Hydropower development and the meaning of place. Multi-ethnic hydropower struggles in Sikkim, India

Rinchu Doma Dukpa, Deepa Joshi, Rutgerd Boelens

ABSTRACT

Academic research and media tend to emphasize the strong opposition to hydropower development in Sikkim, India, and position this as resistance to an environmentally-destructive, trans-local development, particularly by the culturally-rooted, ethnic minority Bhutia and Lepcha communities. There are several accounts of contestations of hydropower development projects in India’s Eastern Himalayan States – signifying robust and predictable indigenous people-place connections. Why then, was the implementation of the largest, Teesta Stage III Hydro Electric Project, located in Chungthang Gram Panchayat Unit in North Sikkim, in the heartland of the Bhutia-Lepcha region, not contested? In unraveling this anomaly, our focus is to understand how people-place connections are shaped and differentially experienced. Our findings are that hydropower development has elicited diverse responses locally, ranging from fierce contestation to indifference, to enthusiastic acceptance. The complexity and malleability of “place” and people’s “sense of place” provide evidence that indigeneity does not always indicate resistance to large-scale project interventions. In ethnically and socio-politically fractured communities like Chungthang, trans-local developments can reinforce ethno-social divides and disparities, and re-align traditional place-based ethno-centric solidarities along new politically-motivated lines. We argue that linear, one-dimensional views of local social coalescence around place belie more complex relations, which evolve dynamically in diverse socio-cultural and politico-economic contexts.

1. Introduction

The Eastern Himalayan State of Sikkim, in India, is said to have a hydropower peak potential of 8000 megawatts (MW) (GoS, 2015a). This implies a key contribution to the 50,000 MW Indian Hydroelectric Initiative, launched in 2003 (Ramanathan and Abeygunawardena, 2007). A total of 29 large dams were proposed across Sikkim’s network of rivers and tributaries, mostly located in the North District in 2003 (Dharmadikary, 2008). Five large dams have been commissioned and over 10 are in different phases (CEA, 2016, 2017). This “hydro-rush” by India’s Central Government (GoI) and the Sikkim State Government (GoS) has prompted diverse responses. The North District (see Map 1), inhabited largely by indigenous1 Lepcha and Bhutia communities, is the centre of dam-related conflicts in the region. Research accounts of the opposition to large hydropower dams in Sikkim speak about contestations around geo-ethnicity; the objection to development-induced degradation and disregard of sacred and spiritual Bhutia-Lepcha (“BL”) landscapes/place (Arora, 2007a; Little, 2008, 2009; McDuie-Ra, 2011). In fact, in Sikkim, contestations against dams are considered to be “a Lepcha thing” (Little, 2010b:121).

Place – or, more accurately, the defense of constructions of place – has become an important object of struggle in the strategies of social movements (Escobar, 2001:139). In India, there are many accounts of indigenous people-nature relationships and struggles (Routledge, 2003; Sangvai, 2000; Narula, 2008). In discussing the struggles against displacement in the Sardar Sarovar dam on the Narmada river by the Adivasis, Baviskar (1995, 2005) however notes that claims of their unique indigenous identities, including their ecological virtues, are often defined and romanticised by outside others. She (ibid: 5111) notes that ‘we cannot assume that indigeneity is intrinsically a sign of

1 Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: rinchu.dukpa@wur.nl (R.D. Dukpa), ac3771@coventry.ac.uk (D. Joshi), rutgerd.boelens@wur.nl (R. Boelens).

1 The interpretation of the term ‘indigenous’ is myriad and contextual, depending also on who uses the concept and under what conditions. In India, the term commonly refers to the Tribal or the Adivasi, i.e. original dwellers (Rycroft, 2014). In this paper, we follow the 1994 definition framed during the United Nation Workshops on Indigenous and Tribal People’s Struggle for Right to Self-determination and Self-government (see Das, 2001). The terms indigenous and Adivasis are used interchangeably in this paper.
Map 1. Hydropower projects (Only those pertinent for the paper have been located, out of many more projects across Sikkim) in North Sikkim.

Source: Adapted from GoS and International Waters websites. Map not to scale (the map is not to scale because North Sikkim in India is a part of the sensitive Indo-China border region. It is a punishable offence in India to create maps of border regions, particularly by non-government entities for national security reasons.)
Taking note of the flaws in invariable people-place connection claims, we discuss how in the face of pronounced contestations against hydropower development across North Sikkim, the largest project in the state, the 1200 MW mega² Teesta Stage III Hydro Electric Project (henceforth Teesta Stage III), went ahead in Chungthang Gram Panchayat Unit (GPU) without any resistance from “local” communities. The socio-cultural concerns initially raised by a few local students and young professionals there fell on deaf ears during public hearings around the project, particularly when the eminent village elders welcomed it. The project, starting in 2007, lies in the heart of the BL landscape in Chungthang GPU in North Sikkim (see Map 2). The ethnic BL communities here did not contest the Teesta Stage III project, even though, just a few kilometers upstream from the dam location, the Bhutias of Lachung and Lachen, contested and successfully stopped hydropower projects (Wangchuk, 2007; Lepcha, 2012), just as the Lepchas opposed and got many projects cancelled in Dzongu – a few kilometers downstream of the Teesta Stage III dam site (Arora, 2008).

² Projects over 500 MW are usually considered ‘mega’ projects in India.
The question of interest to us was to understand what “goes on in Chungthang” that is different to other localities in Sikkim.

Our paper’s focus is not in understanding resistance to large dams. Rather, it is in understanding how people-place connections come into being, are experienced differentially; if and how these relations are embedded in place-history, and how they might evolve differently across situations and scenarios. From our findings, we note a definite “sense of place” (SoP) among indigenous Bhutias and Lepchas within Chungthang GPU. These groups ‘experience particular locations with a measure of groundedness; a sense of boundary; connection [of place] to everyday life and identity traversed by power’ (Escobar, 2001: 140).

Here, SoP refers to collective ‘meanings, beliefs, symbols, values and feelings that individuals and groups associate with a particular locality’ (William and Stewart, 1998:9), related to the “need to belong” (Baumeister and Leary, 1995: 497). It has been noted, that, a SoP goes well beyond immediate physical places to notions of space including social and historical contexts and situations (Tuan, 1974; Hummon, 1992).

SoP scholarship indicates that factors such as length of stay, familiarity, indigeneity, age, etc. shape people-place connections (Hummon, 1992; Hay, 1998a,b; Creswell, 2009). However our research indicates that these parameters are not necessarily linear and/or predictable in terms of socio-political impacts. In Chungthang GPU, place-based connections draw on the region’s socio-political history, in as much as these evolve and are reshaped continually by multiple global to local dynamics. When indigenous place boundaries are ruptured and made porous by trans-locally induced developments, there is often as, Escobar (2001) explains, boundaries created elsewhere - a reinforcing of social ties and political structures.

In the sections below, we explain Sikkim’s socio-political history to understand ethnicity, identity, claims, contestations and connections around place; particularly in relation to the confluence of placelessness with neighboring Kingdoms to neighboring Nepal.

Namgyal Dynasty and the Kingdom of Sikkim witnessed multiple territorial conflicts with neighbouring Kingdoms (Nepal, Bhutan, and Tibet) and with the British colonial government (Datta-Roy, 1984; Gol, 2011). These conflicts resulted in shifting administrative boundaries as well as ethnic hostilities. Following repeated attacks from across the Nepal border, in the late 18th century, Sikkim sought the British government’s help to protect and demarcate its territories – becoming a British protectorate in 1890 (Namgyal and Yeshey, 1908; GoS, 2008).

The period under the British resulted in new administrative structures, revenue systems, forest reservation rules and agricultural and infrastructural developments (Gol, 2008). Along with providing protection, the colonial government capitalized on Sikkim’s geographic location – enabling trade between India and Tibet through the shortest route through Sikkim (Gerar, 1938; Bhasin, 1989; Kharel, 2002). This necessitated road development that required a massive workforce, which was met by encouraging in-migration of labourers from neighboring Nepal. This influx significantly altered the Kingdom’s demographic composition (Schafer 1995; Gol, 2008). While the British encouraged labour migration from outside of Sikkim, they restricted the sale and/or transfer of BL lands to these labourers (i.e. non-BLs) without permission from the King’s office, through the approval of a Revenue Order in 1917 – Revenue Order No.1 (RO1).

After India gained independence in 1947, Sikkim’s British protectorate status was transferred to India in 1950, including charge of Sikkim’s foreign relations, defense and communications (Datta-Ray, 1984). It is worth mentioning that RO1 was retained by the then King of Sikkim in 1954 as a means to safeguard indigenous BL interests. However, RO1 no longer protected the land rights of Limboos, who were categorized as Nepalis in 1975 (Kazi, 1993). This hardened differences of ethnicity and indigeneity between the BLs and non-BL’s resident in Sikkim. When the British left India, the original Bhutia-Lepcha-Limboo inhabitants in the Kingdom of Sikkim were overwhelmingly outnumbered by migrant “others”, who were predominantly Nepalis (Little, 2010b; McAuliffe-Ra, 2011). This ethnically skewed demography impacts inter-ethnic politics in Sikkim and fractures the society into categories, colloquially known today as Sikkimese/non-Sikkimese; insiders outsiders and locals/non-locals (Arora, 2006; McAuliffe-Ra, 2011; Joshi, 2015; Huber and Joshi, 2015).

These ethnopolitical fractures are said to have resulted in the termination of the Namgyal Dynasty and the Kingdom’s political merger with India as its 22nd State, in 1975 (GoS, 2008), apparently encouraged and supported by the Gol (Datta-Ray, 1984; Rai, 2013). However ethnic fractures and contestations have not ended and are evident across socio-political spaces and processes (Sen, 1994; Thapa, 2002; Northeast Today, 2017).

Sikkim’s merger with India resulted in renewed development activities in the frontier regions. Reinforcing Sikkim’s northern and eastern borders with Tibet (now China) was a national-security priority, which required overcoming the difficult geographical terrains with infrastructural access (roads, bridges and army cantonments) to facilitate a strong Indian Army presence in the region. The 1950 Indo-Sikkimese Treaty further enabled GoI “the right to station troops anywhere in Sikkim” (Gol, 1950). These developments led to a second wave of labour influx from Nepal as well as “mainland” India into the Indo-China frontier regions of the newly created State of Sikkim (Datta-Ray, 1984;}

R.D. Dukpa et al.  
Geoforum 89 (2018) 60–72
Bhasin, 1989). A GoI led exploration of the water-abundant Himalayas’ hydropower potential was one of the outcomes of the opening-up of this otherwise geographically “restricted” area. It is worth mentioning here, that while territorial regulations like RO1 strictly remained in place, these restrictions have not applied to the [Indian] State, particularly the Indian Army, including power companies.

The infrastructural developments under GoI made these previously difficult, isolated regions like North Sikkim increasingly accessible and open to non-BL outsiders. But the entry of the Indian Army meant restriction and monitoring of historic trade activities and movement of people between Sikkim and Tibet (now China). The Indo-China war of the 1960’s finally led to complete closure of the Sikkim-Tibet border, ending centuries old traditional and economic ties between Sikkim and Tibet – most acutely felt along the newly created frontier border regions of Lachung and Lachen (Bhasin, 1989). The massive influx of migrant non-BLs to Sikkim triggered the Sikkimese BLs to protect and reassert “their” indigenous identity by establishing and making prominent notions of insiders/outsiders, locals/nonlocal, thereby creating new kinds of socio-political boundaries.

2.2. Sikkim’s hydropower development vis-à-vis ethnic contestations and solidarities

The liberalization of the energy sector in India in the 1990s set the stage for ‘a veritable “hydro-rush” in the Northeast’ (Huber and Joshi, 2015: 16). In 2003, Sikkim became a key part of GoI’s mega-hydropower initiative (GoS, 2015a). However, ethnic-based contestations of large dams in Sikkim preceded the 2003 “hydro-rush”. In the 1990s, a small group of Lepchas of Dzongu in North Sikkim under the banner of the “Sikkim Tribal Salvation Council” led the regions first-ever anti-hydropower protest against the proposed cascade hydropower development (Pradhan, 2014). These protests in a protected area in the distant North, far away from Gangtok (capital of Sikkim) received little to no media attention. This is why many (Menon, 2003; Balikci, 2008) considered a later 1994 protest against the 30 MW Rathong Chu Hydro Electric Project (RCHEP) in the “sacred homeland” of Yuksom, West Sikkim (predominantly inhabited by Bhutias) as Sikkim’s first anti-hydropower movement (see Map 1). Bringing together various ethnic groups (Huber, 2012), Buddhist monks from both Lepcha and Bhutia communities led the 1994 movement (Lepcha, 2012), which was supported by various civil-society organisations (Schafer, 1995; Balikci, 2008). After almost five years of struggle, the GoS was obliged to scrap the RCHEP in 1997, on the grounds that it threatened the sacred land and waterscape in Yuksom, where the highly-revered Buddhist Bum-Chu festival is celebrated annually (Menon, 2003).

Baviskar (1995, 2005) writes that in the case of India’s most controversial dam project, Sardar Sarovar, the indigenous Adivasis were among the thousands affected and displaced. However, the ‘cultural cachet’ of the Adivasi (indigenous) ‘link to land’ (Baviskar, 2005; 5109) was not the key argument in a civil society-led resistance against this project. Mobilized and led by networked trans-local groups – including activists, trade and labour unions, non-governmental organisations and others, the concerns here related primarily to forced displacement, rehabilitation and inadequate compensation (Routledge, 2003; Narula, 2008). In Sikkim, hydropower contestations were contrastingly grounded in place and driven by ‘sacred’ values and meanings attached to land and water. Here, the indigenous BL community, although demographically a minority, are not politically marginal and thus, contestations against dam projects have been initiated, led, and mobilized by them, and in most cases have led to cancellation of dams, despite State efforts to penalize protestors.8

The hydro-rush in Sikkim is reported to have escalated already existing and powerful anti-dam protests by the Bhutias and the Lepchas (Arora, 2007a, 2008; Little, 2009, 2010a, 2010b, Lepcha, 2012). In 2004, when the GoS announced six large dams across Dzongu in North Sikkim, the protection of this place, considered sacred by the indigenous Lepchas, became their rallying point for anti-dam protests (Huber, 2012; Pradhan, 2014). The Affected Citizen of Teesta (ACT) led protests that included indefinite hunger strikes and public rallies in Dzongu, in Gangtok and as far away as in New Delhi. The movement was widely covered by local media, and supported by the Lepchas residing outside Dzongu as well as the Bhutias of North Sikkim (Wangchuk, 2007; Arora, 2008; Little, 2010a, 2010b). This led to four of the six large hydropower projects planned in Dzongu in 2008 and more than 8 projects being cancelled across Sikkim (Little, 2010b; CEA, 2016, 2017). Similarly, all proposed large dam projects in North Sikkim in Lachen and Lachung, were cancelled, following protests by the Bhutias there. However, in the midst of these contestations, Teesta Stage III – the largest dam project in Sikkim was implemented in the heart of this BL landscape, and other “mega” hydropower projects (e.g. 510 MW Teesta Stage V, 1200 MW Teesta Stage III) were also approved in North Sikkim.

Several research reports align the contestation of dam projects in Sikkim to (culture-based) indigenous environmental justice actions (Little, 2009, 2010a, 2010b; McGuie-Ra, 2011; Pradhan, 2014). What we observed in Chungthang deviates from this popular perception, and aligns instead with two other lines of argument. Firstly, the “link to land” endows indigenous people with agency and identity (Escobar, 2001: 144) making them disproportionately privileged to assert ‘sovereign rights to natural resources’ and claims such as “this is our ancestral land” (Baviskar, 2005:5109). Such claims around the politics of belonging... run the risk of rendering [other], “people out of place” (Baviskar, ibid: 5111. See also Routledge (1992) on the Ballalap movement in Orissa). Secondly, simplistic ‘framings of indigenous identities, spatial dimensions of indigenous cultures, and ecologically wise relationships’ of indigenous communities, do not always relate to on-the-ground realities (Baviskar, 2005, 5109). Li (2000:150) argues, that – ‘a group’s self-identification as tribal or indigenous is not natural or inevitable... neither is it invented, adopted, or imposed. It is rather a positioning which draws upon historically sedimented practices, landscapes and repertoires of meaning and emerges through particular patterns of engagement’.

In Sikkim, it has been observed that the areas where hydropower projects are accepted are inhabited by Sikkim’s major non-indigenous ethnic group, the Nepalese/Nepalis, living here with or without the “BLs” (Menon and Vaghholikar, 2004; Gol, 2006b). There is also evidence that the Nepali community in Sikkim have not shown solidarity with BL protests against hydropower development (Wangchuk, 2007; Arora, Little, 2009, 2010a; McGuie-Ra, 2011; Gergan, 2014). This is perhaps why many researchers talk about contestations against hydropower projects in Sikkim as being linked to indigenous identity and culture. In analyzing people-place connections we question such generalisations and argue that political histories of both people and place distinctly shape on-the-ground realities. Our findings in Sikkim, show a complex interplay of indigeneity and political history in the making of place-based claims, and that such decisions are not always neatly

---

8 This is not to imply that the struggle against hydropower development did not garner support and solidarity from others outside of Sikkim.

9 By means of arrest, jail sentences, official transfers to undesired locations or another job position for government employees, victimization for those seeing government jobs, etc. (Little, 2009; Huber and Joshi, 2015).

10 Rukel (90 MW), Ringpi (160 MW), Lingza (160 MW) and Rangyong (90 MW).

11 In Sikkim, the words Nepalese and Nepalis are used interchangeably.
predictable. Shared histories, religious, cultural and spiritual connections do indeed bring Sikkim’s indigenous groups together in multiple ways, but this does not always coalesce and equate to protest against trans-local developments. Such seeming anomalies are explained through unraveling the concepts of place and SoP.

3. Sense of place

3.1. Place and sense of place

Escobar (2001: 139) notes that among multiple disciplines, there is ‘a resurgence of interest in the concept of place... or more accurately, the defense of constructions of place... and that place has become ‘a rallying point for both theory construction, political action... and social movements’. But what is place, how is it experienced, how are people connected to place(s) and place(s)-to-people? We discuss these issues, bringing different viewpoints to bear upon our research findings. In this section we provide a brief overview of relevant terms and concepts.

People are consciously or unconsciously connected to place because more than simply being some background, place(s) are profound centers of meanings, of perceived values constructed by varied experiences (Tuan, 1977; Williams and Stewart, 1998; Creswell, 2004). A place comprises of - a location, a locale (i.e. the everyday activities and the institutional settings of a place) and a sense of place (Agnew, 1987). How people act in a place, make sense of it, connect to/with it and thus defend it depends on how people imagine, understand and interpret “place” (Sack, 1992; Soja, 1996; Guthey et al., 2014). Place is thus a deeply complex construct (Harvey, 1996) which evokes different meanings, feelings and emotions in people; i.e. their “sense of place” (SoP) (Creswell, 2004; Hodgetts et al., 2010; Tonts and Atherley, 2010).

There are many definitions and descriptions of place and SoP. These overlapping constructs of place-people connections create a certain confusion, and prevent a shared understanding of these concepts (Hayhood, 2014). An understanding of place begins with place-meaning (Wynveen et al., 2012), which can be positive or negative (Manzo, 2005), ‘symbolic, emotional, political, cultural and political’ (Burtitter, 1980: 167). This is why place-people relationships are so diverse and fluid (Carter et al., 2007). Jørgensen and Stedman (2006; 317) present a multidimensional conceptualization of SoP focusing on three related yet independent dimensions – place-attachment, place-identity and place-dependence. We agree with Qian et al. (2011) that this classification provides a holistic overview of the ‘affective (e.g. beliefs/perceptions), the conative (e.g. emotions/feeling) and the cognitive (e.g. behavioral intentions/commitments) aspects of people-place relationships. We describe these dimensions below.

3.2. The dimensions of sense of place and the fostering of the sense of belonging

3.2.1. Place-attachment

When people-place connections manifest positive emotional bonding, it leads to place-attachment (Altman and Low, 1992). Hay (1998a); Shamai (1991) and Guthey et al. (2014) note that positive attachments to place(s) arise through long years of residency, people’s daily lives, interactions and experiences, which over time create familiarity. According to Hay (1998a, 1998b), the more familiar people get with place(s) and people, the more intimate, at ease, and ‘belonging’ they feel. Maslow (1954); Anant (1966); Hargy et al. (1992) all describe ‘belonging’ as a subjective feeling of being a part of a certain group or social-system, developed when people feel that the social-system meets their needs. Many factors such as culture, tradition, rituals, myths, symbols, folklore (Relph, 1976); family and friends (Eisenhauer et al., 2000), birth (Hay, 1998a) strengthen positive attachment to place(s), which further develops in people an unselfconscious state of being at home (Tuan, 1980) or a rooted SoP.

3.2.2. Place-identity

‘All aspects of identity to a greater extent have place-related implications’ (Twigger-Ross and Uzzel, 1996:206) as they are informed by place(s) (Proshansky, 1978). Place(s) develops, reinforces, and strengthens people’s identities (Hummon, 1992). This ‘degree of place(s)’ inclusion in individual or collective identity perception’ is referred to as place/place-based identity (Proshansky, 1978) – developed and articulated through a sense of belonging (Buttimer, 1980; Davenport and Anderson, 2005: 628, Qian et al., 2011). Belonging, being part of a social group and its environment or territory, is the experience of valued involvement in a social-system, instilling feelings of being ‘accepted, valued and needed’ (Anant, 1966; Hargy et al., 1992:173). Relph (1976) uses the terms ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ to understand place-identities and asserted that the more deeply individuals feel ‘inside a place’ the stronger will be their identity with the place (Seamons and Sowers, 2008:45). In our findings discussed below, we note that place often assigns a negative, exclusionary identity on some – by not being able to belong (for various reasons), “place” becomes a haunting reminder of one’s compromised, limited identity.

3.2.3. Place-dependence

Place-dependence refers to people’s functional reliance on services and resources that place provides (Qian et al., 2011). When daily needs, livelihood options, religious/spiritual necessities or socio-cultural responsibilities are met in any one place – the need to explore alternative place(s) are minimized, allowing for a certain degree of place-dependence (Schreyer et al., 1981). This gradually translates into a fundamental “human need to belong” to the place(s) and its community (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). In our findings in Section 5, we argue – this is not necessarily the case for all local groups. Regardless of the length of stay and the material benefits “place” provides, certain other prevalent conditions act to differentiate relational experiences of place, dependence and belonging.

In sum, SoP dimensions can thus (un)consciously engender a feeling of being inside a place, fostering people’s SoB (Basso, 1996; Relph, 1976). Strong unconscious connection with place inspires and motivates people to protect their place and identity, taking place-based collective actions (Altman and Low, 1992; Stokols and Shumaker 1981; Jørgensen and Stedman, 2006). Obviously, this is not necessarily or inherently positive, and may invigorate indoctrination (e.g., Lukes, 2005), nationalism (e.g., Anderson, 1983), exclusion (e.g., Harvey, 1996), and disciplinary normalization (“subjectification”) including “governmentality” schemes (e.g., Foucault, 1991, 2007, 2008). SoP provides a step towards developing a SoB through valued involvement, acceptance and recognition in the social-system (Anant, 1966). SoP produces, perpetuates and reinforces place-dependent cohesion, action and even exclusionary place-based insider-outsider identities. The implications of this impact local responses to hydropower development in Sikkim. Our findings show that a SoP does not always instill a SoB. Exclusionary practices such as categorization of people may deeply constrain the development of SoB. This is not to deny that many who are excluded may continue to aspire for a SoB to their place(s) of residence. However, as we saw in Chungthang, such aspirations are contextual, depending on the rigidity and/or malleability of people-place-relations.

4. The study area - Chungthang Gram Panchayat Unit

Chungthang Gram Panchayat Unit12 (GPU), located around 1630 m.a.s.l, is one of the twenty-three GPU’s that make up North Sikkim. It comprises of five ward/villages – Bop, Chungthang, Pegong, Chorten and Theng (see Map 2 below) and is sandwiched between two

12 A GPU is the lowest level administrative body for self-governance comprising of many wards/villages.
regions: Dzongu, a “protected” area inhabited only by native13 Lepchas; and the “restricted” border regions of Lachen and Lachung, home to the native Bhutias - that remains heavily guarded and protected by the GoS and the GoI respectively. The GoI presence along (international) border regions of Sikkim under Foreigners (Protected Areas) Order 1958 and Foreigners (Restricted Areas) Order 1963 before Sikkim’s merger with India in 1975 paved the way for the opening up of the previously difficult terrains of North Sikkim to India; but closing of the centuries old trade ties with Tibet.

Chungthang, like Dzongu, Lachen and Lachung, is also classified as a “restricted” area, where all travelers, except the “locals” require Government inner-line-permits to enter (GoI, 2006b). Post-merger with India, Chungthang became the epicenter of defense-related development interventions in this politically strategic Indo-China border region – in the process, witnessing a burgeoning influx of migrant workers from the rest of India and Nepal. Therefore, unlike the surrounding areas of Lachen, Lachung and Dzongu, Chungthang GPU is strangely like the capital, Gangtok – with a heterogeneous population consisting of “local” Lepchas and Bhutias; and “non-local-others” (i.e. non-BL’s such as Nepalese, Biharis, Tibetans, etc.). The start of hydropower development in 2004 further promoted the influx of migrant labourers.

However, Chungthang GPU is, like most villages in North Sikkim – deeply rooted in Bhutia-Lepcha historical, mythical folklores and considered sacred. It is believed that in the early 8th-century, Padmasambhava,14 the patron saint of Sikkim, fought and subjugated a local Lepcha Chieftain at Chungthang, leaving marks of his footprints embedded on a rock where he sat. This rock, “Lhedo”15 is a highly revered, sacred, historical pilgrimage site for the Bhutias and Lepchas. Chungthang is considered a “miraculous” abode of Padmasambhava – here paddy which normally does not grow at high altitudes, is believed to have started growing after Guru Padmasambhava threw some left-over rice from his meal there (Arora, 2006: 4068). To this day, paddy is cultivated in Chungthang and, during the harvest period, distributed amongst the locals.

It is in this sacred landscape that 1200 MW Teesta Stage III – Sikkim’s largest, mega hydropower project was successfully implemented since 2007. The execution of the project on the ground went smoothly for over nine years, uncontested by the local residents or neighbouring residents from Lachen, Lachung and Dzongu, including from the rest of Sikkim. However nationally, Teesta Stage III was surrounded by controversy, particularly in the national media and among Non-Government-Organisations (NGOs) working on socio-environmental issues. Controversy revolved around legal cases filed against GoS and the project developer for project allotment violations (Yumnam, 2012; Dutta, 2013; Mazoomdaar, 2013) and a “shoddy” environmental impact assessment (EIA) (Kalpavriksh, 2007). A “top-priority” project, promoted by the GoS and a private developer through discourses of uplifting North Sikkim with the revenues from the sale of power to energy-deficient regions in faraway Northern and Western India (WAPCOS, 2006:4), Teesta Stage III was finally commissioned early 2017. The five wards/villages of Chungthang GPU lie in close proximity to the 60-meter-high dam. The powerhouse and underground tunnel that stretches for 13 km come under the “protected” Lepcha area of Dzongu – the epicenter of Lepcha-initiated anti-hydropower resistance.

4.1. Understanding “sense” of “place” and “belonging”

In understanding why the largest dam project in Sikkim – the Teesta Stage III HEP – was implemented uncontested, in the midst of contestations of hydropower development projects by the indigenous BL community in the region, we have aimed to analyze how people-place connections come into being, are experienced [and if differently]; how these relations are embedded in place-history; and how they might evolve in different situations and scenarios. Our paper deviates from other researched accounts of local resistance to large dam projects, resonating instead with the ‘relational’ accounts of local struggles. In particular, we draw from Ozen and Ozen’s (2017: 256) analysis of complex ‘meaning-making processes’ that explains the presence and/or the absence of struggles in similar settings and conditions.

The research method adopted was ethnography – “deep hanging out” (O’Reilly, 2012). The findings discussed in this paper relate to an initial stay of 7 months at the house of a local Lepcha family in Chungthang GPU, North Sikkim. Participant observation and action-research, joining in social, cultural and religious events, allowed for insights to be drawn from the community’s values, dynamics, internal relationships, structures and conflicts (cf. Rennie and Singh, 1996:11). In initial phase interactions we did not trigger specific discussions relating either to people’s ‘sense of place’ and/or the hydropower project but spoke generally, getting to know everyone irrespective of ethnicity, age, gender, occupation, language, or even religion. The way these distinctions operate and make prevalent ‘insider/outsider’, “public/non-public”, “local/non-local” hierarchies and divisions in the community – nonetheless became evident in these interactions. In a second phase, the research involved semi-structured interviews (n = 59) and multiple group and individual discussions to explore perceptions of complex, diversely experienced notions of place and belonging. The familiarity from the initial engagements and knowledge gained from the initial observational phase allowed our research (the first author being a native-language speaker) an insight into the meanings of colloquial Nepali/Bhutia terms and local expressions relating to place and belonging, such as maya/ningchee for the land (care/connection), ghar/khim (home), janma-bhumi/kyiswa (birth-place), Karma-bhumi/yok-yil (workplace), purkhauli-jaga/phayul (ancestral land/place), raithanay/nyniko (original-inhabitants), bairoko (outsiders), public/non-public, khas-basinda/mi-y-neyu (insiders), etc. This helped in discussing complex meanings of a place, SoP and SoB.

In conducting the research, we refrained from a priori assumptions about the “locals” (see Baviskar, 2005; Escobar, 2001); taking care to not color our conversations with popular framings of a conflict between locals and [hydropower] development. Even when we did not raise attention to the topic of hydropower development, given its contentious political nature, the ‘large-dam’ (now completed), conspicuous by its physical presence was the elephant in the room in the conversations that took place. People in general are fearful and skeptical of the powers that be promoting such developments i.e. the State Government and are often reluctant, even suspicious of discussing dams and dam related issues. We therefore narrowed down to specifically discussing hydropower development only after months of “deep hanging out”, when the community had begun to trust the researcher (first author). This allowed insight to a less-known fact, that a few Lepcha residents of Chungthang had expressed serious concerns on the possible negative impacts of the dam. In the sections below, we discuss how ethnic solidarities and socio-political divides shaped the ways in which a decision was made around this “development”. The Lepchas of Chungthang GPU decided unilaterally to give a go-ahead to the project. Understanding people-place relationships here, required analyzing ‘manifest’ as well as ‘latent’ content and interpreting patterns, trends and deviations in what was observed, expressed and experienced (see Gioia et al., 2013).

---

13 In this context, this means only those from Dzongu, Lachen or Lachung; excluding even Lepchas and Bhutias born in other parts of Sikkim or elsewhere. No community other than Lepchas or Bhutias born in these regions with local ancestry can settle in these places, possess land and obtain Certificate of Identification (COI) cards.

14 A Buddhist Tantric Master/Guru.

15 Also referred to as ‘Lhedo’.
5. Unraveling social categorization, a “sense” of “place” and “belonging” in Chungthang GPU

As we discussed earlier, Chungthang GPU has a heterogeneous ethnic composition. Its resident community categorizes by indigeneity and differentiates itself by terms such as “locals” and “non-locals” and “public” and “non-public” – identifications that, as we will show, have profound implications for local SoP, SoB, and hydropower development perspectives and attitudes. Jenkins (1997:80) writes of the complex nature of “social categorization” – intertwined “acts of ‘external definition’ and processes of labelling by institutions as well as by social actors with sufficient power and authority”. The terms local/non-local and public/non-public are not “official”, but they are colloquially used in Sikkim, including in Chungthang GPU, to distinguish between the residents of this ethnically fragmented socio-polity. These categorizations/divisions are ambiguously formal as well as informal, critically shape people-place relations, and in this case, who can and cannot voice opinions in response to the dam project.

Sikkimese people by-and-large refer to themselves as “locals” while all the non-Sikkimese are considered as “non-locals”. Formally, “locals” are (or descendents of) the “Sikkim Subjects”, i.e. persons who had domicile in the Sikkimese Kingdom before the Sikkim Regulation Act of 1961. Currently, the formal identity categorization Sikkim Subject has been replaced by a “Certificate of Identification” with similar clauses. Apart from their official pre-merger identity documents, locals also include those who have immovable property within Sikkim. In Chungthang, this would include the Lepchas, Bhutias and a few Nepalese who are all domiciled Sikkim Subjects before 1975. Nonetheless for reasons that explain the complexities of indigeneity, only the Lepchas and Bhutias (and not the few Sikkimese Nepali households17) identify themselves as locals in Chungthang. The “others” comprising a sizeable population of migrant settlers such as the Tibetan refugees; Nepalese from Nepal; Bhutias and Nepalese from neighbouring Darjeeling, and other communities from India’s plains - are all considered as “non-locals”.

Among the “locals” of Chungthang, there is yet another layer of division by indigeneity19 – “public” and “non-public”. We discuss these complex divisions/categorizations below, by drawing attention to “sense of place” and “belonging” and how these link to the resident community’s diverse response to the Teesta Stage III project.

5.1. Lepchas – “local” and “public”

Native Lepchas whose forefathers were born in Chungthang GPU, who owned and held property (land, house) are considered both “local” as well as “public”. By virtue of their ancestral dwelling, Lepchas here are socially and legally categorized as the “public”. All the 130 Lepcha households are taxpayers, referred to as a khypo i.e. one who pays “khajana” (land tax)20 to the land-revenue department. Socio-cultural norms21 require all public Lepchas to initiate and participate in socio-religious events in the GPU, while these activities are optional for others. These norms and practices are perpetuated by community institutions,22 local governments and(or) power and authority yielding local actors.

For example, it is compulsory for every public Lepcha household to contribute in cash or kind, and participate in religious and spiritual ceremonies held periodically at the village monastery or in the forests. Folklores and legends associated with the region back the assertion of claims of land and indigeneity by the Lepchas, which is verified in the official “parchas” (land documentation) and history of land-tax payments.

A 56-year-old Lepcha woman said, ‘We can feel the wind, water and soil in our bodies. Everything is known to us here, including the people. This is our ancestral land. Our great grandfathers and grandmothers lived, worked here. This very land will sustain our future generations. Today whether we make use of our land or not is secondary – we want our lands intact-to-us. This is our source of identity’.

Field-research, 2016.

While many “others” we met in Chungthang, spoke of it’s inaccessibility from the capital, Gangtok; its remote, perilous landscape – susceptible to frequent natural calamities such as earthquakes, landslides, and flashfloods, this was not how the “public” Lepchas described Chungthang. Their use of the term home and the way, they described Chungthang implied a unique sense of attachment, identity, dependence and belonging to the place. Above all, among all the other residents in Chungthang GPU, the public Lepchas were singularly and authoritatively vocal about the hydropower projects – regardless of whether they were for or against them.

5.1.1. Expressions of voice – enthusiasm as well as concerns

Lepcha respondents perceived hydropower development with a mix of enthusiasm as well as with serious concerns. It was evident that the elders23 among the Lepchas believed the promises made by politicians and the hydropower developers – of ‘development’24 as translating to ‘free-electricity’, ‘employment-opportunities’, ‘business-expansion’ ‘monetary compensations’, and ‘undertaking-of-social-services’. They believed that the returns from acquired land would benefit the public Lepchas; land acquired for temporary-infrastructure such as labour quarters, management buildings and store-houses, would eventually be dismantled and returned back upon completion of the project. Additional claims made by the developers of ‘minimal negative impacts’ to ‘no negative socio-environmental impacts’ – as reported by the Lepchas added to their initial enthusiasm (WAPCOS, 2006; Field-research, 2016). Lepchas from Chorten and Bop that are not Project Affected Villages (in Chungthang GPU) and do not benefit directly, also perceived hydropower development as an ‘economic opportunity’ (ibid). There was high hope and expectation that ‘something-good’ would emerge from hydropower development among large sections of the Lepcha community in Chungthang GPU.

An elderly man said, ‘Our Chief Minister had told us the more electricity we can generate, the more revenue we can earn by selling power to power-deficit states. We cannot just rely on cardamoms. We need alternatives’

Field-research, 2016.

However, not all the Lepchas perceived hydropower development as important and necessary. There were concerns among some around the destruction of “their” environment and “their” sacred places; and that

---

16 In simple terms, the Sikkim Subject had domicile in Sikkim territory before the 1961 Sikkim Regulation Acts by: 1. birth in the territory; 2. residing in Sikkim for at least 15 years prior to the 1961 SRA; and 3. as wife/minor of 1 and 2. This made Bhutia Lepchas of Sikkimese origin automatically Sikkim Subjects, including Nepalese meeting the above conditions. Cf. the Sikkim Subject Regulation Act (1961).
17 This is mainly because the few Nepali households are not native to the region and acquired land to settle in the region during the reign of the Chogyal. Therefore, despite having the relevant documents, they are not equal in legal status with the indigenous Lepchas and the Bhutias.
18 Exact, or even rough, estimates of the number of “other” households could not be obtained despite repeated attempts to get them from the concerned authorities.
19 In the context of North Sikkim, it refers to the original dwellers with ancestral history in a particular geographic area.
20 Locally referred to as “Khajana” - Royalty for the land, paid to the King during the monarchy and continuing to this day.
21 Similar in Lachung and Lachung, where the public Bhutias have to mandatorily take part in the socio-religious affairs of their respective villages.
22 Such as the monastery with it’s moods, the grassroots level government body such as Panchayat and it’s associated elected members.
23 In plain Nepali language, elderly men and women are referred to as thulo-thala. However, village heads, political leaders or representatives and those in other powerful positions, or even rich individuals are also referred to as thulo-thala.
24 40F villages, roads, community halls, monastic schools, playgrounds, etc.
this would bring upon them the wrath of “their” local deities, as would the influx of migrant workers who, it was thought, would disturb revered, local sacred sites (Field-research, 2016).

A middle-aged woman remarked, ‘When the Shipgyer road was constructed, the Officer-in-Charge was killed. So were two Lepchas in a freak accident. It was actually our deities showing their anger and displeasure. Outsiders feel the wrath but because we are the real inhabitants, our Gods affect us more than them.’

Field-research, 2016.

There were also concerns that migrant labourers or “outsiders” in general were tampering with the social fabric of “their” place in other ways. Such concerns, almost mounting to fear, arose from their past experiences in cases of theft, non-payment of food-bills and rent by migrant workers, fights and brawls with the locals/public but most important of all – fear for the safety and security of local women, be it a Lepcha or a Bhutia (Field-research, 2016).

A middle-aged Lepcha man argued, “Our girls marry them [migrant workers] and leave home. One season they elope; next season, poverty strikes, they return back working as labourers on our very roads. Some are duped. Some return back with children. What do they [migrant workers] have to lose. They are men. The influx of outsiders is not good for our society, not good for our young girls and women.”

Field-research, 2016.

Thus, “public” Lepchas display a definite “sense of place” and of “belonging”. They articulate how they are insiders, how they belong to the place in as much as the place belongs to them; and how this allows them to make and take decisions relating to the place.

A prominent anti-dam Lepcha activist lamented, ‘My father, a 70 year old then, attended the Gram Sabha meeting before the public hearing. He was a village head for many years, the first Member of Legislative Assembly and also a Minister from this region. An honest man with the reputation of returning to the Government the unspent money from allocated annual funds. People respect him. At the meeting, he openly challenged those raising dam related concerns and literally scolded them in full public. He believed the project would benefit us. His action that day against the concerned youths was interpreted as his pro-project stance. Directly or indirectly, he ended up influencing people’s perception in favour of the project.’

Field-research, 2016.

Concerns initially raised around the dam were ignored. At the public hearing for the Teesta Stage III project, although the younger Lepchas of Chungthang GPU argued against the project, more than 80 per cent of the “public” Lepchas of Chungthang GPU, guided by the elders and community leaders (Thulo thala), gave their formal consent to the hydropower project (as explained in Section 5.1.1). It is important to add here, that other residents of Chungthang, the Bhutias, and the non-BL outsiders did not have any say in this decision-making process.

5.2. Bhutias – “local” but not “public”

Unlike the Lepchas, the 30 local Sikkimese Bhutia households do not share an ancestral history of dwelling within Chungthang GPU, and do not identify themselves as the “public” there. They are settlers from nearby, Lachung and Lachen; and although their decades of residence in Chungthang, acquiring of immovable property and/or even birth there makes them as “local” as the Lepchas, they retain their ancestral and family ties to Lachung and Lachen where they are recognized and accepted as the “public”. It is in these very regions (not in Chungthang GPU), that the Bhutias mandatorily engage in local socio-religious affairs. The Bhutias here have formed their own exclusive “kiduk” - a society that looks into the wellbeing of the Bhutias only and through this participate in social-religious affairs, such as religious/spiritual ceremonies, funerals, etc. within Chungthang GPU. In fact, the Bhutias have a monastery of their own. The local but non-public Bhutias are mostly settled in Chungthang GPU for commercial reasons – living in and around the market areas, selling liquor, running roadside restaurants, hotels and grocery shops – earning the moniker of “bazaar” (of the market).

Among the Bhutias there is a sense of attachment to and dependence on Chungthang GPU, expressed by similar use of Bhutia words to describe their place of residence – ningchee, khim and yok-yil – but nonetheless, they remain emotionally connected to their native places of Lachung and Lachen. It is to Lachen and Lachung, rather than Chungthang, that the Bhutias articulate their SoB, and assert their notions of place-based identity.

An elderly Bhutia man said, ‘We have a saying in Lachen – “meh-geh-nah-yi-then, phya-geh-nah-dah-then (as you grow older, you will start feeling and caring more for the place where you belong). Our real belonging is in Lachen. It is our ancestral place. I reside in Chungthang, but Lachen is my home.’

Field-research, 2016.

5.2.1. Concerned but not engaging in action

Despite long years of residency, the Bhutias of Chungthang GPU are not the “public” and have no significant landholdings. While they express varying degrees of attachment and dependence to Chungthang, they remain detached and show little SoB to their current place of residence. Lachen and Lachung are the places to which they belong, feel rooted, build and nurture bonds. Some Bhutias expressed grave concerns relating to environmental degradation in the case of the Teesta Stage III project, yet they argued that it was not their place to voice such concerns. Even the younger generation of Bhutias, born and raised in Chungthang GPU chose not to antagonize their own ‘brotherly Lepcha neighbours’. The same Bhutias of Chungthang GPU have vehemently opposed and managed to halt numerous proposed hydropower projects in Lachung and Lachen.

A Bhutia woman says, ‘Place-land are greater than our parents. If one doesn’t have them, where does one go? Having a tangible connection to land is important. My land is not here, so I do not have any rights here. My right to give opinions or participate in any activities lies in my native place in Lachen. I kept quiet here but not in Lachen, where we did not allow the company to even set it’s foot there. Isn’t that I don’t care for Chungthang, I do but I cannot do anything as this is not my place’

Field-research, 2016.

5.3. Others – the “non-locals”

There are many “others” in Chungthang GPU – mostly elderly residents, who have lived here for decades and the younger ones born and raised here. This however does not make these migrant residents “locals” nor “public”. This included the four Sikkimese Nepali households.26 Apart from the Tibetans who migrated to these regions as refugees, the rest migrated in search of livelihood opportunities. Excluding the Bhutias, GoS Revenue Order No. 1 of 1917 forbids the “others” from buying land or property from Bhutias and Lepchas. The majority of non-locals/non-public “others” work mainly as road construction labourers with the General Reserve Engineering Force (GREF). The Tibetans do business26 and/or serve in the Indo-Tibetan Border

25 This is because these four Nepali households do not have any ancestral history of dwelling in the 25Northern region of Sikkim, therefore, despite having attained domicile documents at some point in time, they are not considered locals nor public.

26 Business for ‘others’ implies running small roadside grocery, vegetables, fruits businesses and shops to sell vegetables, including to restaurants. However, unlike the Bhutias, business for the ‘others’ does not include sale of alcohol as outsiders are not allowed to do so.
Police (ITBP), while a few are engaged in various public services and private businesses. The migrant settlers have a “conscious” association to Chungthang GPU given their dependence on it for their day-to-day sustenance and livelihoods.

A Nepali migrant says, ‘If we walk then it’s just roads, if we stop then those very roads become our soil. I came to Sikkim from Nepal when I was 13-years-old and started working as a road laborer with GREF. When a stretch was complete, we pulled down our temporary huts and moved elsewhere in the region. After marriage I settled in Chungthang and started working as laborer in building houses. Currently, I live with a Lepcha family. This may not be my birthplace, but it is my work place’

Field-research, 2016.

Yet, most migrants, like the Bhutias speak of their emotional connections to their own ancestral place(s) from where they migrated. The ties to their homes far away, are preserved, often through yearly or regular visits. Despite decades of residency in Chungthang, the words “home”, “family”, “property”, “land”, “belonging”, “security” as well as “identity” are expressions reserved to describe their connection to their ancestral place(s). It is perplexing for them to want to become attached to Chungthang, to belong and to be rooted and yet to know that this will never quite be their place.

An 80-year-old migrant says, ‘I have been in this place for almost three decades and I know how things work here. People like us, are nobody - never a part of any important meeting. Only those from here, the “public” attend such meetings. We are neither called nor do we go. When there was initial enthusiasm for the project here, I was neither happy, nor sad’

Field-research, 2016.

5.3.1. It is about earning a living

For these non-local/non-public residents, hydropower development invokes some enthusiasm, but mostly indifference. The older generations express their lack of voice in matters relating to the region. Similar to the Bhutias, who do not want to antagonize the public (Lepchas), the “others” do not want to antagonize the Lepchas including the local Bhutias on whom they rely for livelihoods. Young or old, what matters most to them is employment.

A young Nepali migrant says, ‘Despite being born and raised here, I am not a local because my parents are from West Bengal. I don’t have the domicile documents so I am not eligible for government jobs here or anywhere else in Sikkim. I am neither highly qualified nor are my parents well-off. When talks about how project would create jobs began here, I was very hopeful. If the Lepchas who own the lands are okay with the dam, who are we to complain? We don’t interfere in their decisions. I started as a helper for Teesta Stage III. Today I am a lab-technician for quality control there’

Field-research, 2016.

The residents in Chungthang GPU are thus, deeply divided by formal as well as informal categorizations by ethnicity and indigeneity. A layered, divisive socio-ethnic categorization defines their hags (rights), privileges and limitations, which create different experiences of place, SoP and a SoB. The Teesta Stage III project made prominent these divides.

An aspiration to belong, to feel at home, be rooted in “place” is obvious amongst the migrant “others”, however, the region’s contentious socio-political history allows and legitimizes a SoB only for a limited few – i.e. the local, public Lepchas. The complexities of such a social categorization severely constrains inclusive participation and involvement among the residents in making decisions about the “place”. Anant (1966), Hagerty et al. (1992) and Kianicka et al. (2006) all argue that, “valued involvement” in community events is fundamental to form a sense of belonging. The social divisions in Chungthang GPU were so prominent and pronounced that they failed to invoke and/or strengthen the historical ties of place-based solidarities, even between the Bhutias and the Lepchas. Such divisions explain why Sikkim’s largest mega dam was uncontested in over a decade of implementation in the heart of the Bhutia-Lepcha landscape.

In the section below, we link theoretical concepts of place, SoP and SoB to assess what we observed on the ground in Chungthang GPU – diverse responses to hydropower development as an outcome of historically and socio-politically shaped people-place relations. In doing so, we contest linear, one-dimensional views of ethno-centric solidarities. In our view, these belie the complexities through which meanings and expressions of “place” and “SoP” are both cemented as well as evolve in diverse socio-cultural and politico-economic contexts.

6. Discussions and Conclusion

The focus of this paper was to explore how ‘people encounter places, perceive them, and endow them with significance; ...[how] “local” groups mobilize political notions of [place] attachment and belonging for the creation of identities, including the conflict [or otherwise, alignment] ...with broader political and economic interests’ (Escobar, 2001: 151, 149). In doing so, the paper makes two specific contributions – to academic/ theoretical discourses on “place”, SoP and SoB; and to the framings of place and indigeneity in relation to trans-locally imposed development.

In critically examining the complex intersections between perceptions and experiences of place and how these are shaped by, and in turn shape externally-imposed processes and acts of development – we provide evidence of how the politics of place excludes some over others. Further, we discuss how claims to place align with the politics of development. After the invasion of Tibet by China in 1950, the Sikkimese Royalty aligned with the Government of India and facilitated the development of a military frontier in the region. This resulted in making porous the otherwise physically, socially and culturally isolated Northern regions. During these processes of change, the Lepchas in Chungthang GPU strengthened their claims to place by making prominent their position as “local” and “public”. On-the-other-hand, the paper has shown that they continued their hold and say on the region, by being party to, i.e. aligning with, rather than opposing new forces such as hydropower development, claiming the larger share of the (promised) benefits. This explains why indigeneity here is not neatly synonymous with contestations to large-scale outside driven development.

Responses to development are influenced by the historical and contextual dynamics of socio-political divisions and disparities among heterogeneous and unequal local communities. Political ecology discourse on environmentalism often romanticizes the local – local contexts, local communities, local initiatives, contestations, activism etc. even though contextual heterogeneities speak of the myth of the local. Cornwall et al. (2007: 1) argue that such myths are not wholly untrue - they serve to dramatize and articulate ‘stories of change’ that ‘lend [to] political convictions the sense of direction that is needed to inspire [alternative] action’. Such mythical interpretations are critically essential to counter the mostly uneven and unequal outcomes of natural resources’ neo-liberalization and/or other ways of accumulating access and property rights by the few. However, these myths may disempower particular groups among “the local” – those who are marginalized to “assigned” positions and identities” by local norms and power structures (ibid: 15).

Tensions relating to place, people and boundaries are entrenched in Sikkim’s political and economic histories. The opening-up of an otherwise isolated place like Chungthang, against the backdrop of Sikkim’s shifting socio-political demography resulted in divides by indigeneity, identity and ethnicity becoming prominent and blatant. We note that political mobilizations have historically been both sought, and contested, along ethnically fractured lines. The indigenous Bhutias-Lepchas are out-numbered by the domiciled Sikkimese Nepalis, but they are to-date, decisive to political outcomes in North Sikkim. The BL groups
have managed to play to their indigenous identities strategically – which denies, as in the case of Chungthang, blanket assumptions around indigeneity and resistance to trans-locally induced development. The Teesta Stage III project calls for critical ‘reflections on globalization and subaltern strategies of localization’ (Eschobar, 2001:139), in particular, for being cautious about the eulogizing of ethnicity, indigeneity and identity. Our findings show, that it is both unwise as well as unethical to simplify the place-based struggles of the “indigenous”.

Chungthang GPU is an atypical demography in North Sikkim. In the (re)creation of ethnic boundaries and divides; the blatant categorization of the resident community as local/non-local and public/non-public, Chungthang GPU mirrors the socio-political dynamics of the deeply fractured state of Sikkim. Regardless, Lepchas, Bhutias and “others” experience living in Chungthang GPU ‘with some measure of groundedness (however unstable), sense of boundaries (however permeable), and [some] connection to everyday life, even if [their] identities are traversed by power’ (Eschobar, 2001: 142). But, these experiences are far from uniform. The everyday life worlds of the Lepchas in Chungthang GPU are conscious of their “functional reliance” on the place for sustenance and livelihoods. The years of resistance evokes in them a certain place-familiarity, but place-belonging is constrained and limited, and different for the Bhutias and for the “others”. Trans-local development interventions did not spark any solidarity along inter-ethnic lines here; not even among the traditionally united (minority) BL community. Voice and/or articulation in “public” domains of formal and informal governance processes of decision-making is most clearly absent among non-BL outsiders, amongst whom placelessness, exclusion and non-recognition is starkly visible. The politics of [place and belonging renders them, “people out of place” (Baviskar, 2005:5111). Clearly, people-place relations are deeply embedded in Chungthang GPU’s history, culture and legislation, these impact upon the circuits of development and serve to accentuate divides. As the paper has shown, in the case of hydropower development, the Lepchas either gain disproportionately from these developments (through land compensations and project-related benefits as housing, job and economic opportunities) or at the very least, enable their continued, un-challenged decision-making (by virtue of their identity as “public” and “local”).

Among Chungthang’s diversely unequal residents, the Lepchas alone have the authority to defend and/or strategize “place” over developmentalism. However, Chungthang’s borders have long been porous to development initiatives and thus, for the Lepchas of Chungthang GPU, aligning with the state’s agenda for development is more beneficial than choosing to assert indigeneity in contesting development and/or the state. The Thulo-thala Lepchas have been party to these decades of infrastructural development, including hydropower development today by influencing and shaping positive public/local perceptions and opinions towards these developments, and in turn, materially benefited from them – receiving business contracts, for example. These developments shape ‘people-place’ relations and explain why a decision was made (yet again) not to challenge structures of power but [rather] to participate in them. There were no contestations to the Teesta Stage III dam; as our findings have shown, pleas by a handful of young Lepchas to resist the hydropower project did not hold against the entangled power and hegemony of traditional norms and practices, whereby elders and community leaders as authorities expressed their deeply-held belief in the promises of development. Exclusionary place-identity affords one community overt rights/privileges over others, weakens alliances and a sense of belonging. This explains why “others”, including the Bhutias, emotionally identify with “the place” by virtue of birth, residence or work, but “the place” fails to identify with them. “Place” becomes a haunting reminder of one’s compromised, limited identity. Poignantly, migrants are compelled to assert ties to their ancestral place(s) elsewhere – which actually might have little real linkage with them. Clearly, different groups’ valued involvement and equitable positioning in decision-making is fundamental in forming “collective” SoB and to further strengthen “shared” place-based-identity, enabling collective action against extractivism and territorial disruption.

In relation to hydropower development in Sikkim, academia and media present most importantly views of identity, indigeneity and place – views that ignore place-based politics and present “local” economies and cultures as placed outside the hold of capital and modernity. The reality is that in a complex, changing world, indigenous families [as others] might ‘seek other political [and economic] futures’ (Baviskar, 2005:5111); which makes indigenous people-place connections malleable, not necessarily linear and/or even predictable and prone to changes, adjustments or even co-optations.

In Chungthang’s multi-ethnic setting, only the public Lepchas can legitimately claim the entire landscape as “theirs”, and thus are singularly eligible to make decisions regarding hydropower projects. This seriously inhibits inter-ethnic solidarity and critical public discussion about these developments – resulting in this case, in the uncontested completion of the largest dam project in a historically sacred BL landscape in North Sikkim. Currently, it generates up to 800 MW of energy, against the anticipated capacity to generate 1200 MW (The Economic Times, 2017). Recent “public” acceptance of a newly-proposed, smaller hydropower project (Teesta Stage II) in the same GPU further questions the region’s popular accounts of ethnic contestations for defense-of-place. Clearly then, there is a need to reexamine people-place connections and understand their embeddedness in constructs of power and context, and to be cautious in reifying and essentializing the links between “locals”, “indigeneity”, “identity” and “place”.

References

Minnesota Press, Minneapolis,