

New Zealand India Research Institute

'Lines of Contention: The Rowmari-Tura Road'

By **Malini Sur**

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This paper explores an old trade route - the Rowmari-Tura road - that is today divided between Bangladesh and Northeast India. Although border residents in Rowmari (Bangladesh) narrate the road as evidence of historical connections, it is absent in Tura (Northeast India) and in British colonial archives. I take this disjuncture, between the road's contemporary ubiquity and its historical obscurity in British India's northeastern frontiers, to probe how the barely visible remnants of an old infrastructure cast a powerful physical presence. Reading the Rowmari-Tura road in the gaps of village conversations and British archives, I show how the drawing and redrawing of lines surveys and mapping, and road construction, repair and disrepair produced racial boundaries in British India's Garo Hills. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, road building rapidly transformed notions of territoriality, bodies, and cosmologies, legalized the segregation of the marshes and hills as distinct political spheres, and fixed the Garos as primitive subjects. I suggest that the history of the Rowmari-Tura road is central to probing the changing terms of contemporary violence along the India-Bangladesh borderlands.

Malini Sur is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Culture and Society and teaches anthropology at Western Sydney University. Her research addresses three lines of inquiry – agrarian borders, urban space and environment. The first examines fences, transnational flows, and citizenship. A second line of inquiry explores the relationship that mobility has to urban space, and specifically, with regard to bicycling and construction sites across Asian cities. Finally, she examines the afterlives of natural disasters, air pollution, and climate change. She researches these themes ethnographically and historically, and with keen attention to visual representation. She has conducted fieldwork in Bangladesh and India, and with South Asian asylum seekers in Belgium. Malini holds a PhD from the University of Amsterdam. Her publications have appeared in academic journals like *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, *HAU*, *Mobilities*, and *The Economic and Political Weekly*. She has co-edited a collection of essays entitled *Transnational Flows and Permissive Polities: Ethnographies of Human Mobility in Asia* (Amsterdam University Press, 2012). Her photographs from the field and her first documentary film *Life Cycle*, about the politics of cycling in the city of Kolkata, has been screened internationally.

EVENT DETAILS:

Thursday 12 October, 4.00-5.30pm
Old Kirk Building (OK 301)
Kelburn Campus

Limited seating – RSVP to india-research@vuw.ac.nz