

*Languages of secrecy and the secreting of language among the Khasi of northeastern  
Bangladesh*

Borders are one kind of prohibition. Like prohibitions, borders not only constrain, they also construct. Communities grow up around them, because of them, and some communities are defined by them. The Khasi community in Bangladesh is in large part defined in the Bangladeshi public sphere by its perceived relation to India. This makes it the object of suspicion. Being perennially suspect can stimulate an economy of secrets—an economy characterized by the restricted circulation of information and dependent on the glimpses of recognition that lend secrets power.

In this paper I examine how the border creates a community much of whose daily life is a secret kept from the state. That community, in part because of its status as secret, also craves recognition by the state. As a result, it attempts to find a place for itself in national narratives. But the act of recognition does not necessarily dispel a secret; perhaps the opposite occurs more often. Recognition may make the compulsion to retain secrets more acute. Drawing on my ethnographic fieldwork in a Khasi village in northeastern Bangladesh, I show how the Khasi community's treatment of language bespeaks a more general strategy of belonging at the border, where attempts to find oneself in the nation are accompanied by a reluctance to submit oneself entirely to its terms, where the desire to be recognized is attended by the desire to keep something else hidden from view.