski

ISSN 2624-9081

University of Zurich[UZH]

FNSNF
Swiss National Science Foundation