BORDERLANDS AS BARRACKS: Constructing a National Geography of Security in India

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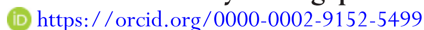
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As Mangal Paasi and I sat in the thick shade of a jackfruit tree, talking about his family's history of service in the railways at the time of Partition, there was a rustle in the bushes behind us. The sound of footsteps approaching. A pair of black rubber boots was closely followed by a man in the uniform of a Border Security Force (BSF) officer, cap in hand, wiping his sweaty brow. Mangal Paasi jumped up and called out to his son to bring a chair and a glass of water for *sahib*.[1] We had been sitting on a charpoy, where Mangal typically lounged in the late morning, but that charpoy was clearly not appropriate for this more important guest. Chair and water arrived in a rush and, soon after, tea.

After initial introductions and polite inquiries about my work in the borderlands, the officer, Sandeep Jha, visibly preoccupied and disturbed, blurted out that a *jawan* (lowest-ranking soldier in the BSF, literally meaning "young man" in Hindi) in his battalion had committed suicide the previous day, texting his suicide note to Jha on his mobile phone. The officer held out a smartphone and waved it with intensity. "Get me a *darshan* [audience] with the *panditji* [priest]," he said to Mangal Paasi. "Check how quickly he can see me. I can't be here for too long, I have to get back to the headquarters." "Here" was a Border Outpost (BOP), in a village along India's border with Bangladesh, about forty kilometers away from the headquarters of the battalion housed in the district town of

CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY, Vol. 40, Issue 2, pp. 221–48, ISSN 0886-7356, online ISSN 1548-1360. Cultural Anthropology *is the journal of the Society of Cultural Anthropology, a section of the American Anthropological Association.* Cultural Anthropology *journal content published since 2014 is freely available to download, save, reproduce, and transmit for noncommercial, scholarly, and educational purposes under the Creative Commons BY-NC 4.0 license. Reproduction and transmission of journal content for the above purposes should credit the author and original source.*
DOI: 10.14506/ca40.2.02

Cooch Behar, West Bengal. In the minutes that Mangal was away to secure an appointment with the priest, the officer and I sat in awkward silence, with him shaking his head and looking down at his phone. As I mumbled my condolences on this tragedy, the officer said, weakly, "Talking to him brings me comfort," referring to the priest. Soon after, Mangal returned with a meeting time for later that afternoon and Jha hurriedly said that he must return before he was missed.

Jha was a mid-level officer in an Indian BSF battalion deployed in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal. While he lived in the battalion's headquarters in Cooch Behar, on this day he was conducting a surprise inspection of the Kathalbari BOP, named after Kathalbari, the border village in which it was located and where I was living at that time. Only a small freshwater marsh separated Mangal's house from the BOP. Next to Mangal's house was the residence of a much-revered caste-Hindu priest and astrologer; he had a Shiva temple in his house, which was unusual in this predominantly Rajbangsi region.[2] Jha had forsaken the main asphalt road that went by the BOP and had taken the less visible path through the bushes along the side of the marsh to get an urgent appointment with the priest. His day's plans disrupted by the sudden suicide and the series of questions of moral, social, and bureaucratic import that sprang from it, he was at a loss to share and house his distress. He had to undertake the inspection in the border outpost, for "things must carry on as usual," but he also had to weave in a preliminary inquiry regarding the condition of the deceased soldier by talking to his friends and immediate colleagues in the neighboring outpost, where the soldier had been. "This is informal, the formal inquiry will come later," he said softly, sipping water and wiping his brow, continuing to shake his head as if in disbelief. For the time being, Jha came out of the BSF barracks to the neighboring civilian yard and turned to this local spiritual figure for comfort.

Once he left, Mangal and I could not get back to our previous conversation about his family history. From a slow, rambling mood of reminiscence, Mangal now sat upright on the charpoy, a gleam in his eye. "Ora amar khub bondhu" (they are my great friends), he said, referring to his close acquaintance at that time with two officers in the BSF, Sandeep Jha being one of them. "Whenever there is any *khana-peena* [feasting] in the barracks, we even eat from the same plate, we share the same food," he said with a smile, emphasizing their fraternal kinship and that he was privy to the BSF's intimate life in the barracks in a way that other locals were not. Mangal's obvious delight in this acquaintance, with no reference at all to the death of the soldier on that day, stood in striking contrast to the mood and circumstances that had brought the officer to his yard.

There is a strange chasm between these two parallel stories: the BSF officer's struggle with care work and being cared for because of a soldier's tragic death and the borderland resident's pleasure in proximity to the BOP and friendliness with the BSF, notably officers of higher rank and status than *jawans*. The chasm points to the separation of the BSF's barracks from Paasi's yard, the BSF from what they call "civilians," and distinct kinds of social and institutional hierarchy, kinship, and care, even as unspoken interdependencies grow and flicker—all of them stressing uncertainties and fragility of both state authority and labor (Reeves 2014). Soldiers need not only food, rest, wages, and arms; they have social, emotional, sexual longings and ties that their employers—state security institutions—must provision and police. As Jha's official inspection work of a BOP is melded with existential concerns around well-being—that of soldiers and his own—questions of violence and care in the barracks in the timespace of the routine erupt.[3]

How do the soldiers and officers in the BSF experience and inhabit places like the borderlands? What priorities and perspectives motivate their everyday working lives, and in turn animate the visions, claims, and privileged order of security institutions? Bringing a "feminist curiosity" (Enloe 2007) about how the Indian state provisions and polices barracks at scale illuminates the militarized sociospatial world that has rooted, grown, and become routine in the name of improved care and welfare in disparate borderland locales across the country. Security institutions themselves remain black boxes, not least because they are notoriously closed off and difficult to study ethnographically. Neither the publicized international defense deals nor spectacularly paraded counterinsurgency violence, the social and spatial inscriptions through which security institutions expand and entrench, in and as routine, typically remain the unexamined background to the supposed front lines of their impact. Turning an ethnographic eye to the "work of manning a border" (Reeves 2014, 174), the embodied and gendered labors, relations, and material claims with which members of armed forces and security institutions define their work and workplaces reveals the fraught construction and maintenance of "the military normal" (Lutz 2009).

Borderlands have become central to the anthropology of security and militarism (Díaz-Barriga and Dorsey 2020; Andersson 2014; Jusionyte 2015; Ghosh 2019, 2023; Follis 2012). Militarization at and of borders has "powerful spatial and ideological effects, changing the visual landscape, the language and social norms, and the local and global economy" (Gohain 2015, 22). Historical and anthropological work has shown security practices in borderlands to be violent and disenfranchising for residents (Sur 2020; Galemba 2017; Bhan 2013), even as

developmental interventions for borderland residents privilege statist priorities of territorial control and nation-building (Gupta 2023; Guyot-Rechard 2015). But what do borderlands mean to contemporary security institutions? This article joins a growing body of anthropological work focusing on security actors and institutions that wield the power of state violence—and not its victims—to interrogate the sites, scales, and logics of power through which they operate (Ben-Ari and Frühstück 2003; Al-Bulushi, Ghosh, and Grewal 2023; Bajoghli 2019; Rashid 2020). I am interested in what borderland barracks, like in this part of India's border with Bangladesh, reveal about India's expanding security regime, and about how we understand postcolonial militarism from such a vantage point. Across the postcolonial world, and certainly in South Asia, the expansion of the security state has not been restricted to violent episodes or specific places, but has proved constitutive of nation-state formation (Rashid 2020; Ali et al. 2019; Khanikar 2018; Lokaneeta 2020). To consider what militarism looks like in the majority world means to take security institutions as central to the history and politics of the postcolonial state (Al-Bulushi, Ghosh, and Grewal 2022; Al-Bulushi 2019; Jaffe 2019; Rizvi 2019).

CARE AND PROVISIONING IN THE BARRACKS: Theorizing Constructive Security

Barracks, in Danny Hoffman's (2007, 402) analysis of the organization of violence in West African cities, "concentrate bodies (particularly male bodies) and subjects into formations that can be deployed quickly and efficiently to any corner of the empire." By studying barracks ethnographically, I share in Hoffman's (2007, 404) attention to "what is being produced," rather than exclusively focusing on what is destroyed in postcolonial regimes of security and militarism. While the organization of masculine labor and its traffic in an economy of violence constitutes the focus of Hoffman's analysis, I shift our gaze, empirically and conceptually, to the infrastructures of care and social reproduction that undergirds military labor. These infrastructures, and the security logics that underpin and emerge from them, represent vital sites of militarism: to focus on them is to subject to critical scrutiny the "everydayness of violence work" (Tahir 2019), including the affects, structures, and relations through which violence workers demand and receive privileges (Schrader 2019; Açıksöz 2019).

Putting the anthropology of space and a materialist approach to landscape in conversation with feminist scholarship on security regimes and militarism reveals how sociospatial practices of care and infrastructures of reproduction can cloak and recompose questions of violence as security institutions expand and

endure. I explore the social and spatial transformations entailed in making borderlands into barracks, sites where increasing numbers of BSF soldiers come to live and work through ever-expanding infrastructures: outposts with barracks, family quarters, roads to support vehicular movement, watchtowers, checkpoints, and the walls to protect them. The "political aesthetics" (Larkin 2018) of such infrastructures of work and dwelling expose the chasms between the barracks and the yard, the BSF and civilians, and the soldiers and their families as they are maintained and bridged through the expectations and provisioning of care. Taking the material, discursive, and ideological transformation of borderlands into barracks as an ethnographic object reveals what I term a mode of *constructive security*, that is, material infrastructures that hinge social and spatial relations within and around the security institution and provision for soldiers' predominantly reproductive needs. This is not a reactive timespace of war, conflict, and spectacular violence; rather, it constitutes a loosely indefinite timespace of war-preparedness and investments into the "promise of infrastructure" (Larkin 2018, 176). I propose "constructive security" as a mode of postcolonial militarism, through which state security actors drive the production and consolidation of a national geography of security.

In describing these sociospatial transformations of borderlands into barracks ethnographically, I suggest we think of them in terms of what M. Murphy (2017, 141–42) calls "distributed reproduction," enabling not only the expansive presence of the Indian security state but its durability across vast and disparate borderland locales. Accounting for "the uneven relations and infrastructures that shape what forms of life are supported to persist, thrive, and alter, and what forms of life are destroyed, injured, and constrained" is integral to the production and provision of care and welfare for the BSF along India's borders. Expanding through this constructive mode, the postcolonial state appears in its well-worn developmental and welfare guise. The relationship between violence and care—the thriving of soldierly work and living and its breakdown—appears always on edge, continuously summoning more material resources and sociospatial work to hold in place. Theorizing constructive security through such a feminist analysis illuminates the entanglement of violence and care within security institutions and with its outsides. Three ethnographic sections trace the sociospatial inscriptions of this mode of constructive security in a twofold way: a) how security needs become durably entrenched and prioritized in distinct borderland locales across the country; b) how security needs incorporate and thereby connect such distinct locales into a national geography of security, in equivalence to one another.

At its broadest I am concerned with how security regimes occupy and militarize space in times and places democratically, not in war but in war-preparedness (Lutz 2002; Bhan 2013), building on a vital feminist reconceptualization of militarization from the masculinist and spectacular front lines to the timespaces of the "homefront" (Lutz 2002; Enloe 2007). One way to follow this question is to examine the gendered forms of affect—grief, love, attachment—as key to the work of and reproduction of security regimes, shaping political discourse, imaginaries, and relations (Rashid 2020; Ali 2019; Wool 2020; Açıksöz 2019). As this body of work in feminist political anthropology suggests, heteronormative discourses of home and family are invoked to justify the militarized responses to security threats (Razavi 2021; Grewal 2017; De Mel 2007). I develop a different approach, complementing this first one to examine how the occupation and transformation of space and claims to material and infrastructural expansions emerge from the insides of security institutions such as the BSF through heteronormative forms of provisioning and policing sociality and well-being. My reference to geographies is not metaphorical. "Military's geographies are about the control of space," writes the geographer Rachel Woodward (2004, 3), specifying the critical examination necessary of the relations to land, landscape, and place for "creating the necessary preconditions for military activities."

The three ethnographic sections that follow trace how agrarian borderlands are remade into a national geography of security: first, seeing borderlands as a soldier, as a place of work; second, spatial transformations in security infrastructures; and third, the social relations and care being privileged and provisioned. I draw on long-term ethnographic research in the borderlands of northern West Bengal, India, since 2011, centered around the place I call Kathalbari, for tracing material and spatial transformations of borderlands into, primarily, places of work and dwelling for the BSF. I combine this with interviews conducted with BSF officers and soldiers, retired and currently serving, participant observation at BOPs, battalion headquarters, and family quarters in north Bengal since 2018, as well as the analysis of government documents such as parliamentary debates and committee reports. Soldiers and officers in the BSF share in the production of a geography of national security by connecting disparate localities, for example, comparing villages in the Bengal borderlands to those in Gujarat or Kashmir. Paying attention to this work of connection reveals not only *how* a national security geography is produced but *what* this geography is meant to be: not only a map of threats but, for the soldier, a map of standardized sites of duty, as well as of dwelling—imagined and experienced as timespaces of violence and care.

But first we turn to a brief material history of barracks in India's borderlands as a modular form, the smallest replicable unit in a national security geography.

BARRACKS IN THE BORDERLANDS OF INDIA

The Kathalbari Border Outpost (BOP) in northern West Bengal is an unremarkable one in the BSF's geography. The border outposts, referred to as "camps" in common parlance, both Bengali and Hindi, are field offices and barracks used and maintained by the security forces along the length of India's borders. Comprising barracks and space for the storage of weapons, they are the smallest organizational and operational unit for the BSF. While they wall out local communities, barracks serve as what Hoffman (2007, 408) calls "a complete social space" for soldiers and officers while they live there.

Soon after Partition in 1947, hundreds of such BOPs cropped up along India's borders with Pakistan in the east and the west (van Schendel 2005, 95). In the east, the BOPs proved integral to making the "patchwork border," demarcating and occupying national territory (van Schendel 2005) long before India started constructing a fence that has now become the iconic image of border security in this region. The BSF started with twenty-five battalions in 1965, when it was brought into existence on the heels of the Sino-India War (1962) and the India-Pakistan War (1965). Established as a centrally administered paramilitary force, it took over the mandate of policing India's borders from the state police of the various border states (van Schendel 2005; Ibrahim 2017). Its peacetime role is to secure India's border with Pakistan (3,323 km) and Bangladesh (4,096 km); in reality it has also been used widely for armed counterinsurgency operations in Nagaland, Mizoram, Kashmir, Punjab, and central India, as well as in election duties and disaster relief. While government reports chart the transformations in terms of strength, budgets, and expenditures, officers and soldiers from the first generation of recruits narrate the transformation of the BSF in embodied, material terms: the kind of barracks, how the food tastes, the scratchiness of the uniforms, the facilities at headquarters, including housing and communication with families.

The BSF's current strength of 192 battalions, with 270,000 personnel, makes it the largest border-guarding force in the world. Parliamentary debates over the decades attest to new battalions being requested and granted, additional BOPs being sanctioned, greater budgets being allocated to fencing, floodlighting, and securing by various technological additions. The number of BOPs along the India-Bangladesh border has increased dramatically in the past two decades—from about 731 in 1999 to 1,011 in 2017, with a further 326 sanctioned for

construction.[4] Since the mid-2010s, the goal has been to fortify and operationally manage the 4,096 kilometer-long India-Bangladesh border and the 3,323 kilometer-long India-Pakistan border such that there is a border outpost every 3.5 kilometers. While conventional security strategy analysts debate their peacetime versus wartime roles, the people in the BSF are trained and live permanently suspended in war-preparedness, a timespace with its own moods, expectations, and designs.

Figures 1 and 2. Insides and outsides of barracks in a newly built "composite" BOP, West Bengal, 2022. Photo by Sahana Ghosh.

Architecturally and functionally speaking, the heart of border outposts are barracks for troops. Augmenting these barracks are a kitchen, a common mess in which meals are eaten, if space is available, a separate recreation room with a TV and some games. These all make for spaces in which to eat, sleep, bathe, dress, and occasionally relax in the few hours that soldiers spend off duty while deployed at the border. In addition to these shared spaces of care, there are a set of common areas of work in the BOP: an open space where the troops "fall in" routinely each morning and whenever else an announcement is necessary; a public meeting room usually right next to the outpost entrance where local residents or civilians are met; a weapons and equipment storage unit; an administrative office; and a Hindu place of worship. Architectural designs for BOPs vary. When a new model is introduced, such as the "composite BOP," resolving the difficulties of land acquisition in West Bengal by designing a horizontally laid out outpost that used the available road space by the border fence, several hundred are built in that design (see Figures 1 and 2).

While the material conditions of the BOPs may vary tremendously depending on locale, from the comfortable ones in Gujarat or Punjab to makeshift ones with hazardous bathrooms in the forested areas of Tripura, they remain similar in key ways: flower beds laid out neatly in straight lines, names of buildings in Hindi, inspirational quotes in Hindi exalting discipline and sacrifice (see Figure 3). The modularity of the constituent structures and the shared aesthetic

Figure 3. "Discipline makes the nation great": barracks in a BOP, West Bengal, 2019. Photo by Sahana Ghosh.

features ensure that the barracks *feel* the same for the itinerant troops who move in and out. Wherever you are, it is the same food, the same rules, the same fall-in, the same routine, and largely the same enemy with some local variation. "The routine gets *set* in your body. You don't have to think about it. What do you mean how is that BOP? This BOP, that BOP, those differences don't matter to us, *border duty* means that same routine that I just told you," snapped a young *jawan* impatiently at me. After he had told me in hour-by-hour detail what the "duty at the border" routine meant, I had tried to elicit a more specific description by asking about the difference between two BOPs he had recently moved between. The outposts thus represent the timespace of the military routine: both in material-aesthetic form and in experience of "the ambient life" mediated by unremarkable yet essential infrastructures (Larkin 2018, 177).

Typically measured out in postings of five years, a standard period of deployment in one border location, soldiers live and work in battalions circulating between BOPs within the battalion's designed area of duty. The capacity of the barracks is elastic, and this elasticity itself is telling of the priorities of speed and efficiency of deployment under which the soldiers eat and sleep. They move between the BOPs—*buxa bistar uthake* (picking up the box and the bedding)—a recurrent phrase with which *jawans* described the sudden yet expected mobility between BOPs. The sameness and the insignificance of distinction, indeed the absence of distinction, are "the tactile aesthetics" of the barracks: these embodied experiences refer to the ways in which "political aesthetics sutures the material and the figural" (Larkin 2018, 177). Enormous resources are devoted not only to producing sameness but to carefully raising the infrastructural provisions across all borderland locales to erase, to the extent possible, distinctions of terrain and to be more explicitly equivalent in a national security geography.

In an overview of the growth of the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) in postcolonial India, of which the BSF forms part, Yashovardhan Azad (2023) notes that budgetary allocation increased nearly twelvefold between 2000 and 2020 in nominal terms, and 3.3 times in real terms.[5] Over time, the demand by the BSF to the Indian Home Ministry's budget for *more* barracks in the borderlands to house their troops has shifted to *better* housing, food, and provisions such as family quarters and regular leaves. These demands characterize such care and welfare for the troops as priorities to ensure the BSF's effectiveness as a vital institution of national security. They also become occasion to display the postcolonial state's care toward soldiers, its exemplary citizens (Cowen 2008). While such measures radically improve the working conditions of soldiers, redressing some of the hardships they experience, at a structural level they demand

enormous resources and investment in durable infrastructures, far greater than the arms and defense deals that typically attract attention. Understanding the costs of militarism must grapple with such expansion.

SEEING LIKE A SOLDIER

Sunil, a senior jawan, was in the Bengal borderlands for the second time in his twenty-three-year-long career and offered a portrait of the changes he has witnessed.

> It is just as bad as it was when I was first here. It may look easier than the hills [in the northeastern states of Tripura and Meghalaya], but it is not so. On the surface of the water, it might look like floating plants or bamboo, but beneath might be bundles of phensedyl or ganja. At night, cows are sent through the water. Tall crops in the fields obstruct our view. When it rains, it is impossible to see or cycle too fast—in seconds the fence can be cut or something can be thrown across. It is better now, though, because there are more of us and we have some equipment. But because of that there is also a lot of pressure—if anything happens on your watch, your record will get spoilt, you might even get punished. So I would say it is harder now.

Sunil's list and listing proved stressful; I could feel that I was holding my breath as he spoke.

Seeing like a soldier brings together the humans, plants, landscape, and material infrastructures of the place of duty with the bureaucratic measures of performance and vigilance against indiscipline. *Jawans* and officers come to view landscape as a combination of physical and social geographies through the foundational training they receive and, most important, in practice through field deployment across diverse sites in India (see Figure 4). Farmers and the crops they grow, cattle and their transporters, water hyacinth and the stems of banana plants afloat in the water, irrigation channels and embankments can all signify danger and suspicion. Seeing like a soldier means to unsee these landscapes as agrarian homelands and place them instead in a national security geography of work in relation to one another. Tall and dense crops like jute, corn, and mustard feel frustrating because they obstruct view; they are also the grounds of comparison between disparate sites, for example, the agrarian borderlands of Punjab or Bengal. A small river in north Bengal, in which a soldier drowned while chasing a group of cattle smugglers in the dark and in blinding rain during

Figure 4. Twitter post from the main BSF Twitter handle featuring the hardships of lookouts, the lookout as a hardship.

a monsoon night, is spoken of as *bhayankar* (monstrous). Years after that battalion has left the region, the story of this death introduces the monstrous features of the landscape to successive batches of soldiers deployed to the area.

As ethnographers of the postcolonial borderlands of South Asia have documented (Cons 2016; Sur 2019; Ibrahim 2017), the state's enclosure of land in attempts at resolving its messiness—acquiring, demarcating, occupying, and securing—while maintaining reasonable relations with borderland locals presents one set of challenges. Situating lookouts engages landscape in two other distinctly embodied ways. As Christopher Tilley and Kate Cameron-Daum (2017) elaborate in their description of Royal Marines training in the bushlands of eastern Devon in the United Kingdom, the vantage of the "panoramic sketch" must present not only an advantageous perspective on the surrounding area around that can be shared between soldiers from one shift to another; it must also present a route map of speedy and safe movement. These "techniques of the body" (Mauss 1973)—learned, honed, and transmitted systematically—turn each locale in the Bengal borderlands into a type to be incorporated into

a larger geography of national security that spans entire careers. Deployment to the Bengal borderlands bids the BSF to imagine, know, and stretch the land and landscape by encoding these ideas of suspicion, fear, and self-protection through physical tactics, architectural forms, and spatial design. To be sure, the soldierly reading of landscape makes for a masculinist one of barrier and maneuver. But, as these narratives emphasize, also one of great vulnerability (Figure 4).

I met Yash when he was deployed at the Kathalbari BOP, in the year of the suicide in Yash's own battalion. This was to be Yash's last posting; he was looking forward to retiring after twenty-eight years of service. He was tired and completely worn out. While pensions and financial calculations about savings and retirement benefits were uppermost on his mind, he questioned the classification of postings by hardship. Considering the physical and psychological toll a posting at the Bengal border takes on *jawans* and officers alike, he mused, it appears at least as bad as one in Kashmir or Mizoram. "Punjab is the best, there are a lot of *suvidhaye* [conveniences and benefits] there," he claimed, specifying the availability of family quarters, good transportation connections, and comfortable conditions of duty. A "hard" posting classification considered risk to life (such as in Kashmir) as well as remoteness and the availability of infrastructural facilities (such as in anti-Naxal operations in central India), and it translated into a daily hardship allowance that significantly boosted the soldier's monthly salary. The Bengal borderlands lagged on benefits but, not classified as a "hard" posting, did not qualify for additional material benefits.

While there is considerable scholarship on the politics of mapping and cartography, particularly state enclosure and territorialization through such tools (van Schendel 2005; Cons 2016; Reeves 2014) these conversations draw our attention to soldiers' phenomenology of borderlands as sites of work. The expression and circulation of these embodied experiences of soldiering map and reframe the borderlands as sites of work and dwelling, forming the basis of institutional transformation into a language of infrastructural needs, codified in training and rendered comparable across a national geography of security. The hashtag #firstlineofdefence, which frames the BSF's official image-making (Figure 4), to the soldier means quite literally offering up their own bodies as a "human fence," as the *jawans* frequently put it. For the security institution, the borderland-as-workplace is portrayed as an unpeopled landscape, where the presence of uncooperative people figures as a hindrance to the objective of protecting national security. Along the India-Bangladesh border, soldiers on the ground experience the unreadiness of this borderland-as-workplace as maddening. It necessitates work they were not trained to undertake and yet were expected to perform daily with

punitive consequences in cases of failure, as Yash and Sunil noted. Soldiers experienced an acute disconnect from the official posturing of the heroic invulnerability of the BSF, emphasizing instead the Bengal borderlands as a treacherous site of national security in terms of personal and professional safety. So, while there were no territorial disputes at the so-called friendly border between India and Bangladesh, in contrast to the hostile India-Pakistan border, these borderlands were not fit to be occupied by the BSF. They were not already established as barracks, as prioritized sites of and for national security actors. The BSF had to produce them as such.

ENCLOSURE

The story of the development of the Indian security state could be told as the story of the enclosure of land. While the empirical enormity of this is hard to convey in the deliberate absence of numbers—a feature of security regimes across the world (Lutz 2002; Woodward 2004)—more than a decade of research in a cluster of villages in northern Bengal has let me see this play out through parcels of agricultural land, held by marginal farmers in India's eastern borderlands.

The story of Kasim's land illustrates this well. Like most residents of India's agrarian borderlands, he is a smallholding farmer and had sold a portion of his cultivable land to the government in 2017. Amid cornfields, the BSF were building a concrete watchtower on that parcel of land (see Figure 5). Kasim was a prominent local political leader, representing a border-lying village, and in the decade I have known him, he has emerged as a vocal advocate for the BSF's

Figure 5. Cultivable land bought and a concrete watch-tower built on it by the BSF, border village, West Bengal. Photo by Sahana Ghosh.

deployment at the border, away from patrols and checkpoints on village paths that are sometimes two to five kilometers away from the border. He told me he had earned very little money from the sale. And yet he had felt somewhat pressured into it by senior BSF officials. "They had been wanting for a long time, and no one was willing to give their land. The sahibs were calling me all the time—from Cooch Behar, from Siliguri, putting pressure through the party also. So I thought, why not, after all we have to live with them here. It is good for me, for my people, if I can keep up this good relation with the BSF."

The pressure that Kasim experienced in a border village of north Bengal is felt by thousands of farmers across the country from Jammu and Kashmir to Punjab, whose border-lying lands are as sensitive, and thereby subject to prohibitions, as they are precious (i.e., needed for security infrastructure such as fortifications, barracks). The Ministry of Defence is India's single-largest landowner.[6] The land under its authority is used by the Indian Army, Navy, and Air Force, as well as other associated organizations, for training, depots, airfields, housing, and a range of other activities. Additionally, paramilitary forces like the BSF have been steadily acquiring land, often agricultural, to accommodate expanding numbers into more BOPs and their improved security infrastructures, such as bigger and more permanent watchtowers, roads, and patrol shelters in border districts. In South Asia, feminist scholars have long joined the call to scrutinize the constitutive political economic relations between patriarchy and militarism (Enloe 2007). Yet militarization has been framed as something that "surfaced intermittently in some regions and states like Kashmir, the North-East and even Andhra Pradesh" (Chenoy 2002, 123). The enclosure of land by the security state is a contentious issue, not least because it is so invisible. As Woodward (2004) notes, in most cases it does not involve the show of military might, but it illustrates a constitutive condition of the intimate expansion of postcolonial governance (Ali et al. 2019; Raheja 2022; Rizvi 2019).

Climbing up on to the partially built watchtower on what had been Kasim's land, we saw the cornfields transformed. We could see far, a distance not visible from any other known vantage point. I squealed in recognition of the marshes that extend across into Bangladesh, taking in how close they felt from that view, a fact I knew in theory but had not *seen* in this way before. Kasim laughed at my reaction and continued pointing out ordinary landmarks, all common nouns: paddy, jute, fallow; irrigation motor, bridge, floodlights; village, paths. Temporarily we inhabited the unique, incomplete view of the BSF watchtower-to-be, at once an open view and an enclosed space. We could also see from above, on to, and through the cornfields, yet another vantage point not quite possible with

your feet on the ground. This was 2019; when I visited next in 2022, after a pandemic-induced hiatus, the watchtower was in use and out of bounds for civilians.

No doubt, from the point of view of borderland residents, such enclosures embody the masculinist, sovereign power of the state. Yet not only are these postcolonial enclosures and structures in India being "built to last" (Weiss 2021), in contrast to the settler-colonial context of Haida Gwaii in Canada that Joseph Weiss describes, but it also matters what they are for: barracks to house soldiers, improved structures for their work, and family housing. These infrastructures draw on the sympathy of borderland residents and general publics for the normative forms of care and social reproduction that they represent. As with Kasim, for example, whose resignation is laced with the discourse of necessity—"odero dorkar" (they also need these)—almost despite himself. Social and political economic relations in the wake of such security infrastructures may shift in each local instance, but the postcolonial state's privileging of the borderlands as places of work and dwelling is consolidated through the foreverness of these infrastructures for security labor, care, and reproduction.

The starkest material and spatial transformation I observed in this period was new buildings on existing land. About a kilometer away from the Kathalbari BOP lay a plot of land, right in the middle of two border villages and next to a thoroughfare. While the agrarian land all around had been carved up into homesteads over the years because of proximity to the road, everyone knew that this fallow plot belonged to the BSF. When I returned to Kathalbari in 2022, I could no longer see across the plot to the homes I could recognize on the other side. The land had been built on, a set of multistoried buildings, enclosed by a concrete wall, that locals referred to as a *campus*, a term noticeably different from the *camp* or *post* used to describe the barracks and outposts. Rumor had it that it was to be family quarters for whichever battalion would be deployed in that area.

Between 2000 and 2018, 700 personnel across the Central Armed Police Forces committed suicide (Azad 2023). In 2018, the number of suicides in the BSF significantly exceeded the number of deaths on duty, a fact mentioned to me by numerous officers as evidence of the institution's most urgent priorities. One officer shared that he was so troubled by the number of suicides that he had submitted proposals to undertake a study of causes and to explore potential institutional measures, but all of them had been denied. Referring to better pay, leaves, material conditions of work and life, he said, "So much is better now, yet clearly many things are wrong, missing. We need to understand this puzzle." He urged me to focus on this issue. Suicides mark not only a violent breakdown of

Figure 6. BSF family housing, West Bengal, 2022. Photo by Sahana Ghosh.

the individual but they also threaten the capacity of the state to control and reproduce its military labor. Internal institutional surveys of BSF personnel reveal that, overwhelmingly, the causes of stress are attributed to lack of adequate sleep and rest, coupled with separation from family (Chhabra and Chhabra 2013). The concern about separation from family surfaced in two ways in this study: the inability to house their family close to them, as well the absence of leave to visit family in times of need. Indeed, Sandeep Jha, too, found in his informal inquiry that the soldier had had his request for leave denied amid troubles at his home front just before he decided to take his own life. The announcement by the central government in 2019 of a hundred days of annual leave and greater housing satisfaction, so that soldiers' families could be accommodated close to them (see Figure 6), responds to such violent breakdowns.[7]

"Housing is a big issue, you must be knowing. There are many efforts and policies at the upper levels to improve housing satisfaction for the jawans," the commanding officer at Kathalbari BOP maintained diplomatically. "Housing satisfaction," a measure of the percentage of soldiers who applied for family quarters and received it (see Figure 6), has been a core political issue for the Narendra Modi–led BJP government since it came to power in 2014. Amit Shah, home minister since 2019, has publicly committed to an expansion of barracks and family quarters for the troops of central security forces at electoral campaigns and public events.[8] In 2018, the BSF announced that its proposal to build guest-house facilities at 192 locations across various Indian borderlands had been

approved by the central government. Newlywed *jawans* would receive priority to be close to their new brides; one press report announced this scheme as "BSF to set up guesthouses to beat loneliness of just-married *jawans*."[9] Recognizing that *jawans* spend around thirty years of their lives away from their families, this scheme under which the family quarters in Kathalbari were constructed, would address in the short-term urgent concerns of loneliness, marital discord, and sexual and emotional frustrations by allowing soldiers to host their new wives, small children, and other family members for up to a fortnight in a year. The institutionalized protection and provision for the soldier's heteronormative family and its reproduction lies at the heart of the expansion of the postcolonial security state.

Care in contexts of policing and security, as feminist anthropologists have shown, is deeply enmeshed with the violence and heteronormativity of the state (Mulla 2014; Baxi 2013; Wool 2020). Barracks in the borderlands embody those enmeshed relations of care in terms that seek to scaffold "distributed reproduction" (Murphy 2017), privileging the thriving of some and specific social relations at the expense of others. Enclosing more and more land to house soldiers and accommodate their needs, borderlands as barracks constitutes a proliferation of "stealth architecture" (Davis 1990), what Anoma Pieris (2014, 395), in the context of urban Colombo, theorizes as the "fortification of the home." This militarization—a process of enclosure and displacement most acutely on display in agrarian borderlands like Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, and West Bengal, where civilian groups estimate that half of cultivable land in border villages has been acquired or occupied by security institutions—does not emerge under exigent conditions of conflict, but proceeds as part of the developmental growth and welfare capacity of the postcolonial state.[10] Such is the many-layered entanglement of violence and care: across the country, constructive security thus clears the ground for a (re)productive organization of space and labor within the militarized fold. We see the cracks in this entanglement and its sociospatial inscription in the next section.

NO FRIENDSHIPS PLEASE/*DOSTI MANA HAIN*

Amit Pandey told me that he had to turn down a wedding invitation from the elected village head that week. "I feel bad. I've come to know him quite well." I wondered what was stopping him—it seemed a harmless and public-facing social visit. "If I go, for sure someone will snitch. He's too close to this one, that one, they'll say, and unnecessarily my record will get ruined." Amit was a

junior officer, and this was his first field posting after his training. He was in his mid-twenties, unmarried, and full of positive energy. "Dosti mana hain" (friendships are prohibited), he said directly, with emphasis. "If we [referring to BSF officers] get bored, we go over to each other's BOP and eat together, socialize a little bit," he continued, citing this prohibition as one of the standard operating protocols that govern their lives in the borderlands of India, maintaining the hierarchies of rank within and distinction from civilians beyond the BSF. "Otherwise wait to go to HQ, something or the other always comes up, it's OK." While in this instance Amit spoke of not taking his local acquaintanceships too far, during other chats he had talked about cultivating social ties with local political and religious leaders as an asset. "Conviviality" in and around barracks mutually benefit civilian and military interests, holding space for interdependencies that mediate life in the borderlands (Sur 2019; Reeves 2014). Such "security socialities" always tread the slippery lines of heteronormative propriety premised on the recognition of (predominantly) male soldiers as husbands, sons, and brothers laboring far away from their own families (Ghosh 2019).

Becoming a soldier demands a disembedding from familial social ties, where "disconnects are not a side effect of soldiering, but instead a necessary pre-condition for service in the military, one that is actively desired" (Rashid 2022, 2). The BSF is only beginning to acknowledge and address the tremendous violence that results from its governance of intimacy: a rigid sociospatial demarcation of the inside-outside of the world of the barracks produces a separation from familial ties, alongside a compulsory kinship within the boundaries of rank. Food, wages, work, and rest materially shape and sustain soldier's bodies while simultaneously incorporating them into an institutional ethos of military masculinity that demands suffering and sacrifice from an indistinguishable collective noun, the troops (Reeves 2014, 180–87). This intense incorporation into militarized violence and care rubs up against their everyday lives working in the borderlands, where soldiers and officers have to continuously engage more fluid sociospatial boundaries. An award-winning Bengali film, *Sankhachil* (2016), made jointly by Indian and Bangladeshi production houses, depicted the emotional attachment that develops between a soldier from northern India—like Amit, Sunil, and Yash—and a young Bangladeshi girl living on the other side of the border, due to which he helps her and her family clandestinely cross the border for medical treatment in West Bengal, India. While the film tries to humanize the BSF, an armed force that has been described as "trigger happy" (HRW 2010), it surfaces an unresolved tension around friendship and sociality at the heart of such security institutions.

How, then, should we make sense of Mangal Paasi's enthusiasm for his fraternal friendship with the two BSF officers in the story with which I began? What kind of kinship was this reaching toward and what makes it tolerable for the BSF? As a Dalit man of Bihari origin in a region of either Bengali Muslims or Rajbangsi, Paasi's boast of intimacy through commensality with the BSF assumes significance as an instance of making kin beyond caste hierarchies and fitting into the national and modular cultural ethos of the barracks. Barracks, the BSF insists, are spaces sans caste as soldiers cook, eat, and observe their personal religious beliefs in proximity, regardless of caste, class, ethnic, and religious differences. Almost all BOPs, and certainly all larger residential and administrative sites such as battalion headquarters and family housing, have Hindu temples. This, too, constitutes a standard feature of the BSF's sociospatial world. While local religious traditions may not exactly converge with the dominant and standardized Hindu worship—in this case it did not in a predominantly Rajbangsi north Bengal—participating in a shared caste-Hindu religious world of the barracks allowed Mangal Paasi to be kin with the BSF in *their* sacred geography of national security. This was permissible as consistent with the BSF's normative sociospatial boundaries, while prohibiting the potentially dangerous friendships that officers like Amit might foster with civilians was deemed necessary.

The spatial and temporal life of the security forces is ordered by routine activities within the BOP, and movements between the BOPs, checkpoints, and roving patrols through six hourly chunks of on-duty/off-duty. These rhythms are punctuated by hours and moments of leisure—buying cigarettes at a tea stall; going to temple in the nearest town or perhaps seeing the local astrologer;

Figure 7. Everyday leisure and pleasure within the BSF stretch the barracks to its outsides. Photo by Sahana Ghosh.

playing volleyball outside the BOP on common land that villagers used to graze their cattle and goats (Figure 7). Such activities of leisure and pleasure draw the soldiers in the BSF out of their camps into sight in the borderlands, including through "a widespread appropriation of local land, labor, and resources," that Mona Bhan (2013, 157) describes in the context of the Indian Army in Kargil, on India's western border. In India's agrarian borderlands, these could be cultivable lands held by small or marginal farmers or commons used for grazing that are appropriated, devalued in worth, or become inaccessible for civilian use (Bhan 2013; Gupta 2023; Ghosh 2023) when remade as a site of and for security. If the armed forces are the organization of labor for the state's monopoly on force in a liberal democracy, then the productive and reproductive activities of the BSF extend across the barracks in the borderlands to the borderlands as barracks. In progress and highly fragile in balancing violence and care inside and outside the barracks, as we have seen, the logic of constructive security is thus exhibited in governing sociality: provisioning, prohibiting, and productively managing bodies and relations.

Samir Basu, a retired officer from West Bengal, recalled his days as a young officer posted in north Bengal in the mid-1980s when the BOPs were few and far apart. The border fence had not yet been built, and internal institutional mechanisms of vigilance were patchy. "Alcohol, meat, and prostitutes [*mod, mangsho, magi*]—these were the weaknesses of a *jawan*. We [young officers] were told to keep an eye on them for this. Who [meaning borderland locals] was luring them away with these temptations, with the appearance of *khatir* [friendliness] and *moja* [fun], we would have to continuously warn them." He emphasized that while there had been a world of change in the intervening decades until his retirement as a senior officer in the late 2010s, even now these "basic needs" remain. "That is partly why the force is doing so much to make sure that the *jawan* can spend time regularly with his wife, especially the newly married ones. We prioritize their leaves. Go home two, three times a year, we say!" The "human fence" that the soldiers of the BSF provide with their bodies, far from the heroic images that feature in Bollywood films and the BSF's own publicity posts, emerges in this picture as vulnerable not to the enemy's bullets but in its thickly sexual and social needs. In this discourse, *jawans* are heteronormatively desiring bodies, needing continuous discipline and vigilance, a discourse reminiscent of racialized colonial discipline (Peers 2006).

The BSF, then, is deeply animated by provisioning and policing social relations, through bureaucratic vigilance and spatial forms for dwelling and operational infrastructures alike. Heteronormative kinship and reproductive care are

acknowledged as constitutive of its ability to constitute an efficient security institution. The soldier's "heteronational body" (Wool 2015), predominantly male, must be housed and cared for toward the right kind of reproductive sexuality. Bodies' excesses needed to be channeled into and kept within the thick "homosociality and organizationally enforced interconnectedness" of the BSF and the reproductive sexuality of the heteropatriarchal household (Wool 2015, 174). Security infrastructures, distinct in purposes of dwelling (e.g., family housing, barracks) and operational work (e.g., watchtowers, shelters), thus "compress within them different operations" (Larkin 2018, 176) in the name of care for soldiers, treading the chasms between work/home, family/soldier, and civilian/BSF.

BORDERLANDS AS BARRACKS

From cornfield to watchtower, grazing grounds to family quarters, the violence of enclosure makes possible the care of the soldier by the state. Constructive security produces the borderlands as barracks through this long-term infrastructural investment in better living and more effective working in the timespace of war-preparedness. While the reproductive needs of soldiers and military institutions are claimed, privileged, and normalized as routine, ethnographic attention through a feminist lens reveals the fragile balance of violence and welfare within security institutions and the disruptive potential of questions of care. We see how incorporation and equivalence (cf. Reeves 2014, 180)—of spaces and individual soldierly careers—into the fold of security is attempted, as well as the enormous systemic efforts invested in sustaining them.

Barracks constitute the material form of durability amid mobility for the BSF: housing soldiers and concentrating all the essential infrastructures—military, social—necessary to reproduce and ready them for deployment by the state. The borderlands—in Bengal and elsewhere—feature as civilian social worlds from which soldiers must be disengaged and walled off for borderlands as barracks to be properly produced and incorporated into the national geography of security. At the same time, borderlands as barracks, in that very same national geography, demand their own forms of sociality, care, and welfare. The BSF inhabit BOPs in eastern India, and any specific site of deployment, literally and discursively through an interreferentiality to other such borderland sites throughout the nation. The accounts from Yash and Sunil simultaneously situate the Bengal borderlands as a distinctive site of hardship and incorporate it through comparisons into a wider national geography through which they move in their career-long itineraries. In and through this typology, a national geography of security emerges as an experiential map, mediated by infrastructural and

administrative standardizations such as facilities in barracks, claims to leave and family housing, disciplinary mechanisms such as the duty record, and incentives such as hardship allowances. This production of equivalence sets up the conditions of possibility befitting violent security practices—spatially, the barracks as a holding ground for labor to be deployed in the service of the state and this borderland, and all borderlands as sites where we can expect the violent defense of the nation. What is created temporally as durable is a national geography of security into which distinct locales are incorporated and made habitable—indeed, over time, even hospitable—for the itinerant troops of the Indian BSF, not in the duress of war but in the timespaces of war-preparedness.

The *jawan* at the border grows more distant from the farmer in the field as the needs of the former are privileged at the cost of the latter, most poignantly in relation to land use. This essay has argued that the production of a national geography of security entails both the material occupation of space through the enclosure of land and the building housing infrastructures for troops *and* attending to rest and reproductive needs at individual bodily scales and that of households. Such a view shows that national security in the form of militarization cannot be understood as a coercive project alone; it is simultaneously a constructive one, particularly a reproductive one. This approach complements important work on militarization in/of borderlands as violence inflicted on residents and shifts the burden of understanding the actors, sites, and force of national security geographies from an overwhelming focus on the destructive and prohibitive impact on communities targeted as security threats and objects of policing and armed action. Instead, conceptualizing borderlands as barracks draws attention to the unobtrusive processes and rationales through which security geographies are produced, extended over timespaces, and woven into the everyday political economy of the postcolonial welfare state *as constructive*. The "violence of care" (Mulla 2014) is many hued; enclaving and expanding spatial and social relations of the barracks privilege the care and intimacies of militarized labor. The logic of constructive security is to provision, and thereby consolidate national security institutions in war-preparedness as an unobjectionable good for life in the postcolony.

ABSTRACT

What does militarism in the timespace of war-preparedness look like in the majority world? Drawing on ongoing research on soldiering in postcolonial India, focused on the Border Security Force, I examine everyday life and labor within security institutions: soldiers' routines in barracks, prohibited friendships, hardships, and longings. Bringing feminist thought and the political anthropology of security regimes into

conversation with a materialist approach to space, this article argues that borderland barracks prove key to the expansionist logic and durability of what I term "constructive security." The ethnographic study of barracks reveals this logic, i.e., the spatial and social inscriptions by which disparate locales across the country come to be reconstituted as places of work and dwelling for soldiers, privileging and provisioning their social reproduction through violence and care, and stitching together a national security geography. Such a view shows that postcolonial militarism cannot be understood as a coercive project alone; it is simultaneously a constructive one, particularly a reproductive one. [militarism; social reproduction; violence and care; military labor; security infrastructures; postcolonial state; feminist and political anthropology]

NOTES

Acknowledgments Many thanks to the *Cultural Anthropology* editorial collective, three reviewers, Sayd Randle, Hema Kiruppalini, and Jacob Rinck for their close readings and brilliant suggestions, all of which have greatly improved this article. I am grateful for the critical engagement with versions of this essay from audiences at South Asian Studies and the Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore, at the Annual Conference in South Asian Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison 2023, and NYU Department of Anthropology. Financial support from NUS (No. A-0000122-00-00) has made the research for the larger project on soldiering possible.

1. *Sahib* is an honorific term of address used in Hindi and Bengali to refer to officers by both lower-ranked soldiers and local civilians. A loanword from the original Arabic, the term came into wide practice throughout medieval South Asia. Under colonial rule it acquired racial connotations through military use as officers, and more generally white men, were referred to as *sahib*.
2. Rajbangsi is a federally listed Scheduled Caste, the most numerous one in the state of West Bengal, and its members are predominantly Vaishnavites.
3. Thanks to one of the reviewers for this formulation.
4. "Border Security: Capacity Building and Institutions," Parliamentary Report No. 203, 2017.
5. Border management has seen an increase of 42 percent, from ₹1,921.39 crore in 2021–22 to ₹2,517.02 crore in 2022–23, while border infrastructure has been allocated ₹2,744 crore, up from ₹2,130 crore in 2021–22. See an article in *The Hindu*, https://www.thehindu.com/business/budget/185-lakh-crore-allocation-to-mha-in-budget/article38358957.ece
6. See a January 10, 2022, article on the matter in *The Print*, https://theprint.in/defence/defence-ministrys-mammoth-digital-survey-of-17-78-lakh-acres-of-land-how-why-what-next/799318/
7. The housing satisfaction of *jawans* was 35 percent, compared to 81 percent for the senior-most officers, according to the parliamentary report, "Working Conditions in Border Guarding Forces," Report no. 214, 2018.
8. See an ABP Live article from December 4, 2021: https://news.abplive.com/news/india/home-minister-amit-shah-addresses-bsf-personnel-at-rohitash-border-takes-part-in-bada-khana-1497683
9. See an article from the *Deccan Herald* of April 8, 2018: https://www.deccanherald.com/content/669191/bsf-set-up-over-190.html
10. See an Al Jazeera article from October 30, 2019: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/30/indias-defences-eat-away-at-farmland-along-border-with-pakistan

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