

Research Articles

Builders, Building, and the Built: Ladakh and the Eventfulness of Road Development

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Abstract

Motorable roads have become such an essential part of the Himalaya that they are celebrated and prayed for. But who are the people who build them? The army, engineers, and the state are usually credited with the construction of high-altitude roads in India, but the road workers who often endure significant hardship while performing this labor have largely remained invisible in both national discourses and academic scholarship.

This article centers on the lived experiences of road workers and argues for an analytical shift that accounts for them *as* infrastructure in order to highlight their importance to road building in Ladakh. Through an ethnographic methodology that includes poetry, this article studies their presence, labor, and livelihood to understand how road workers perform and produce road building. In doing so, it advances the notion of eventfulness—a generative register that encompasses daily routines that are mundane yet reveal the eventful performances of border building. Through this notion, I aim to show how the broader geopolitical processes are sustained through the localized routines of road workers: the infrastructure behind the infrastructure.

Keywords

road workers; Himalaya; eventfulness; infrastructure studies; borders; Ladakh; poetry as method

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“So many hundred Hands in this Mill; so many hundred horse Steam Power.”

Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (1854)

“The inadequate rapport of man and the technical object must therefore be grasped as a coupling between the living and the non-living.”

Gilbert Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* (1958)

Introduction

Eventful Himalaya

An addition to the quiet Himalayan desert:

Drilling in the mountains
hammer on the debris
sun-tanned hands lifting rocks
thumps on the truck
dark smoke from the engine
dust under the tyres
eyes closed
faces turned.
Repeat.

Nubra Valley, July 2023

Ladakh is a high-altitude desert at the cross-roads of South and Central Asia and has been a focal point for geopolitical conflict in the Himalaya. A lack of mutually agreed-upon borders has left this region in the Indian Himalaya with two cease-fire lines: the Line of Control (LoC) with Pakistan and the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with China (see Figure 1). Although such lines of agreement exist, they have not prevented the unilateral imposition of borders, especially between India and China. In a region that has traditionally been considered “remote,” infrastructure, especially roads, has come to represent the foundation of control, or even potential control. Roads are a means of territorialization here. They are the language of geopolitical communication at the political borders of the Himalaya. The onus for this work has been placed on the Border Roads Organisation (BRO), a strategic infrastructure development body under the Ministry of Defence. The road workers discussed in this article are

contractual workers employed by this organization.

Such a situation of disputed borders and makeshift boundary demarcations has led to a continuous expansion of road networks in Ladakh and nearby regions. While many studies on roads in the Himalaya have focused on governance (Rankin et al. 2017; Gergan 2020), outmigration (Gagné 2019), and development (Murton 2017), a few studies have instead highlighted the road workers (Sabhlok et al. 2015; Sabhlok and Sharma 2019; Boyle and Rahman 2019; Marschall and Mostowlansky 2019). I aim to contribute to this growing scholarship on roads and infrastructure by arguing that road workers are the infrastructure of the border roads of the region through the notion of eventfulness.

Eventfulness refers to those activities that often remain mundane or even unseen, but animate infrastructure development. As we pay attention to road building, it reveals itself amid the dusty construction zones, in the workers’ routines, and even on the clean stretches of tarmac. It encompasses daily routines, improvisational responses to various environmental and personal challenges, and negotiations among workers, locals, the military, and tourists, revealing that the Himalaya, as in the poem above, is not simply a landscape; it is a worksite. The dust, the noise, and the grind of daily labor are not a backdrop to border-related construction, but constitute the eventfulness of the larger event of border security. This localized improvisation in everyday life shows us how the “event” is embodied in the bodies of the unacknowledged yet crucial road workers.

Such a focus on roads shows how their construction becomes a means by which territorial claims are asserted, enforced, and challenged. To this I bring the physical labor of road building into closer relation with territoriality in the Himalaya and shed light on the road workers who are the backbone of road development in the region. To understand the roads, road workers, and the process of road building, I employ scholarship on infrastructure as processual and

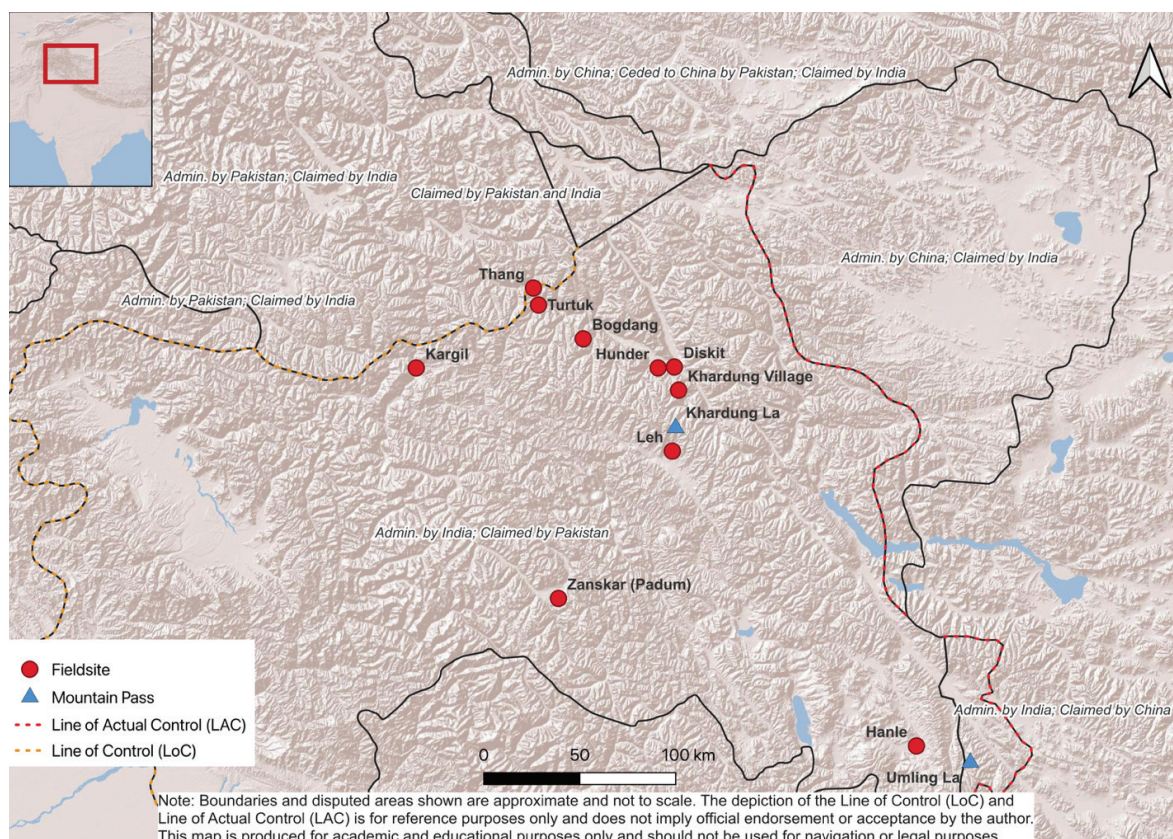


Figure 1. *Ladakh: Field sites amid Contested Borders*. The map shows the fieldwork locations in relation to the Line of Control (LoC) and Line of Actual Control (LAC), the two de facto boundaries that are central to road construction and territorial claims in the region. 2026. Map: Prince Tomar.

“form-al,” and bring it into conversation with the role of road workers.

I situate road workers within Simone’s (2004) notion of “people as infrastructure” through an examination of how workers, through their daily practices and interactions, actively shape the experience of border roads and become an extension of infrastructure. Their presence, everyday lives and struggles as mundane events make them infrastructure. To do so, I build on Larkin’s (2018) notion of “form,” which he defines as an interface through which we interact with infrastructure. This form, for Larkin, consists of not just the material or the discursive but of both, which turns political rationalities behind infrastructure into an ambient experience (Larkin 2018, 184). I then synthesize these arguments and theories to develop a notion of eventfulness as a generative register that attends to mundane activities. Unlike “suspension” (Gupta 2018)

and “incompleteness” (Guma 2020), which are analytically organized around deferral and absence, eventfulness operates as a generative register that attends to what is present in everyday life.

For this research, I conducted fieldwork during the summer months of June to September in 2022 and 2023. My main field site was the road connecting Leh with Thang (one of the last villages on the LoC) in the Nubra Valley. For this article, I mainly relied on participant observation and interviews with road workers across different sites, but I also regularly engaged with the local residents and tourists as well to understand their perspectives on road building. Most interviews were primarily conducted in Hindi. Although the main method of collecting observations was through field notes and audio recording, I also regularly employed poetry writing. This practice allowed me to include my own reflexive

position as an insider-outsider researcher in Ladakh. The article reproduces two field poems alongside a vignette, and anecdotes as empirical data.

In the next section, I lay out my methodology and explain my reasoning behind using poetry as both a method and an analytical output, before moving on to the challenges that were a part of my field research. In the following section, I discuss the relevance of roads, their role in territorialization, and the resulting contestation in Ladakh to suggest how road building has become a form of border building in the Himalaya. The next section presents a vignette of my interactions with two road workers I met in the Nubra Valley, after which I analyze my observations and theorize road workers *as* infrastructure. In the final section, I present my notion of eventfulness, and demonstrate its usefulness for understanding the localization of broader events such as border security, drawing on my ethnographic fieldwork.

Finally, I return to the importance of road workers, their labor, and their routines in the region to understand how border security is performed on the ground, while revisiting the contribution of ethnography and poetry to this research and the broader applicability of the notion of eventfulness.

Methodology

The primary data were collected during two fieldwork periods in Ladakh in 2022 and 2023. I visited multiple locations in the region, including Khardung Village, Hunder, Diskit, Turtuk, Bogdang, Thang, Hanle, Kargil, Zaskar, and Leh, among others (see Figure 1). During these two visits, I focused only on roads under construction, mainly the road connecting Leh with Thang. It is one of only three roads connecting the ceasefire lines with the Indian plains. While there is no official name for this entire road, I refer to it as the Khardung La road for this research due to the high importance and popularity of the Khardung La (or Khardung Pass) in keeping the connectivity with the border areas open, and serving tourists.

I spent most of my fieldwork time on this road, which included traveling by bus, bike, cab, and hitchhiking. I conducted interviews and kept two journals during my time in Ladakh. My respondents were locals, tourists, road workers, and other migrant workers. Wherever possible, I stayed and spent time with my interlocutors and learned about the region, and their experiences. Some of these interactions resulted in recorded interviews, but most were informal conversations, or in the words of Gable (2014, 40), “offhand conversations,” which turned out to be essential to the fieldwork. Furthermore, I also observed my interlocutors and others in their day-to-day activities and, wherever possible, participated in those activities.

Before beginning the interviews, I explained my project and the purpose of recording the interviews to the respondents. All recordings were made with the participants’ permission, except in a few cases where a third or a fourth person joined an ongoing conversation later. I explained the purpose of the recordings to them, either during the recording or immediately after the interview. Most respondents requested that their names and recordings should not be published. I explained the purpose of the recordings to all respondents as follows: “This recording is just for me to work on the interviews at a later stage, and any other person except me will not hear the original conversations.”

Although my respondents’ regional languages were mainly Ladakhi, Balti, Bhojpuri, and Khorzha, this was not a significant issue, because most were also fluent in Hindi. The exception was some older respondents, who were not comfortable with Hindi. Some individuals volunteered to translate in such cases without prior agreement or arrangement. Acts of kindness like this greatly facilitated the research and were not limited to just the interviews.

As a part of diversifying the ways I captured my observations and to include self-reflexive thoughts on my fieldwork, I developed a practice of using poetry to record observations, capture scenes, and

reflect on my experiences. “Situated in the borderland between traditional and artistic methodologies” (Parsons and Pinkerton 2022, 118), poetry becomes a valuable tool for academic inquiry. It proved to be beneficial both as a research method and as a research output. This was inspired by Faulkner’s (2009) use of poetry in research as “a method of turning research interviews, transcripts, observations, personal experience, and reflections into poems or poetic forms” (20).

The primary motivation for my use of poetry is its capacity to capture emotions and uncover hidden yet significant themes. In Ladakh, I often confronted information and experiences that were difficult to convey through traditional academic prose. In such cases I sought diverse ways of storytelling, such as the lyrical (and liminal) form that poetry provides, as well as the photographs included throughout the article. As Faulkner (2009, 17) puts it, lyrical inquiry through poetry is “a process and a product.” In the poems that I have included in this research paper, I try to put forward those moments and experiences—whether mine or those of my respondents (as seen from my view or as they shared them with me)—that complement the empirical dimensions of my research.

What is important about poetic inquiry is that it allows for the simultaneous presence and absence of authorial control over the written work. Such a liminal form of writing complements my role as an “instrument” (Gable 2014) mediating between the field and this research. Using such a liminal method is particularly apt in a geographically, politically “liminal” setting such as the borderlands, and for examining conceptually “liminal” processes such as bordering. Neilsen (2008) captures this well, describing lyric inquiry as being “based on a conviction that using expressive and poetic functions of language creates the possibility of a resonant, ethical, and engaged relationship between the knower and the known” (94). She calls lyric inquiry (or poetic inquiry) a marriage of lyric and research. As Parsons and Pinkerton (2022, 125) argue,

this approach also pushes “against the hegemony of traditional writing.”

Since I began interacting with road workers, I have faced many self-reflexive dilemmas. I have questioned whether sharing the information I gathered about road construction could potentially endanger the region, its people, and the Indian Army. This concern was amplified by the consistent response I received from BRO officials, who emphasized the sensitive nature of the information saying, “*Ye defense ka mamla hai*” (“This is related to defense”). As a result, I decided to limit my interactions with the BRO, which aligned with their preferences, and instead focused on studying the social aspects of building, living near, and using roads in the region. But such concerns continued to shape my questions, notes, journal, and eventually the drafts for this article. In this article, I do not share any sensitive information about the region or the names of individuals I encountered. Other than the names of the villages, and the pictures of workers (taken with their permissions), nothing can be linked to a specific location in the region.

Health-related issues affecting the road workers also presented an obstacle to my fieldwork. Many of these workers come from east Indian states and find it extremely challenging to work in high-altitude Ladakh. For BRO, as one official put it, this is justified by the workers’ relatively “higher wages.” However, from the workers’ perspective, natural conditions severely limit their work capacity and lead to health issues such as breathing difficulties, nosebleeds, fatigue, prolonged weakness, and, at worst, death—as in the March 2025 avalanche at Mana in Uttarakhand, in which eight Border Roads Organisation workers were killed (Outlook India 2025).

Engaging with, observing, and interviewing these workers about their experiences proved incredibly challenging. Although they were outgoing, most were reluctant to speak, opting to conserve their energy for work. Those who did engage often struggled to maintain conversations without taking frequent breaks to catch their breath. Consequently, most of my time with them

was spent listening to accounts of the challenges they faced during their months-long stays building roads. However, Sundays offered a more conducive environment for longer discussions, with many workers generously sharing their time for walks and lunch.

The role of roads

Nestled between the Indian plains and the Tibetan Plateau, the Himalayan region of Ladakh is a geopolitically contested area. Multiple conflicts among India, China, and Pakistan have transformed the Himalaya into a highly militarized region. For example, the Siachen Glacier in the Himalaya is the highest zone of military conflict globally, with soldiers positioned at elevations above 6,000 m. Connectivity even to the de facto border lines in the Himalaya requires a well-maintained network of roads that, due to the precarious nature of the mountain region, demands a constant presence of road workers. This relationship between maintaining borders and maintaining roads has become a highly visible part of the region and illustrates the intersection of infrastructure such as roads “with power and control” (Rankin and Simpson 2021, 199).

The Himalaya, however, has remained a distinctive place for implementing and enforcing the concept of static boundaries. In the nineteenth century, British surveyors faced harsh challenges while trying to mark the boundaries of British India based on the “water-parting” principle in the Himalayan region (Gardner 2021). In their attempts “to put nature to work for the imperial state,” they used watersheds as “political instruments” yet were unable to define static boundaries on the ground (ibid: 60–64). The border demarcation project remained incomplete as the British Empire came to an end in the region. As Gardner notes, “when India gained independence in 1947, it also gained a largely borderless northern frontier” (60). Challenges remained for the newly independent nation-state when questions arose about the precise location of its borders post-independence and again following the Chinese control of Tibet in the 1950s. This

prompted Indian leaders to revisit the security of their northern frontiers, as evidenced by the correspondence between Nehru and Patel dated November 7, 1950 (reprinted in Das 1974; see also Dasgupta 2014).

With no substantial solution other than the agreements on cease-fire lines, the current state of these disputes has led to a large-scale infrastructure buildup in the Himalaya, highlighting how roads are “vectors of both mobility and containment” (Murton 2017, 541). Roads across mountain passes simultaneously connect distant populations and economies while helping the state contain populations and territories. Completed in October 2025, the world’s highest motorable pass is Mig La, at an elevation of 5,913 m. The pace of transformation through road building in the region is illustrated by the fact that, in the draft version of this manuscript, Umling La was identified as the highest motorable pass at an altitude of approximately 5,799 m. Unsurprisingly, these passes are celebrated as achievements of the state and its armed forces. Some are kept open to the army, civilians, and tourists, alike, but many remain restricted military zones.

The increasing pace of road building and its visibility coincide with instances of aggressive standoffs like those in 2017, 2020, and 2022 (International Crisis Group 2023) between India and China. Even the Sino-Indian War of 1962, which resulted in Chinese control of the Indian-claimed region of Aksai Chin in northwestern Ladakh, is understood to have resulted from road building (Joshi 2022). As the history of cartography and current developmentalist politics suggest, roads have always been central to shaping military, diplomatic, and (inter)national relationships. Examination of the use of infrastructure to express control provides further support for this claim.

Infrastructure building is a crucial component of the broader project because of its role in expressing and maintaining control. Dalakoglou (2017) traces the origins of the use of infrastructure to expand state control through highway networks, particularly in European totalitarian regimes like fascist

Italy and Nazi Germany (5–7). The use of infrastructure, however, is not confined to any particular ideology; as Anand (2017, 2018) argues, infrastructures are also used to “consolidate the project of liberal government,” simultaneously freeing and trapping subjects. Roads, although typically marketed as vectors of “growth,” are not neutral and play an important role in building a modern border frontier where economic and livelihood benefits simultaneously overlap with the securitization of border regions. As Heslop and Murton (2021, 34) observe, “the creation of highways comes with many strings attached.” Roads emerge as primary tools for extending state authority by creating and maintaining order. In the process, road building becomes not only a practice but also an objective and an ideology essential to state-building (Murton and Sigdel 2021; Dean, Sarma, and Rippa 2024).

However, it is not just the presence but also the absence of infrastructure that has played and continues to play a territorializing role. In Ladakh, the region’s terrain has long served as its primary means of defense. Discussing the reign of the Namgyal Dynasty (1490–1842), Saxena (2022) notes in his comprehensive study of administration and economy in Ladakh (1842–1947) that “the best means of defense possessed by Ladakh consisted in the general inaccessibility of the country during one half of the year,” referring to the heavy snowfall on the high mountain passes that led—and continues to lead—to a complete cutoff of neighboring Himalayan regions (80). This natural inaccessibility was frequently invoked as a barrier against Chinese incursions after the 1962 Sino-Indian War. Even after the war, the Indian state deliberately left the northern parts of Ladakh with minimal road infrastructure, a decision aimed at safeguarding India’s territorial integrity as outlined by its cartographic borders. Goswami (2012) describes this as the “older Indian strategic mindset.” This approach falls outside the colonial and nationalistic motivations that Ziipao (2020) discusses in the case of road building in Northeast India: “If roads for territorial

expansion and resource extraction were the core agenda of the colonial project in hill areas of Northeast India, then in post-independent India, roads are a means for national integration and securing the region from external threat” (9). In Ladakh, the lack of roads became a deterrent to external threats until the deterrent itself became a limiting factor for regional security.

Today, the logic of security through lack of infrastructure has been replaced by one based on its expansion. With the advancement of technologies such as all-weather roads and the “Rejupe mix” (The Statesman 2025), the Indian state has moved away from relying on the Himalaya as a “natural barrier” to asserting its territorial claims through improved connectivity. The BRO is now central to this shift in state strategy. Established in 1960, the BRO’s work remained largely stagnant for decades. Over the past decade, this has changed dramatically as a result of political will and successive budget increases (Deshpande 2023; The Statesman 2025). Terrefe and Verhoeven (2024) emphasize that infrastructure plays an important role in the maintenance and expression of sovereignty, noting how “across time and space, state-builders have regarded infrastructures as indispensable to buttress internal and external dimensions of their claims to exercising legitimate authority amidst a myriad of challenges from within and without” (9). Similarly, Uribe (2017) in his study of Colombia’s frontier regions, shows how infrastructure projects such as road building do not merely accompany state-building but actively produce and maintain frontier spaces.

Although these studies focus on the Horn of Africa and Colombia, respectively, their arguments about the role of infrastructure in contested areas, such as border and frontier regions, resonate with the evolving Indian approach. Both studies acknowledge that the effects of roads are not linear contrary to common assumptions. It is therefore important to examine the different effects of road building. Roads connect, but they also isolate—and not just

through their absence (Demenge 2013). The shift from viewing the Himalaya as a barrier to seeing it as a space for connectivity and the expression of control marks a significant transformation. Today, road building has become a systematic physical manifestation of border security in the region, replacing the earlier paradigm of natural inaccessibility with one of active infrastructural connectivity. This transition is as much a shift in perspective toward the Himalaya as it is in the governance of India's border regions.

The study of infrastructure in the social sciences has been essential to urban studies, as it helps explore how transportation, governance, and social practices shape urban life (Anand 2017). However, much remains to be learned about how infrastructure operates at the regional scale, particularly in the case of border regions. In their respective works, Glass et al. (2019) and Addie et al. (2020) argue for a regional lens, urging scholars to consider how infrastructural decisions not only construct urban spaces but also shape broader regional dynamics. Such an approach is particularly applicable to border regions, where infrastructure serves multiple, overlapping purposes, including territorialization, governance practices, economic expansion, and mobility.

The role of infrastructure in shaping borders is evident in the history of the complex relationships among the countries sharing the Himalayan region. Since the departure of colonial powers, roads have consistently served as a flashpoint in border politics. The urgency on the Indian side is fueled by ongoing disputes with China and Pakistan, as well as by the growing anxieties over similar infrastructure developments across the LoC and LAC. At the societal level in Ladakh, the need for border security has led to a reframing of the local people from passive “subjects” of the state to “fierce warriors of the mountains” (Gagné 2019, 81). Here, road building is simultaneously about improving regional connectivity, reinforcing boundaries, and contributing to “state formation” (Gagné 2017, 224). Similar



Figure 2. Building the Border Road. Road workers apply cement to a safety barrier while others rest, waiting for their turn. 2022. Photo: Prince Tomar.

dynamics are evident in other border areas such as those between Nepal and China, where border citizen identity cards are used to create differentiated categories of citizenship among different Himalayan populations (Shneiderman 2013). Beyond the Himalaya, infrastructure in Jerusalem is used to maintain the division between the eastern and western parts of the city, demonstrating how politics is inherent in infrastructure (Nolte 2016). In these contexts, road construction becomes a means by which territorial claims are asserted, enforced, and challenged.

As a result, the very process of building roads in Ladakh often produces new forms of violence. Gamble and Davis (2024) argue that the current approach to infrastructure, which they call “a lowland-based Eurocentric cartographical norm,” is proving “socially, culturally, and ecologically detrimental” to the region (181). Where once *mtshams*, a Ladakhi-Tibetan word that describes a boundary but also a “meeting place” (Gamble and Davis 2024, 186–87), served as meeting places for travelers across Ladakh and Tibet, today new roads have become sites where Indian and Chinese patrols encounter each other in zones of overlapping claims.

The logic is stark: roads enable connectivity, connectivity enables control, and control often results in the unilateral imposition

of boundaries. For both India and China, preventing the other from advancing road construction is as essential as expanding their own networks. This infrastructural race reflects intensified territorialization driven by cartographic anxieties that expose the “gap between how the nation represented itself and how it operated” (Krishna 1994; Gamble and Davis 2024, 192). In this way, the politics of infrastructure continues to shape, contest, and reimagine the meaning of borders in the Himalaya.

Encounters with road workers

It was early August 2022, and the afternoon sun felt both harsh and comforting after descending from the freezing weather of Khardung La, at 5,359 meters. I had set out from Leh on a battered Royal Enfield Himalayan 411cc, a namesake of the mountain ranges, whose engine’s rumbling echoed off the bare mountainsides. My route followed the winding road toward Turtuk, situated near the Line of Control (LoC) that marks the tense border between India and Pakistan. Near Khardung village, right after Khardung La, undoubtedly the most popular, and hence the most touristy, motorable mountain pass in India, I slowed the bike to watch two men bent over the roadside painting the safety barriers along the newly constructed sections of the road: a thin white mix all over, then a strip of rusty red in the middle.

In their dusty clothes, with dry hands and eyes dull from the film of road dust and grime, they recounted their journey north from their native Jharkhand in eastern India. As part of the larger infrastructural project termed Vijayak, the road was being widened, almost pushing the mountains away, to upgrade it into a two-lane highway. In addition, potholes were being filled, a roadside ditch was being constructed to prevent melting snow from damaging the road, and safety barriers were being installed on the opposite side of the mountain slopes.

A week later, on another afternoon, as my journey drew to a close and I was returning to Leh, I found myself near Khardung

village once again. The air was turning cold, reminding me of the mountain pass that lay ahead.

A few kilometers out of the village on the way to Leh, I encountered a stretch where mountains had been recently blasted open with large construction machines. Road rollers had recently leveled the ground along some sections. Clouds of dust swallowed the road as a cab ahead of me rushed through the debris. For a few moments, the landscape was reduced to the brute reality that rarely finds a place in serene images of the Himalaya. Emerging from the dusty stretch, I saw workers hammering at rocks in the debris. A little farther on, workers spread hot black tarmac glittering under the sun as the chemical scent of fresh asphalt filled my dry nostrils.

Finally, out of there, I was glad to be “breathing” again. Following the unpainted safety barriers, I observed one man painting and another resting on the aggregate. As I got closer, I was sure they were Rajesh and Shami. I slowed down and parked my dusty white steed close by. With a curious look, Shami turned, raised his head, and cleared the film of dirt from his eyes. Once I removed my helmet, unwrapped my neck and face from an Afghani *phatka* (a head-gear scarf popular with Indian soldiers and commandos stationed in Ladakh), and walked toward them, Shami greeted me with a broad smile: “*Kaise hai, bhaiya?*” (How are you, brother?).

The exchange of greetings with Shami roused Rajesh from his nap, and he greeted me with a broad smile. Both men looked at me in utter confusion and curiosity when I returned. In Ladakh, it is unusual to stop anywhere that is not a touristy spot, let alone twice!

Upon reminding them that I had promised to return, Rajesh replied, “Many nice tourists say that, but we don’t see them again.”

Rajesh had been resting on a pile of stones, beside him was a half-eaten pack of Parle-G biscuits, an immensely popular glucose biscuit that evokes childhood for many in India. I asked if they had been to the village

to shop, but Rajesh shook his head. He told me that some tourists had given it to them along with snacks and water. In these mountains, where a tree rarely interrupts the horizon, such small acts of kindness connect them to the world beyond the relentless work of road building.

Encounters between travelers and road workers are common on these remote stretches. Sometimes, a car slows, a window rolls down, and a bottle of water or packets of snack changes hands. Finding fresh-water streams along the roads is difficult in Ladakh, a region with limited water resources and increasing shortages due to melting glaciers. There could be stretches of road as long as approximately 40 km without any signs of human habitation. The workers carry as much water as they can, but when their bottles run dry, they must rely on finding a stream, the generosity of strangers, or waiting for the BRO to send water tankers.

As we sat chatting, Rajesh began mixing red dye for the barriers, and Shami offered me a Parle-G. I politely declined, my mind returning to our conversations and feeling guilty for taking up their time, knowing that all the workers had emphasized how tiring each breath was at this altitude (see Figure 2). My next stop was about 15 km away, and the thought of hot chai with some Parle-G tugged at me. I was both ashamed and grateful for how generously they welcomed me, despite their struggles with breathing and heavy labor.

I stood and thanked them, pouring the last of my water into their battered two-liter plastic bottle. They saw me off with broad smiles, still surprised that someone had returned to meet them again. As I rode away, the scent of tarmac fading behind me, I remembered a conversation with a host in Khardung village about the old days of traveling: “Earlier, I would leave for Leh at 5 in the morning and reach at 10 at night,” and another who said: “Now, we thank *the road*.”

Rajesh and Shami’s contracts with the BRO kept them in Ladakh until September. They

spoke of home, of green fields, the coming festival of Diwali, and the hope of seeing their families again. As the road workers neared the horizon in my rearview mirror, I carried with me the warmth of their smiles, the taste of tarmac, a yearning for a hot cup of tea, and the quiet resilience of those who shape life on the third pole of the world.

People as infrastructure

Tracks and Treks

Walking back, it’s 4.
Tools like sledges on their backs,
To the tents that they built
on the tracks
– dust
on their faces, their hands, their clothes.
And their eyes,
showing all the traces.
Their shivering and their sweat
connecting mountains, while they wept.
Now, it’s time for some rest.
But first,
a trek.

Khardung Village, July 2022

The journey of the word “infrastructure” from representing the newly invented railway tracks in the nineteenth century to becoming synonymous with “progress” in the twenty-first century is exceptional and hard to ignore, as noted by Carse (2017). Today, there is no denying that infrastructures “are woven into the fabric of society” (Carse 2017, 35). In cities like Delhi, infrastructure is emphasized as an essential pathway to “bring it on par with most developed metropolises of the world” (Ghertner 2015, 23), so much so that at times it becomes (and remains) an object of aesthetics and “fetish” (Dalakoglou 2010; Namba 2017). Infrastructures are certainly more than material things available to be touched, used, seen, and felt; they are also discursive. Both their materiality and discursiveness are necessary for understanding them.

The aim of this section is to understand the form of roads, and what it tells us,

and what it does. Larkin (2018) suggests that what exceeds infrastructure's materiality is its form. Roads in Ladakh are not just asphalt enabling connectivity but expressions of territorial claim, security from an outside threat, and a means of national integration. They are as much a material presence as what Larkin (2018) calls "political aesthetics." To understand roads in Ladakh based on Larkin is to see them as a result of an "energetic exchange" between material assemblages and political aesthetics (2018, 197). As he argues, there is no primacy of materialism because it is "simply one of multiple qualities of infrastructure" (197). His engagement with form focuses on political aesthetics where materiality is not primary, and neither is discursiveness secondary. The two are reciprocal and communicate with each other. He thus defines his understanding of form as "the imposition of conventional meaning through the formal arrangement of signs. It is about a set of properties a thing possesses" (178).

In Ladakh, road building and road builders together embody the physical materiality of construction and the discursive urgency that drives it. While roads become vectors of connectivity, territoriality, and border making, road workers and their work become the material environment that provides the physical reality of border making in the Himalaya (see Figure 3).

It is common to see road workers in Ladakh building new stretches of road and repairing older ones. As the vignette shows, their lives as road workers in the region highlight their overlap with the idea of the road itself. Most workers are hired from Nepal, and the Indian states of Jharkhand, Bihar, and West Bengal, with the majority coming specifically from Dumka District in Jharkhand (Sabhlok et al. 2015). Accustomed to the lush green fields and moderate winters of these states, they face the challenge of performing hard labor in a high-altitude region like Ladakh. Their lives in the region revolve around road building, forming an aesthetic in which they and their work provide an environment that translates, as Larkin

(2018) suggests, "political rationalities, into ambient experiences (184)". Infrastructure here is not just the road but also how and by whom it is built. It is an assemblage of the material, the terrain, and the human.

An interesting way to look at the road workers in Ladakh is through Simone's (2004; 2021) concept of "people as infrastructure." The presence and activities of road workers offer further insights into infrastructure. Simone (2004) examines how locally rooted systems of economic exchange operate in the absence of formal infrastructure, thereby becoming the basis for daily life routines in the inner city of Johannesburg. Differentiating his work from the usual anthropocentric explorations of technical infrastructures (see Barua 2021), Simone (2021) refines this concept in his revisit by flipping the coin and providing a technical-system-centric exploration of the constellation of human interactions and activities. He argues for a shift from different socialities to a focus on the "mathematics of continuous recombination of people's experiences and practices" (2021, 1341). "People as infrastructure" is his notion of different performances of human relations as connected simultaneities. By reversing the conventional approach, he places humans not just alongside objects but as performing like those objects, thereby becoming *as* them. Simone's concept reveals how social relations themselves actively perform and shape the foundational practices of infrastructure. This is a valuable theoretical lens for this study because the argument is not simply that people are infrastructure but that their relational networks, improvisation, and agency constitute what makes roads in Ladakh function.

Charles Dickens' (1854/2009) criticism of incessant industrialization in *Hard Times* provides an interesting layer to the examination of the presence of road workers in Ladakh. It shows how the human experience is embedded in the flattening of workers into units of productivity. Simone's (2004, 2021) "people as infrastructure" similarly foregrounds the place of people but goes further to understand people not



Figure 3. A Makeshift Camp. Sunday is the day for bathing and doing laundry at a road workers' camp. While the living conditions speak to the urgency of road building, the improvised daily routines reveal the eventfulness of their presence in the region. 2022. Photo: Prince Tomar.

as passive victims, but as agents in their own right.

As Larkin (2018) argues, form is responsible for the perception and experience of infrastructure, whether it is a “promise” through an under-construction “world-class city” (Ghertner 2015), a “spectacle” through tall towers (Namba 2017), or “global disconnection” through what Carse (2012) calls weediness. Larkin’s (2018) concept of form is crucial for situating workers within Simone’s (2004; 2021) framework of “people as infrastructure.” While Larkin bridges the split between the material and representational aspects of infrastructure, Simone’s work places that bridge among and within people.

Through this understanding of road building, along with the demanding work of road workers as they contribute to

securing the borders, I want to introduce the notion of “eventfulness.” I use Larkin’s (2018) notion of “form” in infrastructure studies to incorporate Ladakh’s road workers into the framework of “people as infrastructure” and understand how the larger event of border security translates into laying asphalt. Through this analysis, as I suggested in the preceding poem, I intend to foreground how the continuous and uniformly paved asphalt of the BRO’s infrastructure is, in a figurative sense, built upon and sustained by the discontinuous and materially modest settlements of the road workers. The notion of “eventfulness” accounts for daily work that might seem ordinary yet embodies national and territorial significance. As I show in the next section, it provides a generative register of road workers as infrastructure expressed through different mundane events.

Eventfulness

One afternoon in Ladakh, after getting past a dusty patch of road, I got off my bike near a waterfall to refill my water bottle and wash my face. I noticed someone sitting on top of a road barrier, under which the water from the fall was being channeled downstream, preventing it from spilling onto the road. His name was Hari, and he had one of the most peculiar jobs among the road workers. He was assigned to look after the stream to prevent its contamination by road workers before it reached the village downstream. From morning until afternoon, his job was to watch the water. The flow was weak, and there was barely any greenery around. That may be one of the reasons why the water was so precious and required a guard.

As we were talking, it began to rain a little. It rained regularly at that time, so I asked if he carried an umbrella. He told me that he did not, and that instead he had a better way to prevent himself from getting drenched, waving his hands from side to side at the umbrella in my hand to indicate that it would not work. He got off the road barrier, asked me to follow and started walking downhill. A few steps down from the road, he ducked down and turned into a cavity under the road. This was a newly constructed part of the road that channeled the water downhill. This particular type of water tunnel is called a culvert—a tunnel-like structure that goes under roads to channel water from underneath, while protecting the road surface. I followed him as he stepped inside. Since the flow of water was low, there was space for both of us to crouch under. We sat there, chatted, and looked downhill in the direction of the village, as the weak flow of the waterfall passed through the middle of the tunnel, and I learned more about his days in Ladakh.

A seemingly boring-looking, lesser-known job with little to do except keep watch turned into an exciting and fun part of my field day. The entire process of road building is actualized through such patchwork approaches at the hands of those at the grassroots level. Activities with a

mundane appearance, such as finding a cover, reveal their eventfulness—crouching inside a culvert during rain to continue chatting (or, as in my case, continuing an interview inside the mountains, under a road). Events like this shape the infrastructure development that further shapes territoriality and contestation in the Ladakh borderland.

Eventfulness is a state of being embodied in infrastructure as a process. It encompasses the notion that infrastructure is not static and does not fall into the trap of completion or a lack thereof. It helps register a description of infrastructure that can include other notions that may be theorized as similar but mean different things in a traditional sense. Some examples are “suspension” (Gupta 2018) and “incompleteness” (Guma 2020; 2022). Both argue for infrastructure as a multidirectional process with unintended results, and ongoing transformations through their respective notions. Gupta theorizes suspension as a kind of temporality, recasting infrastructure as always in motion. Guma (2020) reworks the concept of incompleteness to take infrastructure scholarship beyond the boundedness of the discourse around completion or a lack of completion. Instead, his arguments draw inspiration from African philosophy and emphasize the lives of infrastructure, especially in the Global South, as a process. Both examine infrastructure beyond its apparent completion.

Both Gupta (2018) and Guma (2020; 2022; 2025) emphasize their respective terms as distinct from their literal meanings. Suspension suggests how infrastructure that has not reached its intended completion extends along various trajectories without being “suspended.” Similarly, incompleteness is “stripped of all its normative, essentialist, and judgmental overtones” and instead offered as a lens through which to view the ever-evolving infrastructure in the Global South (Guma 2022). These terms are dissected, revealing infrastructure as a process through their inversions.

Further, when placed against the classical scholarship on infrastructure, where

infrastructure is hidden and requires bringing forth (Star 1999; Bowker 1995), eventfulness makes infrastructure visible in localized everyday life, and not just at moments of breakdown. Instead of finding its moment in deferral or exceptions, eventfulness comprises the ordinary. The notion of eventfulness, however, moves beyond this practice of deconstruction. It builds on the idea of infrastructure as a process while trying to incorporate all kinds of actions or inactions across a spectrum. Inspired by such influential notions, the idea of eventfulness offers a generative platform for understanding infrastructure as a process.

Eventfulness is positioned to account for mundane and unseen lived experiences. It makes infrastructure analytically visible beyond the boundaries of what constitutes infrastructure. While both suspension (Gupta 2018) and incompleteness (Guma 2020) point toward the temporality of infrastructure in terms of what might appear as an exception and what might appear to require a fix, eventfulness includes the lives of the people building it. In the case of roads, the notion of eventfulness broadens the understanding of macro-level events such as improved border security through mundane and everyday practices as the localized realities of those events. In eventfulness, grander events get woven into the fabric of routine lived realities. Veena Das (1995; 2007) provides a compelling perspective on the localization of distant events. Her deeply ethnographic and philosophical exploration of the lingering experience of trauma and violence in India focuses on the 1947 Partition, the 1984 riots, and the Bhopal gas tragedy to show how violence, with time, does not become an isolated or distant historical event but gets embedded into the rhythms of everyday life. Das (1995) defines her “critical events” as bringing into being “new modes of action...” which, in her work, “redefined traditional categories such as codes of purity and honor, the meaning of martyrdom, and the construction of a heroic life” (6). I build on her theorization of eventful mass violence as embedded in ordinary day-to-day life, to theorize an understanding of the embeddedness of the

infrastructural development in everyday life and time of road workers in Ladakh, which I call eventfulness. The workers embody the process of road building and, with it, the urgency of securing the border regions in the Himalaya. Moving beyond the macro view, the localization of such big events helps us see how they are performed in the mundane and everyday lives of these workers, who, rather than being in the background are essential to understanding the grander projects of border building in the Himalaya.

By embodying the roads and their form in terms of both material excess and discursive meaning-making, road workers become *as* infrastructure, not just through their labor but also through their everyday practices and enduring presence. They continually find ways to adapt to a region different from their native places. Temporary tents, makeshift kitchens, informal gathering spots, and open bathrooms reshape the visual and social landscape of the border roads, contrasting with the typical image of a Himalayan landscape. These improvisational practices are crucial for sustaining daily life and work in such a demanding environment (see Figures 4 and 5).

Further, everyday support networks are central to the workers’ ability to endure long periods away from home. Many workers “survive” in Ladakh by living alongside relatives, neighbors, or fellow villagers. Even in the absence of their immediate families, these social ties provide emotional and practical support. Each tent thus becomes a home away from home, a site where workers share meals, stories, and mutual care, constituting an essential form of social infrastructure.

Finally, the presence of road workers is marked by seasonal rhythms. Each summer, new groups arrive to take up projects, while winter sees a decline in numbers. The collective and recurring presence of workers is crucial for maintaining connectivity in the region. It highlights the circulation of people while emphasizing its importance for road building. This temporal continuity, even as individual workers



Figure 4. Searching for the Signal. A road worker searches for mobile network to check in with family and friends, while clearing small stones to maintain road friction for BRO vehicles. 2023. Photo: Prince Tomar.



Figure 5. Grooming Day. On Sundays, workers line up for haircuts from peers with barbering skills, taking time to rest and attend to their personal lives—a rare pause for the border builders of the Himalayan region. 2022. Photo: Prince Tomar.

change, underscores the infrastructural role of their labor and presence.

These dimensions of daily improvisation, social support networks, and cyclical personnel rotation together form the operational foundation for sustaining the workforce's presence in the region. These practices, in turn, underpin the process of road building, highlighting Simone's (2021) insight into "the capacity of bodies to be simultaneously more and less than what they are—a dynamic infrastructure" (1344).

This is what Simondon (1958/2012) means when he asks us to see the human and the technical not as separate but as partners, as suggested in the second epigraph at the beginning of this article. Focusing on such dimensions provides a deeper engagement with the lives of road workers in Ladakh. Their mundane routines, theorized as eventfulness, bring academic attention to the value of road workers in road building in the Himalaya.

Conclusion

Against the backdrop of decades-long border disputes, challenging landscapes, and the inability of Himalayan states to find common ground, road building and the broader process of infrastructure development have come to redefine bordering in Ladakh.

This article has examined the presence of road workers by situating them in the larger history of border building in the region. Their loneliness, breathing difficulties, hard labor, and lack of knowledge of local languages provide a window into the on-the-ground performance of road building. Their improvisational routines and importance to building and maintaining roads make them *as* infrastructure in the Himalaya.

The larger projects of border security are distant events, and although geopolitics remains in the spotlight, they remain poorly understood without an appreciation of the livelihoods of people involved in such projects. The notion of eventfulness highlights the mundane routines and provides a common platform for understanding the lived realities of infrastructural processes. It builds on the existing scholarship and, without trying to replace the deconstructionist approach of many influential contributions, brings them together through a generative register of how infrastructures are built. As infrastructure studies turns more toward the human, the notion of eventfulness offers a way to ethnographically account for laborers and other workers whose presence sustains critical systems that, though visible in plain sight, remain overlooked.

Finally, the use of ethnographic storytelling in vignettes, anecdotes, and poetry captures the field in its emotional and raw form, aiming for an honest portrayal of road workers and their labor. Ethnographic storytelling is woven into the analytical theme, bringing together different scenes and stories to deepen the understanding of road work in Ladakh. The use of poetry further extends beyond ethnographic data representation, becoming a method that acknowledges the crucial presence of the author as the researcher who remained emotionally embedded in the challenges of witnessing workers' hardships while studying the region with them.

This is a small contribution to the ongoing exploration of how people, infrastructure, and conflict intersect, especially in the Himalayan borderlands, where infrastructure is directly linked to borders and territoriality, and through them, to disputes between the various countries that share the region.

In a way, the two epigraphs at the beginning of this article are two sides of the same coin: the invisibility of everyday labor in grander events. While Dickens highlights the dehumanization of workers through their being likened to horses (or machines), the Simondonian lens demands a deeper engagement with the processes of how technical systems work. They both force us to understand road building in Ladakh as more than asphalt and markers: it encompasses the eventfulness of the lives of road workers who are essential to its functioning. This framing calls for a wider recognition of road workers in the project of border security.

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