Labouring for Connectivity in Arunachal Pradesh

Edward Boyle and Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman

"The sun kisses India first in Arunachal Pradesh. It is our land of the rising sun … It is my sincere hope that like the sun, Arunachal Pradesh will also rise from the east as a new star and become one of the best regions of our country."

Manmohan Singh, Itanagar, 31 January 2008

On a 2008 visit to Itanagar, provincial capital of Arunachal Pradesh in Northeast India, then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh announced a series of development projects for the region, including a 1,840km Trans-Arunachal Highway (TAH) running continuously between the north-western and eastern ends of the Himalayan state. The TAH was an integrative measure that would connect twelve of the state's then sixteen district headquarters, "provide improved connectivity to the state capital and important locations of population concentration and economic activities," and connect the majority of the province to the national highway network.[1] Yet although 'connectivity' has since become the slogan for development in Northeast India,

construction of TAH, originally anticipated to conclude in 2013–14, has continued to slip, to 2015–16, <u>2018</u>, 2020, <u>2021</u> and on. Hooking infrastructure up to the national grid has been a laborious process in Northeast India.

Unconnected infrastructure abounds in India's Land of the Rising Sun.
Photo: Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman.

A trip along a stretch of the TAH, <u>designated National Highway 13 in 2011</u>, between <u>Tezu and Roing in eastern Arunachal Pradesh</u> in March 2016 offered us seeming proof of former Prime Minister Singh's aspirations, as our car rolled smoothly along possibly the best-tarmacked stretch of road in the northeast, if not the entire country. Questions regarding the quality of the road, or evidence for its use, were pushed to one side by the sheer relief of driving along a smooth surface, which remains a rare pleasure in the region.

*A pickled road, preserved
for future connectivity.*
Photo: Edward Boyle.

Yet this smoothness, and the slow reclamation of the road by the jungle, stemmed from a failure to connect. A bridge linking the two completed sections of highway across a river remained unfinished, rendering these perfect strips of tarmac roads to nowhere. While road construction had been concluded four years earlier, five years of labour had not sufficed to bridge the 430m-odd gap between two completed stretches of national highway, resulting in this infrastructure being 'pickled' for future use (Rahman 2019).

*Please Mind the
(connectivity) Gap.*
Photo: Mirza Zulfiqur
Rahman.

Construction of both bridge and highway were the responsibility of the Border Roads Organization (BRO), the military body charged with maintenance of India's operational road infrastructure in the nation's border areas. BRO's involvement shows that the private enterprise of a liberalized and globalized Indian economy still is unable to see the benefits of investing in such remote regions, and dreams of developmental take-off remain dependent upon central-state largesse.

'This is highway, not runway' – BRO labour hard at their signage. Photo: Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman.

The ongoing construction project provided an opportunity to examine the concrete skeleton that would support this tarmacked highway to future prosperity. From the riverbed at the base of the pillars, the disconnect between the new rising star of Arunachal Pradesh and the mundane realities underpinning it became apparent through observing the circulation of bodies labouring to build connectivity.

At odds with BRO's self-presentation as a modern, military organization, its most visible manifestation at the site was not in any ordered, rational masculinity, but rather the gloriously coloured clothing of its female labourers as they swirled around the upper reaches of this incomplete bridge.

Bodies in circulation: female labourers atop the bridge.
Photo: Edward Boyle.

In contrast to BRO's engineers and deputed military personal, this workforce is 'casual'. Paragraph 503 of the Border Road Regulations notes that they are not "eligible for any of the privileges of continued employment under Government. The services of the personnel are liable to be terminated at any time without notice and no terminal benefits shall be payable." Precarious employment, frequently associated with the neoliberal capitalist economy, is here mandated by a statist military organization of almost sixty years' standing.

This reliance on 'casual' labour is clearly a factor in delays to the bridge. With employment available until the bridge's completion, there is an obvious incentive for workers to regulate their labour accordingly. This is clear from experiences recounted to us elsewhere along this highway, where groups of female workers build roads high in the mountains, labouring their days away crushing endless stones by hand – all to provide a gravel base for these asphalt ribbons of connectivity. They then spend their nights rolling the resultant gravel off cliffs, in order to drag out construction for as long as possible.

The colloquial term to describe such 'casual' work across Northeast India is *faltu* labour. *Faltu* in Hindi literally means 'useless', and reflects the ability of such workers to deploy "weapons of the weak," a full gamut of tactics that include "foot-dragging, evasion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander and sabotage" (Scott 1985: 30). BRO, or at least its local agents, frequently chooses to ignore such infractions in order to retain labour willing to work in inhospitable and adverse climatic conditions.

This adverse climate is also significant. The incessant rains of the monsoon months put the brakes on work, during which the labour force has to look for alternative employment, doing chores in nearby villages, serving as farmhands or collecting firewood from the forests. At another construction site near our bridge, we found labourers engrossed in a game of cards by the roadside. With road access washed away, there was no materials delivered for weeks on end, and the workers had little to do except while away their time in drinking, smoking and gambling.

Gaming the system.
Photo: Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman.

Paradoxically, workers building infrastructure that aims to facilitate the continuous, unimpeded flows associated with a modern neoliberal economy clearly experience the "characteristic irregularity of labour patterns before the coming of large-scale machine-powered industry" (Thompson 1967: 71). When you add to such tactical or enforced stoppages contractor negligence, the absence of oversight, and corruption, the result is a perennial construction mode that builds nothing very fast.

Working from home – stones moving up the human chain, residential quarters in the background.
Photo: Edward Boyle.

While such labour policies would appear to hinder efforts at developing connectivity, the labour force's composition suggests its triumph. Although in other parts of Arunachal Pradesh there is greater resort to local workers, through <u>MGNREGA</u>, other state bodies or private companies, here no locals work on the bridge, as they have both farmland and government jobs to tend to. The "<u>casual labour</u>" is largely Nepalis, Biharis and other economically marginalized groups from North India, in contravention to BRO's regulations, which mandates they be recruited locally. Groups of labourers live on site, in a series of poorly constructed huts in the riverbed, or in nearby villages. For instance, one Nepali family from Sikkim, the Newars, had been at the bridge since construction began. Three of the family were employed by BRO, while three generations of the family resided as part of a larger community of Nepali migrant workers occupying a dilapidated Public Works Department colony quarter at the edge of Koronu village.

Living on the job.
Photo: Mirza Zulfiqur
Rahman.

Migrant labour constructing roads has spread across Arunachal Pradesh since 2008, when India finally moved away from its earlier scorched-earth strategy predicated upon the fear of Chinese troops rolling down the Eastern Himalayas again (Verghese 2012). Connectivity is considered crucial to facilitate both the development and defence of the region (Gohain 2019), and thus tie Arunachal Pradesh to the national body of India. The construction of such connectivity is made possible by the state's ability to draw upon a migrant worker pool to labour on projects that the province's indigenous population disdains. Their presence represents the Indian state's development of a political and social infrastructure through which capital can be diverted to new frontiers and ultimately "fixed" in place (Harvey 2006: 398–431). The concrete outcomes of such investment that will materialize the Government of India's aspirations for Arunachal Pradesh to become one of the 'best' regions in the country.
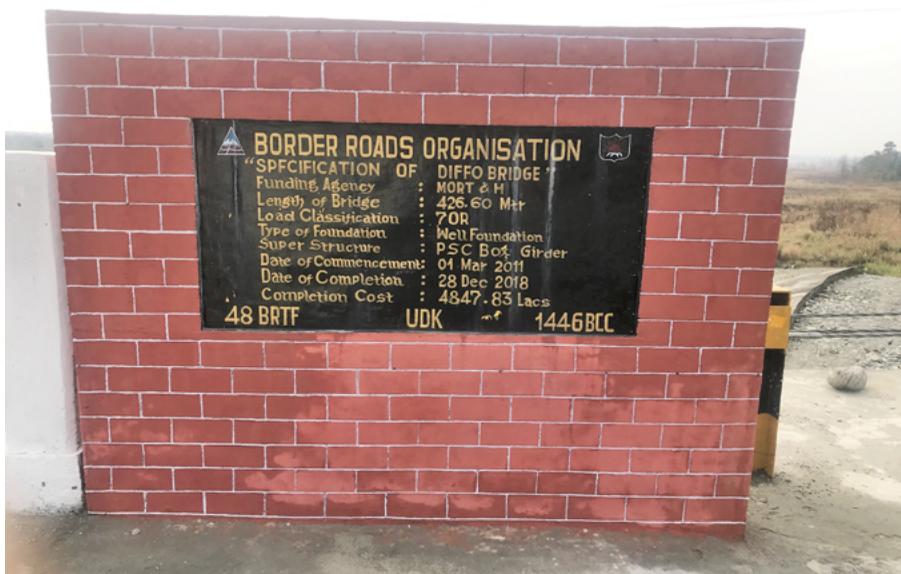
Commemorating competence?
Photo: Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman.

The Diffo Bridge ultimately took seven years and nine months to build, as recorded by an obtrusive and aesthetically discordant signboard marking the structure's completion. The Newars confessed that they had been content with the slow pace of work, as it had allowed them to stay on longer in the village, where their children were able to go to school. They were unsure of their future, but expected that BRO would assign them to other projects nearby. The relation of casual labour with its contractors is not reducible solely to exploitation and resistance, but with construction concluded, the social and material infrastructure of the labour force is rapidly dismantled.

Ruins at the bridge's base, temple left standing for now.
Photo: Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman.

Infrastructure undoubtedly provides a developmental rationale for the extension of the Indian state's institutional power and control (Ferguson 1994), but the resultant bridges and tarmac reflect not only state design but an ongoing process of negotiation that works, haltingly and unevenly, to construct Arunachal Pradesh's connections with the rest of the country. The bridge's completion suggests the state is able to overcome both the "contested terrain" of labour (Thompson 2016: 107) and the natural terrain over which the bridge passes – and certainly those gliding over the bridge in the future will be able to ignore such treacherous topography entirely.

The smoothness of connectivity.
Photo: Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman.

Yet the smooth asphalt surface of the bridge is also suggestive of another connectivity gap, as residents of the region were and are bypassed by these monuments to national development (Rahman 2014). The inherent limits to a connectivity developed through large-scale infrastructure projects is reflected in BRO's commemoration of its own efforts at the head of the bridge. In addition to excising local circumstances, the signboard erases those individuals who actually laboured to build this connectivity. Our last image is hardly sufficient to redress the balance, but is all we can offer here.

Some of BRO's bridge builders.
Photo: Edward Boyle.

Notes:

[1] India is technically a federal republic made up of twenty-eight states. However, to avoid confusion with the federal state of India, we refer to Arunachal Pradesh as a province in this piece.

References:

Ferguson, James. 1994. *The Anti-Politics Machine: "Development," Depoliticization and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Gohain, Swargajyoti. 2019. "Selective Access: Or, How States Make Remoteness." *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 27 (2): 204–20.

Harvey, David. 2006. *The Limits to Capital* (new ed.). London: Verso.

Rahman, Mirza Zulfiqur. 2014. "Territory, Tribes, Turbines: Local Community Perceptions and Responses to Infrastructure Development along the Sino-Indian Border in Arunachal Pradesh." *Institute of Chinese Studies Occasional Paper Series* 7. Available at: http://www.icsin.org/uploads/2015/04/12/dc44619f98243f09109da6867923a56a.pdf

Rahman, Mirza Zulfiqur. 2019. "'Pickled' Infrastructure and Connectivity: Locating Community Engagement in Northeast India's Infrastructural Transformation." *Heinrich Boll Stiftung India Web Dossier on Investigating Infrastructure: Ecology, Sustainability and Society*. Available at: https://in.boell.org/sites/default/files/uploads/2019/06/pickled_infrastructure_and_connectivity_locating_community_engagement_in_northeast_indias_infrastructural_transformation.pdf

Scott, James C. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. London: Yale University Press.

Thompson, E.P. 1967. "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism." *Past & Present* 38: 56–97.

Thompson, Paul. 2016. "Dissent at Work and the Resistance Debate: Departures, Directions, and Dead Ends." *Studies in Political Economy* 97 (2): 106–23.

Verghese, B.G. 2012. "The Truth of 1962: The War We Lost." *Tehelka Magazine* 9 (41). Available at: http://fnvaworld.org/the-truth-of-1962-the-war-we-lost/

Authors:

Edward Boyle is Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Law, Kyushu University, Japan. He currently researches borders and borderland spaces in Japan, Georgia, and Northeast India, focussing on issues relating to maps and representation, scalar governance, territoriality, infrastructures, memory and heritage, and history. He received his PhD from Hokkaido University, where his thesis analysed the spatial incorporation of that northern island into the Japanese state by the nineteenth century. More details at www.borderthinking.com.

Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman is Visiting Research Associate at the Institute of Chinese Studies in New Delhi. He holds a PhD in Development Studies from the Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati, Assam. His areas of interests include research on Northeast India, mainly on issues relating to transboundary water sharing and hydropower dams, roads and connectivity infrastructures, conflict and insurgency, peace building, development politics, migration and cross-border exchanges. He is committed to grassroots based alternative community work and development models. He is an avid photographer.

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*

Editorial Team:

Julie Chu (University of Chicago)
Tina Harris (University of Amsterdam)
Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi (University of Zurich)
Madlen Kobi (Academy of Architecture, Mendrisio)
Nadine Plachta (Heidelberg University's South Asia Institute, Kathmandu Office)
Galen Murton (LMU Munich and James Madison University, Harrisonburg)
Matthäus Rest (Max-Planck-Institute for the Science of Human History, Jena)
Alessandro Rippa (CU Boulder)
Martin Saxer (LMU Munich)
Christina Schwenkel (University of California, Riverside)
Max D. Woodworth (The Ohio State University)

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