

**PRECARITY AND POSSIBILITY AT THE MARGINS: HAZARDS,
INFRASTRUCTURE, AND INDIGENOUS POLITICS IN SIKKIM, INDIA**

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ABSTRACT

Mabel Denzin Gergan: Precarity and Possibility at the Margins: Hazards, Infrastructure, and Indigenous Politics in Sikkim, India.
(Under the direction of: Dr. Sara Smith)

This research aims to understand the intimate linkages between hazards, infrastructure, and indigenous politics in the context of anti-dam activism and a 6.9 magnitude earthquake in the Eastern Himalayan state of Sikkim, India. The Indian Himalayan Region, a climate change hotspot, is witnessing a massive surge in large scale infrastructural development alongside an increase in the frequency and intensity of natural hazard events. Earthquakes and landslides near hydropower project sites, along with incidents of shamanic possession by angered mountain deities, raised serious doubts about the viability of hydropower projects for both local communities and regional technocrats. I take a materialist and postcolonial approach to examine how state apathy combined with the visceral quality of ecological precarity, has prompted solidarity between disparate groups and demands for policies and projects sensitive to the region's cultural and geo-physical particularities. I also foreground the experiences of indigenous youth to demonstrate how environmental vulnerability has a direct bearing on young people's lives, labor, and politics. Young people are at the center of this research as it interrogates how these myriad transformations are shaping their political subjectivities, which are ultimately tied to the political, cultural, and ecological future of this region. Employing qualitative and participatory research methodologies I present a fine-grained analysis of the geo-physical

cultural, and political processes that interrupt the centralization of state authority and environmental governance in the Himalayan region.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION: NEGOTIATING SOVEREIGNTY AT THE MARGINS

1.1. Introduction

But what will be saved for coming generations? What is Sikkim's future? Certainly it is overshadowed by the Red China-India struggle; Mr. Nehru calls this "a drama of which only the beginnings have been seen and no one knows what the end will be." Sikkim's tranquility could be swept away overnight. (Doig, National Geographic 1963:429)

If we bring a small country like Sikkim within our fold by using force, it would be like killing a fly with a bullet. (Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, The Statesman, 3 June 1960 in Datta-Ray 1984)

I have no words when [the] Indian army was sent today in a surprise attack on Sikkim Guards who are less than 300 strong and were trained, equipped and officered by [the] Indian army who looked upon each other as comrades... This is a most treacherous and black day in the history of democratic India in solving the survival of our little country by use of arms. (The 12th Chogyal [Monarch] to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, 9 April 1975 in Datta-Ray 1984)

These three quotes, briefly and dramatically, encapsulate how the "little country" of Sikkim, an independent Buddhist monarchy bordering Nepal, China, and Bhutan, became the 22nd state of India in 1975. While this hostile breach of trust by the Indian State took the 12th monarch of Sikkim, Palden Thondup Namgyal by surprise, similar events had already been unfolding elsewhere in the world. The massive wave of decolonization spurred by World War II saw many newly independent Asian, African, and Latin American countries, frantically attempting to consolidate their territorial integrity. As Krishna (1996) points out this "cartographic anxiety" (509) was especially heightened at the territorial margins and encounters between the state and its frontiers can be seen as indicative of "the contested and tortured production of sovereign identity" (508).

What then becomes of places like Sikkim that find their nascent aspirations for sovereignty crushed, replaced instead by a regional identity that must now exist as a margin to an imagined core? Moreover what becomes of the many people who inhabit these places, who already existed at the margins of these kingdoms and princely states, even before they were incorporated into larger nation-states?

This dissertation tells the story of one such margin and its people, from a snapshot in time, as they resist and desire continual attempts by both a physical and epistemic core, to secure these sites of “cartographic anxiety” (Krishna 1996). In present day Sikkim, remnants of the former kingdom and its symbols of sovereignty are still on display, the Sikkimese national flag on taxis being the most evident of these. This kingdom nostalgia, notwithstanding, since its merger with India almost forty years ago, Sikkim has proven to be a model, disciplined state. Unlike the tragic state-sponsored violence unfolding in border areas like Kashmir and Manipur through draconian laws like AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act), Sikkim is lauded for being one of the most peaceful states in India. But for the younger generation of voters, the resentment felt by their parent’s generation towards the Indian state is slowly giving way to resentment closer to home. Despite winning numerous accolades for tourism, public works, and agriculture, for many years now Sikkim has had one of the highest rates of unemployment in the country (Labor Bureau 2015). More recently, the state has also held the unfortunate distinction of having the highest rate of suicide in India (National Crime Records Bureau 2012). Growing economic precarity especially among young people threatens to destabilize, what on the surface appears to be a tranquil state.

Along with questions of income inequality and a shrinking public sector, ecological precarity has recently taken center stage in Sikkim. Concerns around infrastructure and hazards,

occupy a huge place in the Sikkimese imaginary and its relationship to ‘mainland’ India. My mother belongs to Sikkim and every year we would travel there during our summer vacations. These summer trips unfortunately almost always coincided with the early onset of monsoon rains. My most vivid memories of these trips are of the hours stuck in traffic jams caused by heavy rains and landslides. Indian army trucks filled with nauseated *jawans* (soldiers), buses and shared taxis bustling with locals and large contingents of Bengali tourists, would form a snake-like procession on the narrow, circuitous NH-1 highway, the only road connecting Sikkim to the rest of India. In between complaints about the loud *madisey* (people from the plains) tourists, the incessant monsoon rains and the numerous landslides, my uncle would brush us up on Sikkimese history and his fear of a Chinese invasion. Just hours ago when we crossed into Sikkim through the Siliguri corridor [See **Fig 5**, page 107] in West Bengal, my uncle had remarked, “This is where India ends and Sikkim begins.” Despite this emotional disassociation from India most Sikkimese people like my uncle, believed that the Indian state had a responsibility to its margins, a responsibility that had not yet been fulfilled. On the other side of the border, China had successfully built wide open highways, large enough to accommodate tanks and on the Indian side not only was the road infrastructure questionable, army jawans were notorious among locals for their inability to navigate mountainous roads. After all, as my uncle pointed out, “How can a *madisey* drive in the mountains?” In 2011, when a 6.9 magnitude earthquake shook Sikkim, similar concerns would be echoed by many others. The NH-1 highway had been blocked due to massive landslides triggered by the earthquake, severely hampering rescue operations. Within Sikkim, it took several weeks to reach far-flung areas especially in the North District where the epicenter had been located. People’s fears this time around were not directed across the border

but at the massive hydropower infrastructure which promised roads and greater connectivity and instead, as investigations would later reveal, had rendered the region even more vulnerable.

Geo-political, cultural, and geophysical anxieties have heavily shaped regional imaginaries and the relationship between the Himalayan margins and mainland India. This dissertation presents a fine-grained analysis of the geo-physical, cultural, and political processes that interrupt the Indian state's attempt to secure this strategic frontier region. I was introduced to these questions and concerns while examining inter-generational relations during my M.A. research in the indigenous Lepcha reserve of Dzongu in North Sikkim in 2007. Like many other academics and scholars, I had been drawn to Dzongu because of the rarity of indigenous reserves in India and the many challenges that threatened their existence. My mother also belongs to the Lepcha tribe (though not from the reserve) and this was also an attempt to connect with her culture and history. In retrospect (and after an embarrassing perusal of my M.A. thesis) I realized how I had been driven by a near orientalist fascination of the 'untouched' indigenous culture of the Dzongu Lepchas, a tendency that is evident in much of the early scholarship on the reserve and its inhabitants (Subba and Po'dar 1991). During the end of my M.A. research in 2007, Dzongu started garnering attention because of a hunger strike launched by its youth against hydropower projects planned within the reserve. Hopefully older and wiser now, this dissertation though still focused on Dzongu and the Lepcha tribe, I will tell a far more complex and nuanced story, that sheds light on the many ways marginalized groups especially their youth, faced with ecological and economic precarity, negotiate their relationship with the nation-state. At the center of this research then is the question: what are the material, cultural, and political processes that are reorienting the relationship of the physical and epistemic margins to the core?

Drawing on literature from political ecology, post-humanist and materialist geography, post-colonial and decolonial theory, indigenous politics, and geographies of young people, I demonstrate how environmental risk and vulnerability is reorienting the relationship between the state and marginalized groups like the Lepchas. I conducted ethnographic and participatory research over two predissertation surveys (2011, 2012) and ten months of fieldwork (2013-2014) in Gangtok, the capital town of Sikkim and Dzongu reserve in North Sikkim. My fieldwork in 2014, took place during India's national and Sikkim's state elections. Since 2011, earthquakes and landslides near hydropower project sites, along with incidents of shamanic possession by angered mountain deities had raised serious doubts about the viability of hydropower projects for both locals and state technocrats. Along with interviews with indigenous activists, *panchayat* (village governance officials) members, civil society members, geologists and disaster management officials, I was able to witness how questions of economic and ecological precarity, e.g. youth unemployment and earthquakes, were often conflated and took central place in electoral debates and political rhetoric. My research highlights how indigenous knowledge systems and young people's political subjectivities are being shaped by the contentious politics of hydropower development in the Himalayas. I also draw on interviews with regional technocrats and scientists, to demonstrate how state technocracy in its critique of hydropower project developers specifically their construction practices, is implicated in the production of a Sikkimese regional identity. In the sections that follow, I first outline literature on South Asian borders and margins that provide an important framework to the dissertation, I then provide a brief historical background of Sikkim, following which I detail my research methodology and then conclude with an explanation of the dissertation format.

1.2 Becoming a borderland

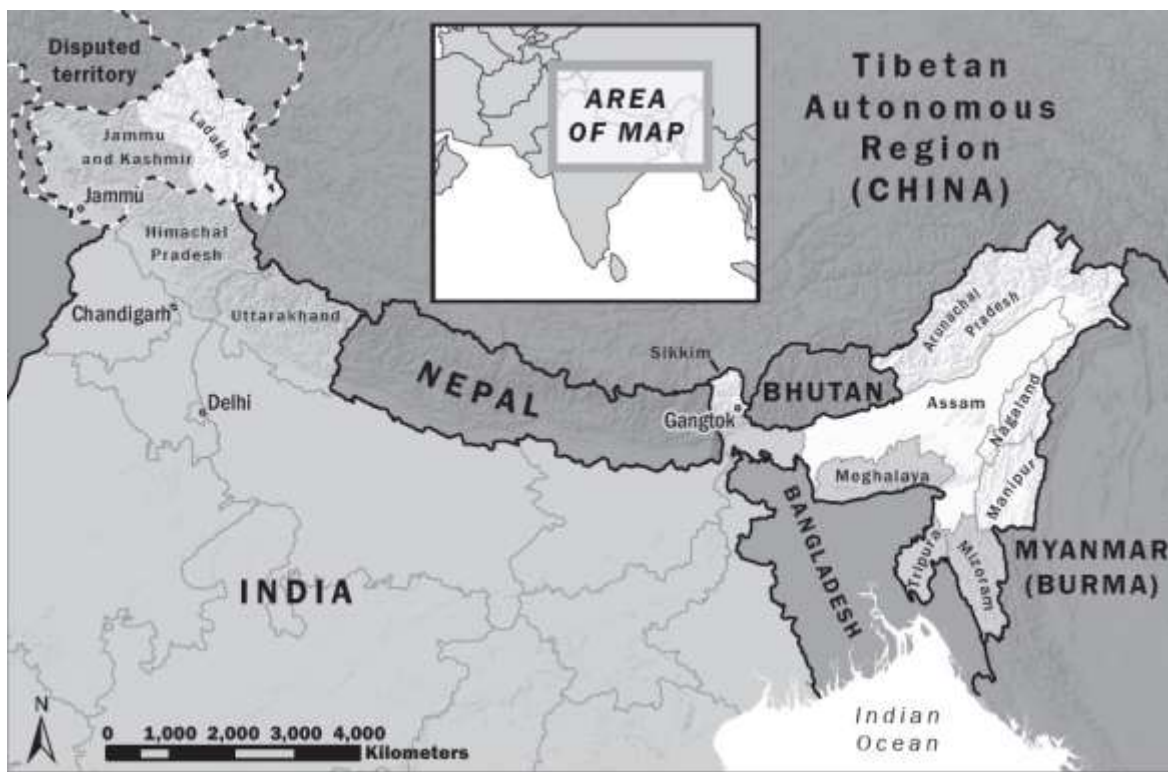
The Indian Himalayan Region is projected to experience the most severe climate change outside the poles but despite its geo-political and ecological significance many scholars have noted that like many frontier spaces, this region has existed at the conceptual peripheries of knowledge production. Schendel (2002:652) critiques the Euro-centric impulse behind area studies which subsumes peripheries of regional heartlands, “under the scholarly rubric of an ‘area’ only to be ignored, othered, made illegible.” He argues that the institutional structure of Area Studies has been predicated on the marginalization of certain regions and types of knowledges. Schendel (2013) has noted elsewhere that in the case of South Asia, borderlands studies have been slow to develop because of a “methodological nationalism” prevalent among social scientists as well as state restrictions that made ‘sensitive’ areas out of bounds for research. This “methodological nationalism”, implies a reading of the margins through the lens of the Indian nation state, a process wherein the nation-state is assumed to be “the natural context and container for all social and political processes” (Gellner 2013:2). The Indian Himalayan region then exists at the physical margins of India and the cognitive margins of South Asian and South East Asian studies¹.

However for the many scholars who have chosen to study the Himalayan region, especially as it exists as marginal to state power, an influential framework has been the ‘Zomia’ concept originally conceptualized by historian Willem Van Schendel (2002) and later popularized by James Scott (2009). Schendel (2002:653) demarcates Zomia as a contiguous area that covers parts of South Asia, Central Asia and East Asia and derives the name from *zomi*, “a

¹ However this scholarly oversight is gradually being rectified with groups like the Asian Borderlands Research Network which focuses particularly on Northeastern India and the upland areas adjacent to it.

term for highlander in a number of Chin-Mizo-Kuki languages spoken in Burma, India and Bangladesh.” Despite having many of the required criteria, such as language affinities, spiritual traditions, ancient trade networks, this geographic area failed to qualify as a region within traditional area studies. One of the main reasons for this failure according to Schendel is that Zomia includes politically marginal areas that actively resisted projects of nation-building and state-making. Highlander communities were often excluded from “discourses of citizenship, and cast in the roles of non-nationals, alien elements, or poachers of the state’s forestry resources who could be redeemed only by assimilating to the lowland ‘mainstream’” (Schendel 2002: 655). James Scott took up the Zomia concept with great enthusiasm in his 2009 book on peasant and subaltern forms of resistance in *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. Extending Schendel’s conceptualization, Scott argues that Zomia comprises of

Fig 1: The Indian Himalayan Region (IHR): The IHR consists of ten states and shares borders with six countries (Map created by Timothy Stallman)



state-evading societies and cultures that in their attempt to keep the state at bay create a “non-state space” or “zones of refuge”. While both Schendel and Scott do not extend the Zomia region to include the Central and Northern Himalayan region, scholars like Shneiderman (2010: 290) believe that the concept has great analytical value for those interested in the entire Himalayan massif and provides “a new framework within which the historically strong focus of Himalayan studies on highland peripheries may be productively united with a more contemporary concern for the political histories of national formations and their ‘state effects’.”

Scholars working in the Indian Himalayan region while acknowledging the importance of the Zomia conceptualization have also critiqued it in the light of both contemporary and historical political realities. Karlsson (2014) writing in the context of North-East India notes that physiography specificities and inter-ethnic relations have had a stronger influence on highlander political and cultural life than “state-evading” impulses. He also argues that the Zomia theorization cannot explain contemporary movements in this region that are demanding state recognition, wherein we observe people of this region, “straddle[ing] between a kind of longing for the state and the opposite, that is, a rejection of it.” (Karlsson 2014: 329). Wouters (2012) takes a more historical approach to Scott’s theorization that hills population are marked by a centrifugal movement away from the state while a more centripetal process characterizes life in the valley state. However Wouters (2012) argues that studying the history of pre-modern states that existed in the Brahmaputra valley, an opposite flow, i.e., people deliberately moving from hills into the ‘state-ridden’ plains, can also be observed. Arguing against Scott, Wouters (2012:61) claims that “the history of those dwelling in the hills can equally be read as the history of their deliberate attempts to access state resources.” Both Wouters (2012) and Karlsson (2014) while offering a critique of the Zomia theorization also demonstrate how Himalayan scholars

(including North East India) interested in studying contemporary political and economic realities of the region are also tasked with developing the theoretical scaffolding that will anchor future debates and interventions.

The Zomia debate illustrates how the processes that shaped and are shaping this region are inherently geographical questions that closely intersect with recent debates within the discipline including but not limited to questions of citizenship, sovereignty, state-making practices, trans-boundary relations, climate change, and the Anthropocene. Within geography, while there has been a long tradition of borderland studies, the focus has primarily been on North America and Europe, partly due to disciplinary Euro-centricism and partly due to the relatively newer borders of post-colonial regions (Gellner 2013). A recent corrective to this disciplinary oversight can be found in Cons and Sanyal's (2013:2) special issue in *Political Geography*, which engages South Asian borders as "*margins of the state and nation*, places at once removed from and central to debates about identity, security, risk, and survival." Identifying South Asian borderlands as a productive site of inquiry, they argue for a conceptual linking of geographies of borders and margins since, "Theoretical debates over borders and margins, [thus,] appear at opposite ends....the former arguably overspecified and empirical, the latter, again arguably, under-specified and vague." (Cons and Sanyal 2013:5). I contribute to these recent discussions within the discipline by drawing attention to the Eastern Himalayan borderlands, its multiple margins and the myriad ways in which these margins are contested and enrolled in political and cultural projects. I do this by linking hazards, large infrastructural projects, and indigenous politics to examine their interactions at the local, regional and national level. Sikkim is an important site of analysis because of its recent inclusion within the Indian state, and is instructive

of the ways in which ethnic minorities from marginal spaces negotiate claims over resources, space, and political power.

1.3 Historical Background of Sikkim and Dzongu

In the postcolonial context, the case of Sikkim elucidates how kingdoms and princely states each with their own dynamic histories were incorporated into a larger hegemonic state and suddenly found themselves at the peripheries of political and economic affairs. Sikkim's early history was shaped by its relations with Tibet, Nepal, and Bhutan, with Tibet emerging as an ally that heavily influenced its military, political, and religious life. The Sikkimese state is said to have been formed in 1642, with the coronation of the first Chogyal Phuntsog Namgyal, a prince of the Minyak house in Kham, Tibet. According to Sikkimese religious mythology, this coronation had been foretold by Guru *Padmasambhava* in the 8th century, who is said to have first introduced Buddhism to Sikkim (Balicki 2008). It is also believed that in the 13th century a blood brotherhood treaty was agreed upon by three² groups, the Tibetan king, Khe-Bhumsa, the Lepcha ruler, Thinkung Tek and the Limbu community, at Kabi village in North Sikkim that assured native populations of the noble and upright intentions of the new Tibetan rulers (Subba 2010). Even today, the altar where this treaty was made by placing stones as witnesses, known as Kabi Longchok, is still well preserved. Several years later in 1642, Phuntsog Namgyal, a descendant of Khe-Bhumsa, was crowned by three revered monks at Yuksam, West Sikkim, which then became the first capital of the newly established Sikkimese kingdom.

² While it was believed that the treaty was signed only between the Tibetan and Lepcha rulers (Arora 2007), scholars like Subba (2010) have argued that the Limbu groups, who are also indigenous to the region, were also present at the signing of the treaty as a third party. While these debates are difficult to prove because of the paucity of historical records, they signal the growing demands and recognition for indigeneity especially by groups like the Limbus who have received much less scholarly and political attention than the Lepcha and Bhutia communities.

Sikkim was a historical crossroads with a geographic location that from early on had been highly desirable (Balicki 2008). While much of this historical cum religious narrative assumes a smooth transition and acceptance of Tibetan monarchy, Mullard (2011) has argued that the first Chogyal did not as much found the Sikkimese state as he convinced several proto-states inhabited by different people groups (including the Lepchas), to consolidate their territory in exchange for protection. Similar historical processes were also at work in neighboring Himalayan valleys like Nepal for example, where small settlements existed at the outer fringes of state control with significant degree of local autonomy until the intensification of state consolidation (Lim 2004). Sikkim's strategic location led to continual warfare with both Nepal and Bhutan, resulting in significant loss of territory and provided the initial impetus for this territorial consolidation. Foning (1987) in *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe* details the historical and contemporary processes of cultural erasure and argues that Lepchas never resisted the Tibetan invasion, pointing instead at systematic efforts of cultural suppression of native groups. However Mullard (2010) believes the reality of these proto-states was far more complex than one of assimilation and subjugation. While the Lepchas and Limbus formed a subject population that did indeed lose much of their cultural heritage in the wake of religious conversions, their acceptance of the monarchy was far from uniform. There is at least one recorded instance of a joint Lepcha and Limbu rebellion against Phuntsog Namgyal in the 1650s however beyond this there is little evidence that can prove whether later on, these groups allied willingly or by force (Mullard 2010: 56).

While the early history of Sikkim was heavily shaped by its Tibetan rulers who introduced Buddhism alongside political and feudal relations that mirrored Tibetan society, the proto-states turned feudal aristocracy were semi-autonomous and their hold over tax revenues

allowed them to exert significant control over the Chogyal. It was these ethnic and political fractures that the British discovered centuries later when they entered the scene around 1814. In the early 19th century Sikkim was a politically fragmented state with a weakened monarch and the British exploited the competing interests of the feudal aristocracy to their advantage (Mullard 2011). However it was the growing antagonism with the British that laid the foundation for a Sikkimese nationalist narrative to develop that drew on the spiritual and religious legitimacy of the monarch (Hiltz 2008). This narrative was further entrenched in the context of decolonization when Sikkim became a protectorate of the Indian state.

If Sikkim's early history is obscured by both political history and religion, Dzongu's history is far more elusive. Dzongu was accorded special protection under the Chogyal and the British, wherein non-reserve residents were not allowed to permanently settle (the exception being marriage) or purchase reserve land. This special status continues even till today under article 371 (f) of the Indian constitution that upholds the old laws and traditions of Sikkim. According to Gorer (1937) a British anthropologist who conducted ethnographic work in the Lingthem village of Dzongu, the reserve was part of the Chogyal's private estate and was administered by one of the hereditary landlords or *kazis*. Foning (1987: 260) however believes that the reserve was set up by the British who were sympathetic to the Lepchas and after observing their abject condition under the Chogyal, decided to set up the reserve in the first half of the 19th century in order to safeguard the tribe's culture. But it is Gorer's version that is widely accepted and corroborated through historical records of a royal proclamation in 1956 by Tashi Namgyal (Bhutia 2012:36). While there is not much clarity about the political impetus behind demarcating this particular geographic area as a Lepcha reserve or why so many members of the tribe chose to settle in this location, there is a plethora of cultural and spiritual explanations

behind the importance of this landscape to Lepchas. All the important mythologies and origin stories of the Lepchas can be traced back to Dzongu (Tamsang 1983; Foning 1987). The *Sangha of Dzongu*, a group comprising of monks in Dzongu, have highlighted that many of the important sacred places in Dzongu such as the Tholung monastery and Kishung lake have been explicitly mentioned in the *Nesol* a Buddhist ritual text (Arora 2007). The idea of Dzongu as a sacred landscape of the ‘vanishing’ Lepchas gained further traction during the anti-dam protests where spiritual and cultural narratives were woven into concerns around environmental protection.

This brief historical context of Sikkim and Dzongu provides three important insights into the political and ethnic politics of present day Sikkim that speak directly to this dissertation research. First, Sikkim’s dynamic political history now exists as fragmented knowledge diluted with popular mythology. To date there is a dearth of research on Sikkim’s history that does not merely revert to its Buddhist origin story (an important exception being Mullard 2011). Furthermore, histories of areas like Dzongu and its inhabitants that can provide important insights into the marginalization and political claims of groups like the Lepcha are even more difficult to excavate. Second, despite its transition to democracy in 1975, Sikkimese polity still retains a strong feudal nature characterized by deep inequality which exists even within the same ethnic groups. For example we find Lepcha families that at the time of the monarchy were feudal aristocrats, have retained considerable material wealth and access to political patronage (Bentley forthcoming). Third, we find that oral or written histories and mythologies of these proto-states were completely subsumed under Buddhist Sikkimese nationalism, which in turn finds itself subsumed under Indian nationalism. These multiple erasures of histories have led to deep-seated cultural anxieties among several groups including the Lepchas that today manifest in a variety of political and cultural demands on the state.

The anti-dam struggle of the Lepcha youth therefore is not just a reaction to contemporary political and ecological transformations but must be understood as ancient histories that are being driven to the surface by earthquakes and angry deities, among other things. Examining the political and cultural demands arising from social movements such as the Lepchas anti-dam movement can provide insights, however fractured and incomplete, into some of these questions and concerns. However these histories cannot be examined in isolation and must be brought into conversation with the histories of the dominant nation-states like India in this case and other ethnic-groups. Shneiderman (2013) writing in the context of the border-crossing Thangmi community of Nepal, argues that processes of migration and mixture in the region remain severely under-theorized. Most scholarship that attempts to understand the process of state-formation in this region focuses either on “the Indic” or “the Tibetan”, placing them in opposition to each other when what is required is “an astute examination of the contingencies of political history and nationally-specific trajectories in the Himalayan region, as well as the recognition of the cultural, linguistic and religious fluidity that defines the lived experience of many border citizens.” (29) Young people are at the center of this study because of their unique position as interlocutors who traverse myriad worlds (virtual and physical; the village and the city; state and community; international and local and so on) sometimes with ease, sometimes with unease. This dissertation foregrounds the experiences of indigenous youth to demonstrate how environmental vulnerability has a direct bearing on marginalized young people’s lives, labor, and politics. I began this research with the following three research questions and the chapters that follow seek to answer these questions:

1. What socio-material spaces of public engagement have opened/closed at the intersection of hydropower development and indigenous youth activism?

2. How are technocratic and indigenous worldviews being co-constituted as they encounter each other? And what specific technologies are mediating this co-constitution?
3. In what ways are young Lepcha activists asserting new political subjectivities in the face of racialized and exclusionary state development practices?

1.4 Methodology

A central argument of my research is that, indigenous articulations shift our understanding of social movements from simply a politics of identity to a politics of knowledge. This entails questioning pre-given epistemological and ontological underpinnings. Critical feminist and performance theory have pushed for a deeper engagement with questions of methodology. If we acknowledge that the production of knowledge is a deeply political process then how is this understanding reflected in our own research methodologies? The researcher's positionality is an important starting point. My mother belongs to the Lepcha tribe and Sikkim is like a second home to me. Doing ethnographic research in such a setting comes with an additional sense of expectation and responsibility. The Lepcha activists welcomed me into their homes and their lives as a comrade and a confidant. However, I was never considered a complete insider. Two or three generations ago, my mother's family converted to Christianity which has given them significant upward social mobility. Several of my relatives hold important government positions and have voiced concerns about my research and how it might affect their standing with the ruling party. I am not fluent in Lepcha and have lived and studied outside Sikkim. Questions of authenticity and allegiance are important in any indigenous social movement. In this context a participatory and collaborative methodology is not an option but a political necessity.

My research questions and methods were developed in close collaboration with community members over two years of pre-dissertation fieldwork while my association with the community has been since my M.A research (2007). I conducted 11 months of multi-sited fieldwork, dividing my time between Sikkim's capital Gangtok and Dzongu in North Sikkim. Dzongu is divided into seven Gram Panchayat Units (GPU's are village-level governance units) where I interviewed young people and panchayat members. In total, I conducted 13 interviews with panchayat members, 54 interviews with young people, 25 of whom had either supported or been involved in anti-dam protests. I conducted semi-structured interviews and questions were directed at understanding what it meant to be young in Dzongu. Since many young people had returned to the reserve after living in more urban parts of Sikkim, my questions were aimed at understanding what challenges they faced in adjusting to life in the reserve and what opportunities were available to them. I also asked questions related to the social, cultural and political life of the reserve and their level of involvement in each of these spheres. Since this was also the lead up the state elections, I attended campaign rallies of the two main political parties and attended cultural functions within the village. Following is the break-down of my research methodology for each research question:

1. What socio-material spaces of public engagement have opened/closed at the intersection of hydropower technology and indigenous youth activism?

Since hydropower is still a fairly divisive issue within the reserve, my questions were framed more around cultural and ecological concerns. In-depth questions related to hydropower projects were mostly directed to anti-dam activists or those who showed a willingness to engage in these questions. I conducted semi-structured interviews in Nepali, where I asked questions ranging from recent earthquakes; spiritual beliefs about the reserve; reasons for

supporting/opposing hydropower, involvement in village and state level politics before and after entry of hydropower, nature and level of political involvement and desire to join official politics. During interviews, eco-tourism was mentioned so often and due to tensions around eco-tourism projects within the reserve, I adapted my questionnaire to include specific questions related to the design, infrastructure, and aesthetics of eco-tourism. This was an unanticipated “socio-material” realm of engagement, which provided rich ethnographic insights into the formation of indigenous political subjectivities. Then, to understand how official political processes might be influenced by young people’s activism, I used unstructured interviews and participant observation to observe events leading up to the state and national elections. I attended village level meetings; participated in informal household discussions, and observed election canvassing within the village.

2. How are technocratic and indigenous worldviews being co-constituted in the process? And what specific technologies are mediating this co-constitution?

To answer this question, I conducted semi-structured interviews with state technocrats, supplemented with state reports on landslides, disaster management, and post-earthquake recovery. To understand state perceptions on hydropower technology, materiality, and expertise semi-structured interviews scientists in the Mines, Minerals, and Geology Department, Disaster Management Department and the Department of Science and Technology. Questions ranged from road connectivity and infrastructure in Sikkim, benefits of hydropower energy, perceptions on diversion dam technology, problems posed by seismicity and landslides to hydropower development. Then, to understand official discourse these interviews were supplemented by two kinds of texts a) Official reports: such as Detailed Project Reports (DPR) of commissioned dams and annual reports of each department b) Political discourse: newspaper articles and political

speeches which made mention of similar themes. In addition to this I attended two workshops one on Disaster Management and the other a youth consultation on Sikkim's Human Development Report. I also had the opportunity to attend a regional level conference, the Sustainable Mountain Development Summit, organized by the Integrated Mountain Initiative (former Indian Mountain Initiative). This conference brought together stakeholders from various states of the Indian Himalayan Region to discuss selected themes around sustainable development in mountainous regions with the focus that year being on natural hazards. This conference provided important insights into both grassroots and policy level conversations that were taking shape in relation to growing ecological precarity and infrastructural development in the regional Himalayan context.

3. In what ways are young Lepcha activists asserting new political subjectivities in the face of racialized and exclusionary state development practices?

To answer this question, I interviewed those young people who had been directly involved in the anti-dam protests. I interviewed 25 anti-dam activists using semi-structured interviews where questions ranged from perception of Dzongu and Lepcha youth by State, Tourists, Non-Lepcha communities and Lepchas from outside the reserve and to what extent they agree or disagree with these perceptions, level of involvement in state elections and specific plans and projects for Dzongu. My initial plans had involved making a collaborative film with Dawa Lepcha, who spearheaded the anti-dam hunger strike and was a trained filmmaker. However his involvement in the state elections, where he decided to run for the Member of Legislative Assembly from the Dzongu constituency, required sidelining my ambitious plans. Instead, I accompanied, Dawa and his entourage of supporters, as they campaigned from village to village in Dzongu.

1.4 Explanation of the Dissertation Format

This dissertation draws on two published articles, one under-review article, and two unpublished articles, the last chapter is the conclusion that summarizes the findings of these chapters and presents my future research directions. Below, I include the abstract of each article/chapter and their publication status.

Chapter 2: Animating the Sacred, Sentient and Supernatural

Materialist and post-humanist scholarship within the discipline has opened up exciting philosophical and theoretical possibilities with which to understand both human and nonhuman worlds. Yet, recent scholarship has been critical of the modern secular tendencies within this approach especially in its lack of engagement with sacred, sentient, and spiritual accounts and experiences. The aim of this review is twofold. First it provides an overview of the concerns that drive the most recent work in materialist and post-humanist approaches in geography. Second, it presents perspectives from the subfields of indigenous and religious geographies and disciplines like anthropology, religious studies, literary fiction, and post-colonial studies that speak directly to these concerns. The review is divided into three sections. The first section provides a cursory overview of recent materialist and post-humanist work in geography. Surveying recent reviews from prominent geography journals, three categories relevant for the present discussion have been identified: resource geographies, urban materialities, and the Anthropocene. The second section examines three approaches which grapple with similar concerns but offer quite a different approach: indigenous ontologies, imaginative geographies, and geographies of religion and western spiritual epistemes. The conclusion draws linkages between the first and the second sections to argue for a more robust theoretical engagement with the sacred, sentient, and spiritual in materialist and post-humanist scholarship within geography.

Chapter 3: Precarity and Possibility: On Being Young and Indigenous in Sikkim, India

In the last decade the Indian Power Ministry began an aggressive campaign for hydropower development in its ten Himalayan states. Twenty-nine of these dams were commissioned for construction in the small Eastern Himalayan state of Sikkim. In June 2007 Dzongu a protected reserve of the indigenous Lepchas in North Sikkim became the center of controversy when reserve youth went on a hunger strike against seven dams planned within the reserve. Their protests garnered enough national and international attention to cancel four of the seven dams. However within the reserve there was very little support for the activists who were seen as educated, upper class youth, most of whom had studied and lived outside the reserve. In this article I narrow the focus on the Dzongu youth and demonstrate how contestations between State and indigenous groups often pry open profound contestations within these groups. In tracing the trajectory of the Dzongu activists after the protests I examine how they are redefining indigeneity, beyond and sometimes in conflict with former connotations. I argue that the anti-dam protests became a way for Dzongu youth to question state-led development agendas as well as elders and urban elite who spoke on behalf of the community. Building on literature in indigeneity and geographies of young people, this research draws on the authors M.A. research (2007-10), two pre-dissertation surveys (2011, 2012) and ongoing fieldwork. The Indian Himalayan region is home to several indigenous groups and is the site of intense geo-political anxiety given its proximity to China and Pakistan. I argue that an attention to young people's political articulations can provide a valuable lens in analyzing the politics of nation building, the politics of difference and the shifting political subjectivities of marginalized groups.

Chapter 4 Living with Earthquakes and Angry Deities at the Himalayan Borderlands

The Indian Himalayan Region, a climate change hotspot, is witnessing a massive surge in hydropower development alongside an increase in natural hazard events. The focus of this paper is on indigenous people's response to ecological precarity, beyond more legible instances of social movements or resistance. Through an ethnographic case study of a 6.9 magnitude earthquake in the eastern Himalayan state of Sikkim, the site of controversial hydropower projects and an indigenous anti-dam protest, I show how marginalized people's relationship with a sacred, animate landscape exceed both scholarly and activist notions of politics. Many in Sikkim believe the earthquake was caused by mountain deities, angered by the desecration of its sacred physiography. While activists point to these events as a sign of the moral and political failure of the state, for non-activist tribe members they raise deeper cosmological concerns. While not easily translatable into political action, these concerns signal tensions between the minority indigenous religion and the more pervasive Tibetan Buddhism, a history that precedes and undergirds contemporary political and ecological transformations. I suggest these spiritual narratives are grounded in a longer history of the contested relationship between marginalized peoples and hegemonic state and non-state powers. In this, I offer a critique of recent post-humanist and materialist scholarship and its lack of engagement with indigenous and subaltern ontologies. I highlight the relationship between natural hazards, sacred landscapes, and indigenous groups, to argue for a more holistic approach to the uneven impacts of climate change on mountainous environments and their inhabitants.

Chapter 5: Geological Anxieties in the Anthropocene at the Unruly Borders of the Indian State:

The increased frequency of earthquakes and landslides especially near dam construction sites, along with incidents of shamanic possession by angered mountain deities, has raised serious doubts about the economic and spiritual viability of hydropower development in the

Himalayan borderlands. The *Nesol*, a sacred Buddhist ritual text, warns devotees that desecrating the scared landscape of *Beyul Demajong*, the Tibetan name for Sikkim, can result in natural disasters and socio-political unrest. In official reports, Sikkim's 'adverse geological conditions' have been described as 'unpredictable' and 'volatile' (in Kohli 2011:21). As project developers soon discover, these projects don't flow uninterrupted into inert, empty spaces (Tsing 2005). Instead, they encounter 'geological surprises' (Indian Power Ministry 2008: 27), which delay projects or worse, result in the loss of human life, laying bare the ecological and cosmological limits of capitalism. In this article, I put recent materialist and post-humanist scholarship on the Anthropocene in conversation with indigenous and decolonial theorizing to understand how geo-physical indeterminacy is deployed by both regional technocrats and indigenous groups, to critique the hegemony of 'national interest'. I explore indigenous and technocratic narratives, to interrogate how heightened indeterminacy is mediating and productive of a borderland subjectivity grounded in the geo-physical and spiritual particularity of the region. In this my attempt is to demonstrate the importance of indeterminacy and a 'critical geographic mobilization of place' (Jazeel 2011) for environmental politics and marginalized subjectivities in the Anthropocene.

Chapter 6: Concrete or Clay? Eco-Tourism and the Contentious Politics of Designing Lepcha Indigeneity

In the last few years, Dzongu, a reserve of the indigenous Lepcha tribe of Sikkim in India, has gained immense popularity as an eco-tourism destination. This success is fuelled by a now well-known youth led movement against state sponsored hydropower projects which has produced a compelling narrative for the conscientious 'eco-tourist. Even as eco-tourism emerges as a viable option for Dzongu's growing ranks of educated unemployed youth, the proliferation

of concrete structures through state housing initiatives is seen as a threat by young entrepreneurs to the ‘rustic’ authenticity of the reserve. Most successful eco-tourism homestays are run by anti-dam activists who are eager to retain traditional architectural styles and the associated skill and knowledge but lack political clout and therefore have little control over what plans and projects enter the village. This article examines how decisions related to Dzongu’s built environment are incendiary issues closely linked to ongoing political and cultural negotiations. Contestations over the design, aesthetics, and architecture of eco-tourism infrastructure are intimately tied to ideas of indigeneity and authenticity, inter-generational gaps, and electoral politics. Building on literature in indigeneity, spatial politics, critical design studies, and geographies of young people, this paper explores the material and spatial production and contestation of state practices to understand how young people from marginalized groups navigate unemployment, exclusionary state practices, and inter-generational expectations.

1.8 Contributions of this dissertation

This dissertation research is an intervention into debates about environmental justice in an era of rapid industrialization and urbanization especially in the Global South and the consequent ecological degradation and income inequality. This work comprises four main contributions to the Geography. First, its focus on the Himalayan region highlights a geographic and academic area of study, which despite its ecological and geo-political importance, is at the conceptual peripheries of knowledge production in both South Asian and South-East Asian Studies. Second, it furthers our understanding of environmental politics in the Anthropocene by demonstrating the centrality of ecological precarity to indigenous, technocratic, and political narratives and practices. Third, it points to overlooked forms of political action and knowledge through serious engagement with indigenous narratives of geological and supernatural events.

And finally, it reveals the centrality of youth, indigeneity, and colonial legacies of racialization to contemporary politics in India, one of this century's crucibles of global environmental and economic change.

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CHAPTER 2: ANIMATING THE SACRED, SENTIENT AND SPIRITUAL IN POST-HUMANIST AND MATERIAL GEOGRAPHIES³

2.1. Introduction

Geographers should avoid considering the earth as the scene on which the activity of man (sic) unfolds itself, without reflecting that this scene is itself living.

(Carl Sauer, 1925: 321 *The Morphology of landscape*)

Surveying geographical scholarship from the past two decades one can no longer say that the discipline has been indifferent to the “livingness” of the earth. The discipline has witnessed a shift from the post-structuralist view of politics as an effect of discursive and linguistic practices, to the post-humanist expulsion of the human from the ontological center. Consequently, there has been an increasing acknowledgement of non-human actors and their agency and role in determining political means and ends (Castree and Nash 2004). In these explorations, the human subject is just another actor in a dense relational network with other animate and inanimate actors. Post-humanist and materialist approaches in geography have drawn on a plethora of theoretical and philosophical approaches, most prominently, Deleuze and Guattari (1987), Haraway (1990) and Latour (1993), to challenge the belief in human exceptionalism, destabilizing the dualisms of nature/culture, human/non-human, theory/method, subject/object and structure/agency (Hinchliffe 2007).

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These enquiries have drawn our attention to the entangled nature of human-environment relations and their political and ethical consequences (Castree 2003; Whatmore 2002; Loftus 2012).

However despite venturing into the fantastical realms of hybrids and cyborgs, most post-humanist and materialist work has neglected a very obvious site of enquiry into non-human/more-than-human agency. Accounts and experiences which take seriously, the agency of gods, spirits or otherworldly phenomena (a different variety of non-humans) are largely absent from post-humanist and materialist work in the discipline. While not all who identify as religious or spiritual subscribe to these beliefs and there is significant variation even among those who do, there is overwhelming scholarly work in allied disciplines that an inquiry into these belief systems, provide crucial insights into both extraordinary and everyday politics (Holloway and Valins 2002). However incorporating these perspectives, as this review goes on to examine, requires questioning a set of dualisms that reveal the latent power-knowledge hierarchies in post-humanist and materialist approaches.

Before I proceed, a brief note on terminology. I use the term ‘religion’ to convey a wide spectrum of beliefs, from organized institutional faith, involving a communal experience to more personal expressions and practices⁴. I use the term ‘sacred’, as the characteristic of a specific space, place, object, human or non-human, to elicit awe and reverence⁵. I use the term ‘spiritual’

⁴ Geographers writing on religion argue that since it is historically produced and context-specific it is impossible to have a single all-encompassing definition of the category. It would be impossible to do justice to the numerous debates within the sub-field but for more details see Kong (2001) and Ivakhiv (2006).

⁵ Ivakhiv (2006) tells us that this definition of the ‘sacred’, most closely associated with Mircea Eliade (1969) has been critiqued for “harboring the very assumptions it is meant to study” (170). The sacred as a “classification of persons, places, and things, involving the regulation of behavior toward those objects through rules, protections, and prohibition” (ibid) is the more “fruitfully applied” (ibid) approach within the discipline. For the purpose of this

and ‘spirituality’ to denote a specific orientation towards sacred space-time, which is open to the manifestation of a known “divine or ultimate being” (Holloway 2003:1962) or the “intangible, unknowable world of the spirit” (MacKian 2011:69). I use the term ‘sentience’ or ‘sentient’ to specifically reference the indigenous belief in the quality of all life⁶ to think, feel and act. In specific relation to indigenous ontologies, Hunt (2014) rightly notes that much of the discipline’s engagement with indigenous peoples has been fixated on their relations with land and natural resources while ignoring other pertinent concerns. Needless to say, the categories this review concerns itself with represent merely a facet of indigenous knowledge and experience.

While geographers have explored how emotions, desires and, affect influence people’s relationship with nature, non-humans and the built environment ((Thrift 2004; Pile 2005; Pile 2010; Sultana 2011) the analytical value of sacred, sentient and spiritual categories in understanding political action and knowledge, has not been fully considered or in some cases, been purposely dismissed. An example of such a dismissal can be seen in Whatmore’s (2013) work on the “onto-politics of ‘natural’ hazards” where she makes the following assumption about natural phenomena, such as earthquakes, hurricanes, and the focus of her paper – floods:

Where such powers may *once* have been attributed to and treated as ‘acts of god’ or ‘forces of nature’, *today* they signal an ontological alliance between interests in the propensities, affordances and affectivities of more-than-human phenomena, and amplifications of the producedness and contingency of human embodiment. (Whatmore 2013, pg. emphasis mine)

review, I have intentionally chosen the former definition, acknowledging that I and many other authors I draw on in this review do harbor these assumptions.

⁶ ‘Life’ - references a very broad understanding, incorporating both animate and inanimate objects and world. For example, the indigenous Andean ‘*tirakuna* or earth-being’ could as easily be a fish as it could be a mountain (Cadena 2010).

Whatmore effectively dismisses belief in ‘acts of god’ or ‘forces of nature’ relegating them to an archaic past. There is good reason to be uncomfortable with viewing natural phenomena as “acts of god” since it might “obscure[s] the forces that compel people to live in risky environments” (Steinberg 2000: pg xxi). However, in this specific context, religious and spiritual beliefs can influence how people make sense and cope with ‘natural’ hazards and disasters (Blong 1982). Writing in the context of Andean indigenous politics, Blaser (2014) drawing on Stenger, argues that the absence of certain entities (gods, djinns and spirits) within new approaches in geography alongside the proliferation of specific types of more-than-human entities (objects, animals, diseases) exposes the “homogeneity of assumptions that help to sort out legitimate from illegitimate matters of concern” (51). The disciplinary reluctance to engage with claims of a religious or spiritual nature is particularly evident, in the lack of a rigorous theoretical engagement with indigenous social movements. Many geographers, especially those on the left, have been uncomfortable with indigenous claims to territory and natural resources and the possibility of disenfranchising non-indigenous groups in the process (Watts 1996; Castree 2004). These concerns are valid and must be addressed; however the discomfort around the ‘militant particularism’ (Harvey in Castree 2004) of indigenous projects has meant that not much attention has been directed to the epistemological and ontological nature of these claims.

Panelli (2008) and more recently Sundberg (2014) and Blaser (2014) build on arguments within the sub-field of Indigenous geographies, which highlight the struggle to bring indigenous epistemes more squarely into the realm of western geographic knowledge (Johnson and Murton 2007). While it is important to be careful of framing these inquiries in nostalgic, uncritical forms or worse re-enacting colonial knowledge practices, Panelli believes there is an urgent need to decolonize the discipline and acknowledge Indigenous and more-than-White Anglo perspectives.

Building on this, the aim of this review is two-fold. First it provides an overview of the concerns that drive the most recent work in materialist and post-humanist approaches in geography. Second, it presents perspectives from the sub-fields of indigenous and religious geographies and disciplines like anthropology, religious studies, literary fiction and post-colonial studies that speak directly to these concerns. The review is divided into three sections. The first section provides a cursory overview of recent materialist and post-humanist work in geography. Surveying recent reviews from prominent geography journals three categories relevant for the present discussion have been identified: Resource Geographies, Urban Materialities, and The Anthropocene. These categories are not meant to represent the range of post-humanist and materialist approaches within the discipline. However they do represent a sizeable body of literature and several influential geographers with a decided orientation towards addressing marginalized identities and concerns. The second section examines three approaches which grapple with similar concerns but offer quite a different approach: Indigenous ontologies, Imaginative Geographies, and Geographies of Religion and Western Spiritual epistemes. The conclusion draws linkages between the first and the second section to argue for a more robust theoretical engagement with the sacred, sentient and spiritual in materialist and post-humanist scholarship within geography.

2.2 Materialist and Post-Humanist Approaches

i) Resource Geographies

The control of, commodification of, and access to natural resources and people's daily and spectacular responses to these processes are central disciplinary concerns. A materialist and post-humanist approach to resource geographies has resulted in an attention to the biophysical properties of natural resources and how they 'enable(s), constrain and/or disrupts the social

practices through which resource regulation is achieved’ (Bakker and Bridge 2006:21). While geographers have focused on a range of natural resources, most empirical and theoretical attention has been directed towards water and carbon derivatives, given their multiple scales and spheres of influence. Within this scholarship the analysis of resource politics can be broadly categorized into two approaches. The first approach occurs at the scale of the state and seeks to decipher, how the neo-liberal project of modernity and democracy is sustained through the control and commodification of these natural resources (Swyengdouw 1999; Bakker 2005; Mitchell 2009). The second approach looks at how the material properties of natural resources and allied infrastructure and expertise, influence conditions for democratic politics and the formation of political subjectivities (Mitchell 2009; Perrault and Valdivia 2010; Sultana and Loftus 2013).

This scholarship in resource geographies has been in productive tension with critiques from the geographical left who worry about the whiffs of environmental determinism in these approaches, a historical baggage that the discipline has struggled to shed. Marxist scholars worry about how an ontological flattening might obscure a ‘pervasive mode of human relationality to nature’ – i.e. capitalist social relations and its role in ordering and structuring these networks as well as the radical impulse in human practice (Kirsch and Mitchell 2004; Loftus 2012). This critique also alerts us to how ‘ontological flattening’ might foreclose attention to difference and inequality within/across human social groups and the disproportionate effects of capitalism on marginalized groups and identities. Resource geographers Bakker and Bridge (2006: 21) believe that ‘deploying materiality’ can be viewed as a call for a “broader anti-colonial project within geography that seeks to destabilize the discourses and practices through which are constituted the materiality of ‘others’ – whether these ‘others’ be human, animate, non-human or material

objects”. An attention to the practices and work of scholars detailed in this review can constitute an initial move in enacting this ‘anti-colonial project’.

ii) Urban Materialities

Within geography, political ecology has a long tradition of exploring the nature-society complex however sites of enquiry have predominantly been located in the Global South or non-urban areas, what Heynen (2013) calls a function of the ‘rural Third World trap’. Cronon’s (1996) influential piece drew our attention to how notions of pristine uninhabited wilderness deeply influenced western notions of conservation and environmentalism. This understanding of nature as ‘out there’ waiting to be discovered also worked to locate nature outside of the city. Urban political ecology (UPE) draws attention to the production of nature in the city, building on Harvey (1996) and Smith’s (2008) Marxist engagements with questions of social justice and uneven development in urban spaces. UPE pays special attention to a technologically mediated and networked understanding of infrastructure and the built environment, bringing to life the metabolic flows and hybridity of socio-natural urban landscapes (Swyngdouw and Kaika 2000; Gandy 1999, 2002; Loftus 2012).

UPE scholars have drawn our attention to the role of materials, technology, and the built environment in reinventing, facilitating or hindering processes of political participation and citizenship (Braun and Whatmore 2010). UPE scholars have also been attentive to people’s everyday and spectacular responses, to uneven power relations that sustain oppressive socio-natural configurations in urban spaces (Loftus 2012). In his recent review, Heynen (2013) outlines the first and second wave of scholarship within UPE, identifying important scholars and recent shifts. He identifies the first wave of UPE as a cross-fertilization between Marxist, Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and post-humanist scholarship. The second wave emerged out of two

critiques of the first wave: first an overemphasis on Marxist approaches, sometimes at the cost of others like ANT and post-humanism, and second making the city the “privileged analytical lens for studying contemporary processes of urban social transformation that are not necessarily limited to the city” (Wacsmuth in Heynen 2013). These internal debates within UPE signal there is still room for more theoretical maneuvering especially a deeper consideration of methodology and the multiplicity of political subjectivities that inhabit urban spaces (Heynen 2013). Perhaps it is time for UPE to revisit and extend Pile’s (2005) line of enquiry in *Real Cities* which takes seriously, “the imaginative, fantastic, emotional – the phantasmagoric – aspects of city life” such as “dreams, magic, vampires and ghosts” (7). Can an attention to the sacred, sentient and spiritual, offer UPE a meaningful engagement with the multiplicity of worlds and entities that inhabit cityscapes?

iii) The Anthropocene

A materialist attention to relationality and interconnectedness has made it impossible to ignore how we are deeply implicated in the global environmental crisis and in birthing an entirely new geological epoch, the Anthropocene (Gibson and Graham 2011). Scientific practice and discourse have played an important role in determining the conditions of life in the Anthropocene pushing geographers into the “politically charged climate of relations between science and society” (Whatmore 2006: 600). This ‘geological turn’ has drawn materialist and post-humanist geographers into deeper engagements with natural science disciplines especially geology and environmental science (Yousuff 2012; Castree 2014). Lorimer (2012) and Castree (2014) believe that inquiries into the Anthropocene bring a new specificity to geographical scholarship, by drawing our attention to the largest spatio-temporal scale of analysis: the planet itself. This claim to specificity might seem counter-intuitive at first, since it shifts our attention to

planetary problems, an approach that “resists immediate political traction” (Clark 2012: 685). However in doing so it draws our attention to how “all of these facets of existence – dynamic *and* inert, vital *and* mineral, generative *and* destructive – might under certain conditions spark political action, but none has a privileged affiliation with...politics in general” (Clark 2012: 687).

Global climate change has led to an intensification of natural disasters increasing the vulnerability of the most marginalized groups. While geographers have analyzed the role of the state and neo-liberal policies in the spatialized production of disaster (Baldwin and Stanley 2013) post-humanist and materialist approaches examine natural phenomena like floods, earthquakes, and tsunamis as actors and events that can drastically reorient politics and social life (Whatmore 2013; Clark 2011). The Anthropocene is still an ‘adolescent concept’ (Castree 2014: 446) but signals a unanimous agreement within the discipline, that human actions are fundamentally altering the experience of all living, animate, and inanimate actors, demanding a recalibration of our epistemological and ontological frameworks (Gibson-Graham 2011). An attention to planetary processes has also led to a reflection on how viable political projects can be built without losing their meaning for specific places and concerns (Gibson and Graham 2011). But as Kirsch (2015) notes, the figure of the human is still central in these concerns for what is “more distinctly human, than thinking in epochal terms” (1). Alongside this we must also ask, “What sorts of cultural work have made this condition possible, and continue to hold the Anthropocene in place?” (Ibid: 2). This emergent work must then take into account, the uneven impacts of global environmental change on marginalized groups and their attendant response and political strategies.

2.3. Animating the Sacred, the Sentient and the Spiritual

This section builds on the argument of Panelli (2008) and Sundberg (2014) that post-humanist and materialist approaches within the discipline, can greatly benefit from conversations with disciplinary sub-fields and allied disciplines which engage with ontological pluralism in thoughtful, critical and creative ways. This is not to say that geographers have been completely closed to other disciplinary approaches however this review speaks to the general tendency to dismiss accounts of materiality and non-humans that take seriously sacred, sentient and spiritual experiences and practice. While indigenous beliefs are perhaps the most widely studied and recognized in this context, this review also explores empirical-political approaches within literary fiction and western religions. While much of the literature in the following section comes from the margins of power it also recognizes the plurality of western spirituality in both institutionalized religion and alternative practices in a move to lever open the ‘ontological multiplicity’ of the North (Law 2011).

i) Indigenous ontologies

Within geography spiritual claims deployed by indigenous groups for political ends have been read as discursive strategies or material ones that aim to benefit from the state (Watts 1996). Even in materialist accounts where indigenous groups figure prominently, there is little mention of how these groups might view natural resources as sacred or sentient, and not simply as matter with agentic capabilities. Indigenous groups, especially in Latin America, have been able to gain political traction by deploying an overtly spiritual-materialist understanding of the environment. ‘The Law of Mother Earth’ enacted in the Bolivian constitution which redefines mineral deposits as “blessings” and grants nature equal rights to humans is the most prominent of these examples. Anthropology and allied disciplines have been far more cognizant of Indigenous epistemes. In the Andean context of indigenous resistance to mining, sentient mountains or

‘earth-beings’ were called forth from the realm of everyday belief into the political realm resulting in a dramatic reinterpretation of politics (Cadena 2010; Blaser 2014). Indigenous claims of sacred and sentient beings, in the context of resource conflicts and environmental movements, can disrupt the smooth flow of capitalism into seemingly ‘empty’ frontier spaces (Tsing 2005).

There has been a long-standing anthropological interest in how people relate to drastic political economic changes in terms of new ‘magico-religious’ practices (; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). In her analysis of the socio-economic transitions in post-socialist Mongolia, High (2013) looks at how the current gold rush in Mongolia has resulted in immense wealth along with rumors of dangerous spirit beings. Instead of trying to make sense of people beliefs High examines people’s doubts in the context of socio-economic transformations which “entail[s] profound doubts about how humans and spirits can co-exist when human desires threaten to disrupt the fragile cosmological balance” (61). In this, she addresses the unpredictable role of a ‘living landscape’ in the production of valuable commodities for global markets. In another example from Mongolia, Pedersen (2011) examines the emergence of ‘half-shamans’– “young, unemployed men whose undirected energies erupt[ed] in unpredictable and frightening bouts of violence and drunkenness that seem[ed] occult in their excess”. He believes these “half-shamans” embody the chaotic nature of the free market, neo-liberal reform and government corruption in the wake of post-socialist economic transformations. Both High and Pedersen signal towards a complexity in spiritual belief systems and how people’s response to neo-liberal restructuring, can go beyond more visible instances of social movements or resistance.

Animistic ontologies which view objects as having capacities of ‘action or spirit’ can speak particularly well to materialist interest in ‘non-human’ agency (Reynolds 2009). Sullivan (2013:52) notes how the concept of “commodity fetishism” is ‘steeped in particular

understandings of the “fetish” as a component of “primitive” and animist thought”. He attempts to reclaim a modern animist ontologies from such a dismissal and forwards the epistemological and ontological move of “becoming-animist”. He points out that the Euro-Western tradition of a transcendent God, as beyond the material world and non-specialist humans, is in contradiction to the animist view of the sacred as immanent and accessible to everyone. Johnson and Murton (2007) echo this in their argument for a “re/placement of modern Native voices within constructions of nature” as a way to “heal[ing] the disenchantment caused through the rupture between culture and nature in Western science.” Thoughtful critical engagements with indigenous projects and belief systems can provide complex material and political insights into “the incomplete state of colonial erasure, the interstices in neoliberal practices and a more hopeful politics of place based identities, all of which have significance for geography as a discipline” (Coombs, Johnson and Howitt 2011: 697). Cameron, de Leeuw and Desbiens (2014) offer a counter word of warning to geographers in the recent special issue on Indigeneity and Ontology in *Cultural Geographies*. They observe that critical colonial scholars are “wary of mobilizing any kind of ‘essential’ Indigenous nature or experience in their work” not because they reject indigenous ontologies but because of how these might be “represented and mobilized within colonial structures of knowledge production.” (19). Geographers then must proceed with an awareness of their personal and academic positionality, knowing that any engagement with indigenous ontologies is necessarily an engagement with indigenous bodies and projects.

ii) Imaginative Geographies

Post-colonial authors have been critical of Western traditions for their inability to be “attuned to the forms of communication through which a genuine pluralistic universalism might develop” (Barnett in Aitken and Valentine 2002). Story-telling and fantasy can be seen as forms

of communication that further an ‘imaginative geography’. It is widely acknowledged that western, scientific perceptions of what constitutes reality have been imbued with a sense of universality that is privileged over other ways of being (Law 2011). Said’s Orientalism critically analyzed the “imaginative geographies of Egypt produced by European scholars and artists in the nineteenth century” (Gregory 1995: 454) to demonstrate how ‘geographical imagination’ is a contested cognitive space, with material and political implications (Radcliffe 1996). Sundberg (2014) critiques post-humanist engagements in geography for ‘reproducing colonial ways of knowing and being by enacting universalizing claims and, consequently, further subordinating other ontologies’. She builds on the concept of *walking with*, put forth by the Zapatistas, to think of different ways in which geographers can engage with indigenous people as political subjects rather than research objects. She suggests including indigenous scholarship in our research, direct collaboration with indigenous groups, and direct action as a way to *walk with* indigenous people (41). Also relevant, is Blaser (2014) who draws on Annemarie Mol, to develop the term ‘storied performativity’ -- a stance in favor of ontological pluralism, since all stories have “world-making effects” and “different stories imply different ontologies or worlds” (54).

In the context of this review the literary genres of magical realism and Afrofuturism are especially relevant. As a literary discourse, magic realism inserts fantasy and supernatural elements in an otherwise ‘real’ environment. Believed to be an “authentic expression” of Latin America (Flores 1955) it is most prominently associated with the work of Marquez and Carpentier. In his seminal article, ‘*Magic Realism as Post-colonial discourse*’, Stephen Slemon (1988) argues that magical realism has been a central component of post-colonial literature because of its “positive and liberating response to the codes of imperial history and its legacy of fragmentation and discontinuity” (21). While Latin American authors provided the initial force

in developing the genre it has been widely used by authors from other post-colonial contexts. A prominent example of this is Rushdie's *Midnight Children*, in which he uses fantastical elements to explore the major events following India's independence and partition.

More recently, magic realism has made its presence felt in US ethnic literature in the work of writers from minority groups who have deployed it to reveal "traumatic or suppressed histories" and "even signposts to the future" (Sandin and Perez 2012). An example of this can be seen in Dominican-American writer Junot Diaz's acclaimed novel *The Brief and wondrous life of Oscar Wao*. Diaz uses the notions of fuku and rafa, a curse and its counter-curse to explore Dominican life under Dictator Rafael Trujillo and the multi-faceted immigrant experience in America. While magical realism has been critiqued for a "commodifying kind of primitivism" those sympathetic to the genre argue that it questions traditional dichotomies bringing to view "hidden connections and connivances between material practices (late capitalism, globalization, social injustice), spiritual/ethical concerns (lack of eco/critical awareness and/or activism) and environmental degradation" and "provides spaces for alternative experiments with "reality"" (Sanchez, Calvo and Gonzalez 2009).

Afrofuturism is a literary and cultural trend (Nelson 2002; Womack 2013), that draws on "science fiction themes, such as abduction, slavery, displacement and alienation to re-narrate the past, present and the future of the African diaspora" (Ramirez 2008:186). While Afrofuturism draws on a multiplicity of sources including magic realism and non-western cosmologies, it has a decidedly futuristic orientation which problematizes the disassociation of people of color from narratives of science and technology. A prime mover of this genre is Octavia Butler who inserts black people, women and people of color as protagonists in her stories, to interrogate notions of science and technology as progress Afrofuturism and more recently Chicanafuturism (cf Ramirez

2004) open up inquiries into the “promises of science, technology and humanism for Chicanas, Chicano, and other people of color” and can speak very directly to major themes of concern within materialist and post-humanist literature while also addressing its silence on issues of race, indigeneity and gender (Panelli 2009). Kitchin and Kneale note that an attention to literary genres (cyberfiction in their case) can be a useful resource for geographers to “map[s] out possible future spatialities of the postmodern condition, and provides cognitive spaces which are being used by individuals and institutions in conceiving and making future society.” (2001:32). Both literary genres of magic realism and Afrofuturism, push the boundaries of the real and imagined to tell stories that deal with contentious issues in new and compelling ways. The act of story-telling (Balser 2010; Houston 2013) is also the act of imagining different conditions of possibility, as a counter to Capitalism’s stifling ‘There Is No Alternative’ line of thinking.

iii) Geographies of Religion and Western Spiritual epistemes

There is substantial research in the sub-field of geographies of religion that examines a range of concerns through the lens of religion and spirituality such as the body and subjectivity (Holloway 2006; Gokariksel 2009) everyday spaces of faith (Kong 1993b; 2002) and urban cityscapes (Kong 2008; Fenster 2004). Like Panelli and Sundberg, scholars in this sub-field have also been critical of Euro-Western modernity and the mechanisms through which it creates a false dichotomy between the religious and the secular (Asad 1993, 2003; Gokariksel 2009; Ivakhiv 2006; Kong 2001; Howe 2009). Authors in the sub-field demonstrate through their work the persistence of religious experiences and expressions and its importance in highlighting the experience of different constituents of population – young people, migrant communities, ethnic minorities (Kong 2010). In her recent review of the sub-field Kong (2010) examines the intersection of religious and ethical values with four key global shifts, “rapid urbanization and

social inequality; a deteriorating environment; an ageing population; and increasing human mobilities” (765). A significant portion of this scholarship is located in urban and western locations challenging notions of growing secularism in these sites.

While indigenous and post-colonial perspectives offer a plethora of new perspectives, Law (2011) points to how there is ontological multiplicity even within the North, encouraging us to “craft encounter across ontological difference”. There are internal debates within the Judeo-Christian tradition that argue that just as religion has been central in the Western context of capitalism, religion can also develop alternatives to capitalism (Bergman 2009). From his grounding in Christianity, Cloke (2002) argues that geographers must be sensitive to the ways in which people are linking questions of social justice, oppression, and supernatural notions of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ in the world. Holloway and Valins (2002:5) argue that the “secular space is itself a hybrid of past religious traditions”. This understanding of the secular can also illuminate people’s relationship to nature and the environment and how it is informed by a pluralism of frameworks. There is a burgeoning field of eco-theology within religious studies that explore the intersections of sustainability, religion and ecology primarily within the Judeo-Christian tradition. Bergmann (2009) echoes this in his argument that ‘ecological spiritualities’ have the power to provoke and heighten political agendas and associations even in the West.

Ivakhiv (2009) in examining the ‘religious turn to ecology’ has made a case for a rigorous theoretical engagement “with situations where religion, science and nature encounter each other on the unstable grounds of a rapidly changing world”. Natural hazards and disasters are perhaps the strongest reminders of this unpredictability and have “reawakened the interest of geographers and others in disaster politics” (Pelling and Dill 2010). However Chester (2005), writing in the Christian religious context, argues that not much attention is paid to how “many

actual and potential victims of hazard continue to explain losses in theistic terms; even in societies where individuals are aware of alternative scientific and social explanations.” In a special issue on religions, natural hazards and disasters, Galliard and Texier (2010) consider four major religions, Catholicism, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism to offer insights into how “religious practices intermingle with social, political and economic constraints” and argue for religion to be seen “as a resource rather than a hindrance in the planning of disaster risk-reduction policies” (83).

Much of the recent scholarship in the sub-field has drawn on post-secular theory in its critique of secularism in both Western and non-Western context highlighting the profusion of religious practices and beliefs in both public and private spaces. However Kong (2013) is wary of this overemphasis on post-secularism arguing instead that the focus should be on “the complexity of religion itself” as this can open up enquiries into other functional and symbolic dimensions of religion which may at first appear to have no overt connection to religion. Olson, Hopkins, Pain and Vincett (2013) echo this sentiment in their study of young Scottish Christians to argue that along with a critique of secular theory, “a critical understanding of religion and class – as material relationships, symbolic reference and moral significance – must also be a priority” (1433). This breadth of scholarship demonstrates the importance of taking spiritual and religious perspectives in considering a range of empirical-political questions.

2.4. Conclusion

Anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose (2008) suggests that our openness to unique styles of history leads us to relational and ethical encounters and engagements. This is a stance in favor of plurality and the disruptive agency of others, an agency that challenges dominant paradigms of thinking. Materialist and post-humanist scholarship within the discipline has opened up exciting

philosophical and theoretical possibilities with which to understand both human and nonhuman worlds. Yet, we must be wary of the tendency within such scholarship which in one instance acknowledges trash as lively, yet, in another, dismisses people's insistence on a mountain's sentience or the agency of other worldly spirits. Sundberg (2014) is critical of scholars who operate in the binaries of "political theory/primitive religion and rational/magical" (37). Drawing on Dipesh Chakrabarty, Sundberg (2014) argues that the epistemological consequence of such a theoretical gesture is that "Anglo-European scholarship is the only tradition truly alive in post-humanist theorizing" which treats "thinkers who are long dead (e.g. as John Locke, Karl Marx, Max Weber) as intellectual contemporaries" while "scholars from other intellectual traditions...are treated as truly dead, material for either historical or ethnographic research only" (38). A strand of post-secular theory forwarded by McLennan (2011) is particularly relevant here. McLennan argues for "the ontological possibility of incorporating other-world explanatory variables into critical realism" and for these experiences "to be recognized as a legitimate form of knowledge of the world" 4 (McLennan in Olson et al. 2013: 1424).

Chakrabarty (2000) grapples with a similar question in his own research on labor history in colonial Bengal, and he observes this, "Labor.... is seldom a completely secular activity in India; it often entails...the invocation of divine or superhuman presence." (72). He acknowledges the importance of the Marxist secular narrative of labor as "indispensable" yet "inadequate" in its inability to "incorporate agency on the part of gods and spirits" (88). His suggestion is to develop a "relationship of intimacy to both languages" (89) or two systems of thought which in his case were the Marxist secular narrative of labor and the tool-worshipping life-worlds of jute mill workers. Therefore this review's critique of post-humanist and materialist scholarship isn't a call for its outright rejection. Instead it is a call to develop proficiency in another language, in order

to better represent the life-worlds of the humans and nonhumans, whose stories we are entrusted with. The work of scholars drawing on indigenous and animist ontologies is particularly relevant to work within resources geographies and the Anthropocene. De la Cadena, Sullivan, High, and Pedersen demonstrate how an attention to animist ontologies can reveal political networks, properties of the resource, and how people might relate to these. These authors are sensitive to capitalist and neo-liberal power structures especially the ways in which it silences indigenous voices and projects. This review has also pointed out that an attention to the Anthropocene needs to actively engage with the claims of indigenous and marginalized groups who have to bear the brunt of environmental precarity brought on by climate change. As literary trends and critiques of prevailing power structures, both magical realism and Afrofuturism offer provocative ways to imagine and write about ontological pluralism. Afrofuturism in particular makes us attentive to the ways in which a growing interest in scientific solutions within the humanities must be tempered with the awareness of the ways in which marginalized groups have been distanced as well as “injured or killed by and/or for science and technology” (Ramirez 2008:188). We also find productive intersections between UPE and geographies of religion as both seek to address absences and fixed understandings of cityscapes. Together they challenge the notion of the urban as profane, artificial, and lacking an authentic expression of either faith or nature. UPE scholars can benefit from an attention to how religious and spiritual beliefs influence the creation of enabling and inclusive spaces especially with regard to marginalized and minority groups.

While the mechanisms to enact an ontological rupture within academia are beyond the scope of this review, taking a cue from the approaches highlighted here, a few suggestions are briefly outlined. Our engagement with other disciplines needs to go beyond just citations. A good place to start could be attending other disciplinary conferences where similar discussions are

taking place. Many of the insights in this review were a result of courses taken in other disciplines and attending conferences such as the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association. Sundberg (2014) also highlights the importance of incorporating non-western and indigenous authors when teaching post-humanist and materialist issues. Resources for these can be easily found with the help of scholars on specialty listservs like the Indigenous Peoples Specialty Group or the Geography of Religion and Belief Systems.⁵ These listservs are also useful in keeping abreast with latest development, conferences, and debates within these fields. The most important consideration however is a methodological one which requires far more disciplinary introspection. Acknowledging sacred, sentient, and spiritual more-than-human entities signals an ontological rupture in our research agendas. A rupture which makes us attentive to not only how the North establishes political and economic dominance over the South but also how those very same institutional mechanisms work to erase ontological difference, making them entirely incommensurable and inconceivable outside of their contexts (Law 2011; Povinelli 2001). Engaging with multiple ontologies is inextricably linked to encounters with difference and their meaningful academic translation (Carrithers et al. 2010). In the context of research being “undertaken by nonindigenous peoples in largely colonial institutions” (Cameron, de Leeuw and Desbiens 2014:24), this raises the difficult task of honoring and engaging with non-western voices and multiple ontologies without treating them simply as “resources for disciplinary self-renewal” (Salmond 2013: 1) but as a corrective to colonial tendencies within the discipline. The burden then should not fall on indigenous and non-western subjects to speak loudly, but for us in the discipline to listen more carefully.

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CHAPTER 3: PRECARIETY AND POSSIBILITY: ON BEING YOUNG AND INDIGENOUS IN SIKKIM, INDIA⁷

3.1 Introduction

The Dzongu reserve, located in the district of North Sikkim, is home to around 5,000 members of the indigenous Lepchas also known as the ‘Vanishing Tribe’⁸. For years the reserve had witnessed an out-migration of young people leading to concerns over the cultural and moral dissolution this mobility would cause. Young people’s ambivalence about returning to the reserve had strained inter-generational relations within the reserve. But events that unfolded in 2007 saw these young people emerge as ‘alchemists of the revolution’ (Jeffery 2011), questioning, challenging and reimagining the future of Dzongu as well as their own.

Before 2007, 29 hydropower projects had been planned in Sikkim as part of the Indian Power Ministry’s effort to develop the hydroelectric potential of the Himalayan states (Government of India 2008; Dharmadhikary 2008). Seven of these dams were planned to cut across Dzongu. Predictably, this resulted in tensions within the reserve splitting opinions and loyalties but very few could have anticipated what followed next. Dawa and Tenzing, two young men from the reserve both of whom had been educated in Gangtok, the state capital went on a hunger strike which turned into a 915 days long (2007-2010) relay hunger strike.

⁷ This chapter previously appeared as an article in *Himalaya, the Journal of Nepal and Himalayan Studies*. The original citation is as follows Gergan, M. D. 2014. Precarity and Possibility: On being Young and Indigenous in Sikkim, India. *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*, 34(2), 10.

⁸ A.R. Foning (1987) a Lepcha author wrote the book, *Lepcha, my Vanishing Tribe* and ever since the epithet has been used in common parlance to refer to low numbers of the tribe and other ‘threatened’ aspects of the culture.

Their protests garnered enough national and international attention to pressure the State Government of Sikkim to cancel four of the seven dams⁹. Amidst celebrations, young activists voiced concerns about their future in a state with limited employment opportunities. Their involvement in these protests had jeopardized any possibility of employment in the highly competitive and coveted government sector (Govt. of Sikkim 2009). Larger concerns over the fate of the reserve were intimately tied to young people's concerns over their future in a precarious political landscape.

The Lepcha protest raises several pertinent questions around democratic politics, development and the agency of marginalized indigenous groups. Some of these questions have been explored by scholars who have argued for the increased involvement of civil society groups in official politics highlighting the limits of representative democracy for marginalized communities (Little 2010; Arora 2013). Others have pointed to the elitist and ethnocentric tendencies of such movements since these were educated, upper class indigenous youth, and the resultant polarization this causes between ethnic groups (McDuie-Ra 2011). Acknowledging the contribution of these scholars, I draw in the young people¹⁰ who were part of the movement and place them at the center of this conversation. I argue that the Dzongu Lepchas experience merits a closer examination of the relationship between youth and indigeneity. There is rich literature within human geography and allied disciplines exploring questions of youth agency (Aitken 2001; Katz 2004; Durham 2008; Jeffrey 2013). Within the Indian context, young people's

⁹ The works of Kerry Little (2010), Vibha Arora (2007; 2008) Duncan McDuie Ra (2011) provide a rich ethnographic look into what sparked the movement and its political ramifications.

¹⁰ In this paper I employ the term 'youth' and 'young people' to refer to 16-30 year olds, fully aware that these are intellectually and politically problematic terms and that there can be no straightforward definition or experience of 'youth' (Jeffrey 2013).

agency has been approached from the lens of caste, gender, masculinity and temporality (Jeffrey 2001, 2008; Jeffrey et al 2004; Dyson 2008; Jeffrey and Dyson 2008; Smith 2012). However, thus far there has been very little discussion around indigenous youth in the context of environmental movements despite the prominent role played by them in such movements. While several authors have explored indigenous youth activism (Bora 1992; Dutta 1998; Baruah 2002) and environmental movements in the North-Eastern context (Arora 2007; 2008; Karlsson 2009; McDuié-Ra 2011), my work seeks to draw a more explicit connection between the two.

This article builds on two important observations of the anti-dam protests in Sikkim: the protests were led mostly by educated youth from Dzongu and much of the support for the movement came from outside Dzongu and the Lepcha community in Sikkim (McDuié-Ra 2011). Rather than viewing this as the movement's hamartia and one which led to its perceived failure, I draw our attention to the articulations of the Dzongu youth to demonstrate how contestations between State and indigenous groups often pry open profound contestations *within* these groups. The Lepcha anti-dam dam protests became a way to question state-led development agendas as well as elders and urban elite who speak on behalf of the community. In these contestations the meaning of indigeneity was and is being redefined by Dzongu youth, beyond and sometimes in conflict with former connotations. Building on literature in indigeneity and geographies of youth, I draw the reader's attention to three ways in which indigeneity and young people's experiences are intimately linked in the Sikkimese context. Firstly, the articulation of indigeneity was tied to young people's contradictory experience of everyday hardships in a sublime¹¹ landscape. After

¹¹ The usage of the term sublime is derived from Bill Cronon's (1996) influential piece, "The Trouble with Wilderness or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." Cronon examines 'the sublime' and 'the frontier' as cultural constructs which influence contemporary environmentalism. Pristine wilderness is seen as the "ultimate landscape of authenticity. Combining the sacred grandeur of the sublime with the primitive simplicity of the frontier." Cronon

the protests Dzongu youth promoted the idea of ‘return to Dzongu’ by presenting it as an exceptional landscape of both spiritual significance and economic potential. Secondly, the discourse of indigeneity that emerged from the Dzongu protests marked a shift from the more institutional discourse that is prevalent in the region that appeals to the state for recognition and benefits. This shift was linked to young people’s experience of their community’s dependence on the government and their lack of competitiveness with other ethnic groups both of which were understood as effects of racialized and exclusionary state practices. Lastly, the protests and what followed after were an attempt at constructing respectability for young Lepchas, especially men struggling against tropes of the ‘lazy native’ and ‘apathetic youth.’

My research for this article draws on several years of association with the region and these young activists. My mother belongs to the Lepcha tribe and I conducted my M.A. research (2006-2008) and two pre-dissertation surveys (2011, 2012) in Dzongu, wherein I conducted group interviews, an oral history study on inter-generational relations, personal interviews, and household surveys. Most of my interactions have been with young activists from two organizations, Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) and Concerned Lepchas of Sikkim (CLOS). In most cases I have used pseudonyms except for the more prominent members of the movement. Interviews were conducted in Nepali and English.

3.2 Being Indigenous in India

critiques this tendency to place the human and the natural at opposite poles thereby obscuring the complex ways in which the two are entangled. During the hunger-strike many of the activists presented Dzongu as the sublime-sacred and pristine in opposition to the more ‘artificial’ urban landscape of Gangtok, the capital town. Cronon would perhaps have been critical of such a move and further along in the paper I discuss how and why these activists presented Dzongu as a sublime, exceptional landscape.

The term 'indigeneity', while being rooted in "historically sedimented practices, landscapes and repertoires of meaning" (Murray Li 2000) is itself a fairly recent product of post-war international bodies like the UN and ILO (Karlsson 2003; Castree 2007). It interpellates different indigenous groups situated in distinct histories and territories and is a way of pursuing local, place-based agendas through global means (Radcliffe 1999; Turner 2001; Routledge 2003; Castree 2004; Routledge and Cumbers 2009). Indigenous movements are rooted in struggles over material, symbolic and intellectual resources generally in opposition *to* the state but they are also seen as a way of securing certain benefits *from* the state (Karlsson 2003; Shneiderman and Turin 2006; Middleton 2013). While acknowledging historical conditions that necessitate indigenous struggles and demands, scholars argue that indigeneity is "the cultural and political work of articulation" (Murray Li 2000) and is 'customized' by the interlocutors (Greene 2009). The interlocutor's position, mediated by class, gender and age, to a large extent determines the nature of indigeneity articulated. Indigeneity therefore is not 'customized' equally or similarly by everyone within the tribe (Canessa 2007). This is not to imply that these articulations are false rather it makes us sensitive to the stories of the interlocutors, the multiplicity of voices and the knowledge that in these articulations certain "sites and situations....are privileged while others are overlooked" (Murray Li 2000).

If indigeneity is indeed the work of articulation, then it is important to recognize the role played by colonial administrative discourse in the Indian context. The British demarcated tribal areas as excluded or partially excluded areas (Pathy 2000). Post-independence partially excluded areas came under the Fifth schedule of the constitution which granted tribal groups several rights over forest and land resources. Areas which were wholly excluded came under the Sixth schedule and had more rights to retain customary titles and positions. Sixth schedule areas are in

the Himalayan region¹² whereas Fifth scheduled areas are spread across India with a large concentration in Central India. Since the Fifth schedule didn't have as strong regulations as the Sixth schedule, tribes here were subjected to more state-led development incursions. In opposing these incursions, tribal groups in Fifth Schedule areas developed stronger ties with environmentalists and other marginalized groups and effectively cultivated an 'adivasi' identity (Karlsson 2003). Large-scale development projects in Sixth schedule areas have a more recent history. The language and terms used by groups in this region are shaped much more by their transnational engagements rather than alliances with other Indian tribal groups (Ibid 2003). Differences in regulations and policies have resulted in a significantly different politics of resistance and recognition arising from Fifth and Sixth schedule areas. The term for indigenous in India is 'adivasi' however very few groups in the Himalayan region identify themselves as such and prefer the term 'indigenous' or 'tribal' since 'adivasi' is seen as a sanskritized term that doesn't apply to them.

Therefore in the context of the 'indigenous debate' it is important to recognize a plurality of indigenous movements as well as a plurality of discourses *within* indigenous movements (Rappaport 2005). In India, indigeneity is a controversial category which is closely related to the confusion around the question 'who count as indigenous?' Indian anthropologists such as Roy Burman and Bettiele (in Karlsson 2003) feel it is difficult to determine who is indigenous in India since the entire country was colonized and the history of tribes has been that of movement

¹² The Indian Himalayan Region (IHR) consists of Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, hill districts of West Bengal and Assam and the other North Eastern States (Nandy, S.N et al 2006; Ministry of Power 2008). The official geographic definition of the IHR includes the North Eastern states however the author is aware of discrepancies on the ground wherein NE states and subjects may not necessarily identify themselves as Himalayan. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out and pushing me to elaborate on this definition of the Himalayan region.

and migration. Others (Xaxa 1999; Karlsson 2003) feel we must accept these groups on their own terms. Claims to indigeneity are understandably controversial since they provide important social and political leverage. Karlsson (2013) points out that in the North Eastern context, “the indigenous tribe category [is] a strategic conflation of two different regimes of rights or political assertions.” The first relates to the recognized Scheduled Tribe (ST) status for affirmative action and the second being the emerging global framework for indigenous peoples rights. In Sikkim and neighboring regions of Darjeeling and Kalimpong, Lepchas have been recognized as Scheduled Tribes and self-identify as indigenous since as early as 1925. In Sikkim the interlocutors belonged to institutional bodies with close ties to a State whose ‘pro-tribal’ policies have made it the envy of its neighbors (Shneiderman and Turin 2006: 56). The Dzongu protests marked a shift away from the institutional framework and this reformulation of indigeneity drew them closer to global indigenous discourses wherein the State is an antagonistic force. While being shaped by global indigenous politics the articulation of Lepcha indigeneity was also a response to localized issues specifically those facing young people from Dzongu.

3.3 The Lazy Native meets the Apathetic Youth

Young people stand on the edge of a community's boundaries constantly traversing between lines of ‘tradition,’ ‘modernity,’ ‘morality,’ and ‘immorality’ (Cole and Durham 2008). Geographers examining young lives offer a spatial and temporal analysis of how young people’s lives are marked simultaneously by apprehension and anxiety as well as hope and potential (Aitken 2001; Cole and Durham 2008; Jeffrey and Dyson 2008). Despite their involvement in social movements and civil society groups, young people’s lack of interest in formal politics has long been seen as a sign of their apathy leading to concerns around the ‘crisis of democracy’ (Furlong and Cartmel 2012). Young people occupy a liminal legal and political space viewed as

‘adult-in-waiting’ or ‘political apprentices’ rather than political agents (Skelton 2010). In the domestic space young people and children occupy a special place of exclusion because of their perceived inability to enter into intelligent dialogue with adults (Matthews, Limb, and Taylor 1999). The agency of young people therefore needs to be understood as operating at these multiple scales (Dyson 2008; Skelton and Gough 2013) .

When discussing indigenous youth it is important to have an understanding of the powerful racial tropes related to indigenous groups that further contribute to their exclusion from political spaces. Racialized tropes brought into effect by colonial discourses cut across time and space and have a continued dominance in how indigenous groups are racialized in present-day post-colonial nations. Stoler (1995, 2002) examines how the racial discourse of colonialism employed patriarchal, protective and familial metaphors where racialized others were frequently equated with children. Both children and ‘the natives’ were othered in ways that compared them to lower-order, animal-like beings, lacking civility, discipline, and sexual restraint (Ibid 1995: 151). These arguments are echoed in Nandy’s comparison of childhood and the state of being colonized and in Alatas’ influential piece on the ‘Myth of the Lazy Native’ (Alatas 1977; Nandy 1983). Early anthropological accounts of the Lepcha tribe describing them as “timid, peaceful, and no brawler[s]” (Hooker in Kennedy 1991) with a “want of aggression [and] sex-obsession” (Gorer 1938) resonate with these racialized tropes. Even today these tropes are perpetuated by both state and non-state actors to explain away the lack of development within the reserve as an effect of the laziness or the lack of ambition of reserve members.

This analysis when layered onto our understanding of indigenous youth provides a striking parallel in how similar tropes are variously applied to young people. Young people especially in non-western contexts are seen as somehow less than adult and inadequate citizens,

simply ‘passing time’ and a site of ‘moral panic’ (Neyzi 2001; Jeffrey 2008; Smith 2012). These concerns are echoed by the state, older adults in the family, and get exemplified in rural indigenous communities where we see strained inter-generational relations because of out-migration. The challenges faced by groups like the Lepchas are distilled in the struggles of their youth —unemployment, out-migration, increased drug usage, and suicide rates to name a few (Eicher et al. 2000; Ningshen 2013). Concerns over the future of these young lives figure prominently in claims over land, resources, and material benefits. In many recent social movements in the region, indigenous youth are positioned as vanguards who must fashion new political selves which work to both challenge and affirm the anxieties of community members and state authorities. Young people’s bodies and futures then form the template on which these desires are inscribed and where territorial, ecological and moral anxieties play out (Smith 2012). The story of the young Lepcha activists brings these important concerns into sharp relief.

3.4 A Political Landscape of Precarity and Possibility

A narrow twenty three kilometer wide corridor known as the ‘chicken neck’ connects the eight North Eastern states of India to the rest of the country. While Sikkim has only recently (2001) been included in the North Eastern states, like the other states it has a contentious though far less violent history of assimilation with India. Bordering Nepal, China, and Bhutan, Sikkim has been described as the “single most strategically important piece of real estate in the entire Himalayan region” (Graver in Hiltz 2003). Beginning in the 1860s the British began settling Nepalis in the southern and western tracts of Sikkim to balance out the pro-Tibetan Bhutia community with the pro-British-India Nepalis (Ibid 2003). Sikkim was annexed to India in 1975 prior to which it had been an independent Buddhist theocracy. A restless Nepali political majority pushed for a referendum in which 97.5 percent voted in favor of abolishing the

monarchy and becoming a part of the Indian union. The stage for annexation had been set by the Indian authorities in 1953 with the establishment of the Sikkim Council which divided the electorate into Bhutia-Lepcha and Nepali Sikkimese constituencies (Ibid 2003). This electoral system paved the way for the annexation and widened divisions between these communities.

These lingering tensions still define present day political life in Sikkim. The Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) has been in power for the last four terms with the same Chief Minister, Pawan Chamling, with practically no opposition party. However, in a dramatic turn of events in early February of 2013, ‘rebel’ leader P.S Tamang floated a new party, Sikkim Krantikari Morcha (SKM) under the Obama-esque rallying cry of *Parivartan* (change). SDF’s pro-incumbency factor will be put to the test and the fate of this fledgling political party will unfold as Sikkim goes for elections in April 2014¹³. One of the central concerns around which opposition has coalesced is the steady increase in educated unemployed youth in the state. The following quote from a disgruntled youth on SKM’s website summarizes these concerns.

Unemployment has reached new level [sic] with over 5000 candidates filling up the exam forms for a vacancy of 20 or 30. Well-educated youth whose only mistake was coming back to their hometown to work are being employed on ad-hoc and contract basis putting their career and future in jeopardy. I personally have a lot of respect for our Chief Minister but if he has become too powerful to ignore what’s going on beneath his nose then I am sorry sir, next year I am voting for change.

After the hunger strike, several young Lepchas returned to Dzongu and set up different self-employment ventures, like coaching classes, organic farms and eco-tourism homestays. These projects were aimed at weaning young people from their dependency on the government.

¹³ The state elections results were declared in May 2014 after this article was written. SDF won 23 seats of the total 33 seats in the State Legislative Assembly making Pawan Chamling Chief Minister for the fifth term. SKM won 10 seats making it the official opposition party.

While activists received little support from within the reserve the hunger strike marked a shift in political activism within the state. The indigenous Lepchas claim to be one of the most marginalized groups within the state, forming just 8 percent of the state's population. The North district, with a majority Lepcha population, fares poorly on socio-economic and health indicators, while the Dzongu reserve is considered 'underdeveloped' in official state reports. Several Dzongu youth joined SKM, including Dawa Lepcha, who initiated the hunger strike and commands the respect and loyalty of many in Sikkim. While support for SKM may not be uniform, the decision to join it is the first official political move made by the Dzongu activists. Given this backdrop, young lives are where both state and community elders' desire and aspirations for the future intersect.

3.5 An Exceptional Landscape

The Dzongu reserve has only three bridges to enter and exit it and is revered by Lepchas as an ancient paradise which holds the myths and folklores of the tribe. Early British anthropological accounts of the reserve detail a plethora of unique species of flora and fauna. Reserve members appear in these early accounts as bearers of indigenous knowledge 'born naturalists' knowing the name for every flower and animal in the reserve (Gorer 1938; Hooker in Kennedy 1991). These accounts also fed into a geographical image of the reserve as an untouched paradise. Winding down perilously narrow, pot-holed roads through forested slopes and terraced fields, even today one traveling to Dzongu can make a similar observation as Gorer did that "the overwhelming beauty of the landscape [is] spoilt only by the very considerable difficulty of traveling about, so rocky and precipitous is the land" (81). Most roads within the reserve are unpaved and every monsoon several interior villages get completely cut off from the rest of the reserve. Questions of remoteness, isolation, and poor infrastructure profoundly shape

young people's everyday experience within the reserve. There is only one higher secondary school here and in interviews with reserve youth difficulty of access to education was often cited as a reason for Dzongu's 'backwardness.' Nima who was now in his 30's recalled how many students would have to walk several kilometers every day to get to school.

Nima: School started at 9am and I would have to leave latest by 7am. I would walk every day to school. Seven kilometers both ways, that's fourteen kilometers daily. By the time I reached school, I would be so tired but we did not have any relatives in Mangan [district capital] nor could we afford to take up a place on rent.

Fig 2: Just another day in paradise: Landslides, heavy rainfall and poor road infrastructure make this an all too familiar sight in Dzongu. (Source: Author, 2013)



Owing to its geographic isolation the reserve has less political clout and therefore poor basic infrastructure. In her account of indigenous politics and eco-tourism in the Amazonia drawing on Agamben's *Homo Sacer*, Wheatley (2009) interrogates how specific geographical

locations like the ‘Amazonia’ become the exception and indigenous subjects examples of “bare life”—“life that is simultaneously banished beyond the normal political order of the state and also subsumed by the legalities of the state through its very exclusion.” Dzongu Lepchas experience a similar ‘banishment’ from the political realm wherein they are enrolled in various government schemes because of their marginalized position but are unable to effect any change in the political order because of this very position.

Fig 3: A view of the landscape on the way to Lingdem, Upper Dzongu. (Source: Author, 2013)



Employing Wheatley’s analysis, I argue that young activists responded to this ‘banishment’ by presenting Dzongu as an exceptional landscape. In interviews, hardships of the reserve were frequently invoked both in terms of a need for improvement but also as a spiritual experience that kept the young activists ‘grounded’ and ‘in-touch’ with nature. Young Lepchas articulated a contradictory discourse which worked by essentializing the indigenous subject as

guardian of the reserve while simultaneously critiquing state-neglect. After the protests, youth who had studied and lived outside began actively creating a vision of Dzongu as untouched and idyllic through posts on Facebook groups such as “We the Indigenous Lepchas,” “Lepcha Youth Association,” and “Dzongu History and Cultural Conservation Society.” An eco-tourism website run by one of the activists after the protests tempts the reader to visit Dzongu, “Where there are hidden treasures behind every tree.” Before the protests began, I interviewed Dzongu youth who felt that while the lack of infrastructure was a drawback, growing up in Dzongu made them more sensitive to Lepcha culture unlike their urban counterparts. Karma, who had returned to the reserve after the protests was interested in setting up an eco-tourism resort and felt he now had a fresh perspective.

Karma: When you come back to Dzongu, you have that sense of belonging. Like when you are all the time in Dzongu you don’t feel that “own-ness” like when you go outside, and you see the real world outside then you come to know what Dzongu really means and what are the potentials in it. You [author] have seen Dzongu. We don’t have potential only in tourism. It’s still untouched, unexplored.

Aitken (2001) points to how attention to the contradictions embedded in young people’s everyday experiences has not just descriptive but also prescriptive value, as young people may find playful and creative ways to subvert these oppressive structures. During the protests, Dzongu youth discussed the need for documenting oral histories and exploring sites of spiritual importance within Dzongu on Facebook groups. In the initial days of the protests with very little support for the movement, Dawa and Tenzing, the two young men who went on the hunger strike, gathered a team of young men and women who went from village to village within the reserve raising awareness about the movement. Dawa recalls how through these tours young people who had grown up outside the reserve were able to gain a spatial and spiritual awareness of Dzongu,

Dawa: There's Dzongu they know it is Dzongu but they don't know where, which point is Dzongu? The shape of Dzongu and of course how many rivers? What are the stories related to those rivers? Or the lakes and the mountains...but with this movement you know a lot of the guys know the rivers. A lot of guys have learned about the lakes and the stories about these lakes. For example when you [author] were in Gyathang you maybe have gone to this small lake? Many youth didn't know about that lake but with this movement a lot of people know about this lake and they even make it a point sometimes to visit the lake.

While walking from one village to another, experienced members would point to important landscapes and their stories as well as the sites where power houses were being planned thereby superimposing important spiritual landscapes onto the project sites. The articulation of indigeneity here is a material, place-based process closely tied to young people's experience of the reserve. Dzongu is presented as the sublime whereas Gangtok, the capital city, is portrayed by several activists as fraught with risks of drugs, sexual promiscuity, and increasing unemployment. While very few young people have made the actual transition, most actively subscribe to the discourse of returning to Dzongu, which feeds into the vision of the reserve as an exceptional space worthy of being visited, lived in, cared for, and protected.

3.6 Shifting Terrain of Indigeneity

In Sikkim until recently, only Bhutia and Lepcha groups were recognized as Scheduled Tribes (ST). Both groups are recognized as early settlers of Sikkim and present a united front with organizations like the Sikkim Bhutia Lepcha Apex Committee (SIBLAC) and have joint Bhutia-Lepcha (BL) seat reservation in the state assembly (Shneiderman and Turin 2006). Though many scholars suggest the Lepchas migrated from Assam, official discourse recognizes them as 'original inhabitants' bestowing on them the 'first insider' status (Little 2007). In 2002,

the Limbu¹⁴ and Tamang groups, formerly under the Nepali category¹⁵, were also accorded ST status. In an indirect response to this in 2003, the Sikkim Lepcha Youth Association (SLYA) pushed for Lepchas to be recognized as the Most Primitive Tribe (MPT) “to protect and preserve this endangered human species...as these people cannot adapt in such [sic] competitive world” (Arora 2006). While claims to indigeneity and autochthony may not be prerequisites for the Scheduled Tribe status in India, histories of migration (real or imagined) and the insider/outsider debate still figure chiefly in official and unofficial discourse within Sikkim. The push for MPT, while criticized by many, for labelling Lepchas as ‘primitive’, points to the attempts at positioning Lepcha claims as somehow more valid and urgent than those of other groups.

In Sikkim, Lepcha groups like the SLYA, Renjyong Mutanchi Rong Tarzum (RMRT), Mutanchi Lom Aal Shezum (MLAS) have actively deployed the term ‘indigenous’ in their programs and activities. However, other than MLAS, which is based in Dzongu, the other groups are in Gangtok and aren’t particularly active in the reserve (Bentley 2007). These groups, headed by urban elite Lepchas, focused primarily on building and maintaining institutional frameworks, especially around language (Shneiderman and Turin 2006; Turin 2014) and political reservation which required close dealings with the state, making it difficult for them to openly support the anti-dam movement. Protests were given momentum by groups like Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) and Concerned Lepchas of Sikkim (CLOS), which, while established and advised by older Lepchas, was comprised mostly of Dzongu youth. It also became a ‘youth movement’

¹⁴ The Limbu’s are acknowledged as one of the earliest settlers of Sikkim however colonial administrative discourse progressively classified them as Nepalis. Due to limitations of space I couldn’t possibly do justice to Limbu claims to indigeneity which have been discussed in great depth by scholars like Arora (2006), Subba (2010).

¹⁵ Scholars view the Nepali category as a colonial construct that enveloped distinct groups with cultural, religious and linguistic heterogeneity who migrated from Nepal into Sikkim (Arora 2006).

since several older Lepchas sympathetic to the cause were held back because of their position as government employees and the fear of victimization.

During the protests, Dzongu Lepchas interacted with national and international researchers, activists, and media persons connecting them to global indigenous discourses. With severe opposition from several reserve members and state authorities, reserve youth depended mostly on national and international solidarity networks (Arora 2007; Little 2010). But after the protests when young people struggled to find employment, many returned to the reserve and began reflecting on their experiences. In Sikkim the government is the single largest employer and every year government jobs get harder to come by. Many of the young activists had at some point unsuccessfully tried securing government jobs, leading to a sense of failure coupled with indignation. Reflecting on the lack of support from official Lepcha organizations and elders within the reserve, young activists inferred that being a government employee made state critique impossible. In many interviews, a recurring theme was the refusal to be dependent on the State, and the focus instead was on developing sustainable self-employment alternatives. Tashi one of the activists had this to say,

Tashi: They [panchayat members] make our people day by day more dependent on government, no? They don't talk about self-employment kind of thing. It's only theoretical to them but not practical. They talk about income-generation and all those kinds of things. How can you generate income in your area when you are not self-employed?

Another youth, Paljor reflecting on the futility of looking for government or private jobs in Gangtok felt that young activists returning to the village could set an example for others,

Paljor: It's not like you won't get a job in Gangtok if you look hard enough. But it'll be something like a salesperson or in a shop. You stay out for a year and realize that in Gangtok you end up spending more than you're earning. Also what happens is that young people right after they finish their studies they only want government jobs. Now it's not as easy as it was before. What I'm telling the

younger generation is that we're trying to set an example for them that 'See it is possible to come back to the village and still make a living.' Maybe they will see this and return.

Many of the young activists had been critiqued as educated, upper class youth who had left the reserve and were disconnected from the realities of the reserve. While acknowledging these critiques, they felt their decision to return to Dzongu was a deliberate attempt at changing people's perception of both Dzongu and its youth. During my fieldwork before the protests, I encountered two prominent discourses being mobilized by non-reserve residents. Building on colonial romanticized notions, outsiders saw reserve members living simple uncomplicated lives in close proximity to the spirits of their ancestors. But a reverse logic was simultaneously at work where reserve members were caricatured as black-magic-wielding simpletons. Many young people who studied outside recalled how they suffered the taunts of those viewed Dzongu as 'backward' and perceived them as unhygienic and superstitious. Sonam, one of the activists who had returned to the village, made this pointed observation:

Sonam: From the start Dzongu has...it's been called the 'victimized' place. Govt. officials like teachers get sent here as a punishment. If there is a program organized in Gangtok and they announce that our next program will be in Dzongu, everyone says, "*Ambo* [Oh gosh] Dzongu! Why there?" but if you see it only takes two and a half hours from Gangtok but that's the image they have. I feel like the earlier leaders made that image. And that's what we're trying to change now.

Young people I spoke with demonstrated an awareness of the ways in which racialized tropes of the reserve and its members were sedimented in both official and unofficial discourse. While being aware of these negative stereotypes, they invoked another oft repeated stereotype of 'not being assertive' and juxtaposed it with Bhutia and upper-caste Nepali groups who were portrayed as 'shrewd' and 'business-minded.' These tropes have their roots in what Bernard Cohn termed as the colonial sociology of knowledge whereby British authorities constructed a

knowledge of their subjects according to their own needs and purposes (Kennedy 1991). The British¹⁶ had a huge role to play in drawing a contrast between the Lepchas and their mountain neighbors, the Nepalese and the Bhutanese. While the latter two peoples were seen as aggressive, industrious, and warlike, the Lepchas were seen as “timid, peaceful, and no brawler[s]” (Ibid 57). While these tropes regarding different communities had been in circulation prior to the hunger strike, these were deployed by young Lepchas to create a subjectivity that would stand apart from the ‘dominant’ communities.

In my M.A. interviews I asked young Lepchas to state what they felt was a unique aspect of Lepcha culture. Ugen, a first year college student had this to say,

Ugen: For me the best feature of Lepcha culture is our straightforwardness, there is no sense of any deception in us everything that is in our hearts is there on our lips...giving rise to blind trust and hospitality. We must remember that we are those same people who gave their own lands to their so called Bhutia brothers to stay otherwise who gives his or her land to anyone.

Emily Yeh’s (2007) work on tropes of Tibetan indolence and ‘being spoilt’ by the Chinese government and how Tibetans themselves participate actively in the circulation and reproduction of these tropes provides an important theoretical entry point. While these might appear to be straightforward reflections of state discourse, she argues that they point to important experiences of development and exclusion. In the Lepcha context we find an extension of this coded critique of the state being articulated by Dzongu youth in promoting tropes of the ‘shy and unambitious’ Lepchas. While the government sees it as the reason for their economic backwardness, young Lepchas deployed this trope to talk about how they have been taken

¹⁶ While Dane Kennedy writes primarily in the West Bengal context of Darjeeling and Kalimpong, his analysis can be extended to Sikkim since early anthropological studies of the Lepchas of Sikkim were undoubtedly influenced by these tropes.

advantage of by other groups demonstrating how “ethnic values and sentiments can be generated from socio-economic insecurities and mobilized politically” (Chettri 2013). The moral and ecological high ground of the Lepchas is demonstrated through the performance of an environmental consciousness and ancient claims to the land predating those of both Bhutia and Nepali communities. These critiques mixed in with the general belief among Dzongu youth that benefits for the Lepchas were cornered by their urban counterparts suggest a break from official Lepcha institutions based in Gangtok thereby shifting the articulation of Lepcha indigeneity within Sikkim. Dzongu activists through these material and discursive practices then are fashioning not only an ideal vision of the reserve, but also an ideal vision of the indigenous subject.

3.7 Constructing respectability

Before the protests, young Lepchas leaving the reserve in search of better opportunities were written off by community elders as apathetic to their cultural roots. The hunger strikes sparked discussions among young Lepchas around a moral responsibility to return to Dzongu. However, many of them were studying or working outside the reserve and were critiqued for being disconnected with ground realities. Cardamom, the main cash crop in North Sikkim and an important source of income within the reserve, had seen a steady decline in productivity in the past decade while reserve land could not be sold to non-reserve members. With these limited economic opportunities, hydropower development appeared as the perfect opportunity to liquefy a resource that was either unproductive or no longer an essential material capital (McDuie-Ra 2011). In interviews with community elders regarding the younger generation, they expressed feelings of disapproval and possibility. In interviews with village elders in the reserve many felt that young children were “lazy, rude, disrespectful and indifferent to Lepcha culture” but also

“bold, adventurous and willing to take risks.” Conversely, young Lepchas like Norden, who was actively involved in village affairs, felt youth were taken for granted by community elders.

Norden: I guess in entire Sikkim there is this thing, this communication break down between the generations. Like the seniors don’t believe in the youths...for them youths are only like... there’s a meeting to be organized you have to get some bamboos, cut some bamboos make something [such as makeshift tents]. For manpower, for labor, but after that you are not thanked also like ‘you guys did this it’s a very nice thing.’ You’re just like a fool out there working so hard.

Several young men like Norden who had been part of the hunger strike returned to the reserve after being unable to find jobs in Gangtok. While the protests were supported by both young men and women, there was a disproportionate amount of young men in positions of responsibility within the movement. The hunger strike was launched by two young men and prominent positions within the movement are still held by men. My own interactions with the movement have mainly been with its male members, a choice made for matters of convenience as well as one that reflects the reality of the movement. Jeffrey’s (2004, 2008, 2010) work on educated unemployed men is an important reference point here. He argues that for young men being unemployed and excluded from ‘productive’ forms of labor can come with associated feeling of failure, guilt, and loss of respectability. In line with broader patriarchal notions, young women do not face similar pressures to enter paid salaried employment (Jeffrey 2004). For Dzongu Lepchas, perhaps this reflects the ways in which young men in particular have been affected by lack of employment opportunities given the increasing competition with other groups in the Sikkim. Whether their unemployment was a cause or a consequence of activism, in what followed during and after the protests, Dzongu youth fashioned themselves into important political actors worthy of their community’s respect. For some this respect was gained through setting up successful eco-tourism homestays. One such homestay boasts of hosting the Royal Prince of Norway, has won tourism awards, and has been featured in magazines such as National

Geographic traveler. For others like Kalzang this respect was gained through standing up for panchayat (village-level) elections as an independent candidate

Kalzang: Things are really changing...now youths are really being recognized. Even the seniors, they act differently towards the youth...like they act a little maturely towards us not like before making excuses refusing to meet with us. Now they have to be more serious towards us. But in order to do that even we have to do something that's worthwhile. That's why we are getting more recognized and the public trusts the youth more than the seniors, the politicians. So that's a huge difference we made.

From being perceived as a remote, backward area, of interest only for researchers, Dzongu is slowly emerging as an important political constituency. After the last elections, the Dzongu constituency was altered to include Mangshila, the hillside across Dzongu which has a majority pro-SDF population. This past year, many young men and women from Dzongu, including Kalzang, joined the opposition party with Dawa Lepcha leading the charge. After the protests, Dzongu youth have been actively challenging not just racialized and exclusionary state practices but also community members' perceptions about them. As Norden pointed out, from being seen as useful only for 'cutting bamboos, young people are slowly being taken seriously as political actors who are consciously and actively shaping Dzongu's future.

3.8 Conclusion

Difference has always been acknowledged as part of the national project in India, as evidenced in our motto, 'Unity in Diversity.' Within the framework promoted by ideals of liberalism, projects of recognition require the subject of recognition to posture in certain ways that fit within the given framework of difference (Povinelli 2002; Shneiderman and Turin 2006; Middleton 2013;). The indigenous subject in India has to twist and position oneself within a neo-colonial, neo-liberal, and religious framing of difference (Appadurai 1996b; Hansen 1999; Pandey 2006). Indigenous youth find themselves responding to all this and more with

community and state aspirations and apprehensions weighing heavily on their lives. Unlike their neighbors in neighboring districts of West Bengal who are struggling to secure the coveted Scheduled Tribe status (Middleton 2013; Chettri 2013), the Dzongu Lepchas are struggling against state apathy despite having this status. In the Dzongu Lepchas' case, indigenous claims to exceptionalism are deployed to bolster their project of recognition where Dzongu is presented as an exceptional landscape which embodies and induces the contradictory experience of adversity and opportunity.

While this indigenous exceptionalism is supported by transnational groups, it leaves out non-indigenous groups within the state who cannot make similar claims to land and natural resources but might experience a similar 'banishment' from the state. Karlsson (2013), writing in the Meghalaya context, points out that there the indigeneity discourse is not so much to address social inequality but to strengthen claims of certain already powerful tribes over land and resources. Discussions on Facebook groups by Lepcha youth reflect a growing anxiety around the dissolution of the tribe's boundaries alongside a growing desire to keep the tribe 'pure.' How might we then make sense of this politics of difference which in challenging important exclusionary and racialized practices is assigning those same categories to other communities within the state? For any engaged academic, this presents many such worrisome yet important questions. An awareness of these different positionalities has to be carefully tempered with the ability to critique and enter into dialogue. My role as an engaged academic who positions herself alongside the Lepchas is not to simply critique these tendencies in an academic journal while keeping them hidden from the activists themselves. Instead I see myself as an outsider who expresses solidarity while questioning and challenging these disturbing patterns and contradictions.

In the Dzongu Lepcha case we see that there are contestations within the tribe over who defines indigeneity and its associated meanings. Even as there is public debate promoting Lepcha exceptionalism, there are also internal tensions over purity and difference. McDurie Ra (2011) draws our attention to the “intra-ethnic contest for legitimacy” wherein pro-dam groups within the reserve have been critical of Lepchas from neighboring regions like Kalimpong and Darjeeling for lending support to the anti-dam protests while Dzongu activists have been critiqued for being upper class youth disconnected from the reserves material realities. While acknowledging these intra-ethnic dynamics, my argument has been built around an attention to young people’s particular experience of state neglect and community anxieties which have put them at odds with the older and urban members of the tribe. Dzongu youth are redefining indigeneity to address concerns specific to their experiences both within and outside the reserve. Even as young people subvert racialized tropes surrounding the reserve and its inhabitants, they reify others that help them access both internal and external recognition. Tropes regarding Lepchas’ indolence and lack of industry have a long history in Sikkim and are at present firmly sedimented in official and unofficial discourse. As Yeh (2007) points out in the Tibetan context, while these tropes shape development policies directed at these groups and are utilized for political control, they also shape possibilities of maneuvering within the larger trajectory of reform and development. Dzongu youth’s political performance of authenticity and posturing of difference is closely tied to young people’s desire to be included in the plans and policies of the State and acknowledged as important political actors with a voice. Even though they are excluded by the state they cannot help but reluctantly appeal to it, pushed by their desire and longing for justice (Secor 2007).

Dzongu youth respond to and challenge the concerns of their elders and state leaders transforming these expectations and apprehensions into new practices and goals. Their desire to be seen and valued by the state and their community members as responsible citizens instead of apathetic youth have found fertile ground in the hunger strike and their subsequent projects. Through this article I have sought to illustrate the interplay between indigeneity and youth and the myriad ways in which indigenous youth encounter and engage with development and democratic politics. The entry of hydropower and other development projects in the Himalayan region merits a closer examination of how marginalized groups are navigating the treacherous terrain of industrialization and urbanization. In the Sikkimese context, indigeneity is being defined by young people through the lens of their particular material and embodied experiences and is informed by a complex relationship between personal agency and structural constraints. While the political practices of Dzongu youth can be read as simultaneously progressive and reactionary, they demonstrate that they are not unwitting subjects of state exclusion and are playing an important role in shaping the imaginaries and futures of their community.

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CHAPTER 4: LIVING WITH EARTHQUAKES AND ANGRY DEITIES

4.1 Introduction

Q: What do people say about the earthquakes?

Palzor: People say it's because there is so much lack of peace in the village. Then some people say it's because of *paap* [sin], maybe people have excess paap. Maybe the environment has gotten polluted. Then other people say it's because of the *devi-deorali* [Nepali term for gods and goddesses]. In Lepcha we call them *lingzee* we believe they live in the mountains and hillside. And slowly we've stopped following these gods and started focusing more on Buddhism especially this generation we don't believe, it could be because of that the earthquakes came.

September 18th 2011, a 6.9 magnitude earthquake shook Sikkim, a small borderland state in the Eastern Himalayas of India. Exactly one year later in an uncanny coincidence, an earthquake of smaller magnitude, sparked panic among a gathering of people observing the anniversary of the previous year's earthquake. Since 2011, Sikkim has witnessed earthquakes of varying magnitudes every year without fail. This heightened sense of precarity has drawn public attention to a waning anti-dam movement which began in 2007 and was led primarily by educated youth of the indigenous Lepcha tribe. Lepcha activists had warned state authorities of the dire ecological and spiritual consequences of building hydropower projects in Sikkim and the sacred Lepcha reserve of Dzongu. However, as Palzor¹⁷, an unemployed youth in his early 20's, suggests in the quote above, beyond the moral failure of the state, for many these earthquakes also point to deeper spiritual and cosmological anxieties.

¹⁷ Everyone I spoke to has been given pseudonyms and all identifying details have been removed.

As extreme weather conditions become more commonplace in mountainous environments like India's Himalayan borderlands, we find cultural anxieties like those voiced by Palzor, seeping through the cracks and fissures. Palzor's concern around sin, pollution, and abandoning indigenous Lepcha deities in favor of Buddhist ones, reveal deep seated cultural anxieties around loss of authenticity and self, a common symptom of the postcolonial condition (Nandy 1989, 1989b; Escobar 1995). In the Sikkimese context, I suggest that people's spiritual narratives regarding the earthquake, signal tensions between minority indigenous religious practices and the more pervasive Tibetan Buddhism. I demonstrate through ethnographic research, that while most lay Lepchas are aware of this tension it is the anti-dam activists who are tasked with enrolling these concerns in a political recognition of indigeneity that demands stable categories and narratives. I argue that critical scholars, committed to marginalized and indigenous groups often also desire this stability which deems certain categories and scenarios as worthy of inquiry. Drawing on fifteen months of fieldwork in Sikkim, I highlight Lepcha narratives of spiritual indeterminacy and loss of cultural authenticity, in an attempt to push our understanding of what counts as politics in the Anthropocene era, especially in examining the relationship between marginalized groups and vulnerable environments. Much of this ethnographic work was located in the Dzongu reserve, a protected reserve for the Lepcha tribe and the heart of the recent anti-dam movement in Sikkim.

The concerns highlighted in this article have important theoretical and methodological implications for research on marginalized groups inhabiting mountainous environments that are the most vulnerable to climate change impacts. This article builds on my larger research project which examines how hydropower development and the Lepcha anti-dam movement is shaping the political subjectivities of indigenous youth and shifting the relationship between the

Himalayan margins and the Indian state (Gergan 2014). There is an urgent need to address the concerns of this region within geography given the recent surge in infrastructural development alongside an increase in the frequency and intensity of natural hazard events. Theoretically, this article builds on recent conversations within the discipline to ‘decolonize’ geography by challenging euro-western epistemes and engaging with indigenous and postcolonial knowledge and histories (Jazeel 2011; Sundberg 2014). Methodologically, this article builds on the growing interest in the geophysical as a site of inquiry within critical scholarship (Clark 2008, 2011; Last 2015). In the Indian context, Dalit and Adivasi scholars point to the limits of postcolonial and subaltern scholarship, dominated by upper caste scholars, that has failed to incorporate their voices in interrogating the experience of colonialism and modernity (Bhagavan and Feldhaus 2009). Scholars of the Himalayan region also argue that despite its geopolitical and ecological significance, the region still occupies a peripheral status in knowledge production within South and South-East Asian Studies (Van Schendel 2002; Gellner 2013). Recent natural disasters in these mountainous regions, such as the devastating earthquakes in Nepal (April 2015) and Afghanistan (October 2015), expose conditions of vulnerability that require a sustained and deeper engagement with local communities. In this article I examine how natural hazards and disasters open up seemingly stable narratives and categories to a whole host of cultural anxieties. While this article focuses on the Indian Himalayan region, it draws attention to broader ecological and cultural concerns that are also shaping other mountainous environments.

4.2 Living with Indeterminacy at the Peripheries

Recent scholarship on the Anthropocene evokes a sense of crisis and urgency (Roelvink and Gibson-Graham 2010). Apocalyptic framings of the current ecological crisis have enabled both academics and environmental activists to mobilize specific political projects. However,

indigenous and postcolonial scholars argue that the indeterminacies associated with the Anthropocene epoch, require a fundamental reworking of the epistemological and methodological frameworks of these political projects that are often still operating within the strictures of Euro-western intellectual traditions (Jazeel 2011; Last 2015). Within geography, post-humanist theory central to discussions on the Anthropocene, has been critiqued for being steeped in universalizing categories and classifications (Sundberg 2014). Drawing on Gayatri Spivak, geographers suggest her ‘planetary’ framework can bridge the posthuman and postcolonial divide through engagement with non-western and more-than-white Anglo ontologies (Jazeel 2011; Sidaway et al 2014). Distinct in its explicitly materialist and geo-physical language, Spivak (2003) describes ‘planet-feeling’ as an experience of the uncanny, the *unheimlich*, the undoing of a sense of habitation. Both theoretically and materially, the planetary is something that “contains us as much as it flings us away” (Spivak 2003:73). As anthropogenic climate change makes extreme weather events more frequent, “planetary demands we work with the indeterminacies and ambivalences of ‘our planet’ ” (Jazeel 2011: 89) wherein the apocalyptic serves as an opening to examine the “grounded scene of the everyday” (90). Our engagements with ecological precarity in postcolonial contexts, then also presents a challenge to our disciplinary habits.

Geographers have drawn attention to how natural disasters and hazards expose differential vulnerability and conditions of everyday forms of violence and marginalization (Blakie et al 1994; Baldwin and Stanley 2013). Writing about drought conditions in Australia, Clark (2008:739) suggests that a deeper understanding of the erratic rhythms of a volatile earth requires an engagement with social histories of indigenous communities and argues that “integrating social history with geological, climatic or evolutionary history has its own potential

to destabilize colonial narratives”. Anthropologists have paid close attention to the significance of spiritual life worlds such as popular religion, shamanism, witchcraft, and spirit possession in examining not just hazards but how people make sense of drastic social shifts (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). Buyandelger (2007) illustrates how the collapse of state socialism in Mongolia, resulted in the resurgence of shamanic practices among ethnic Buryats. As Buryats attempt to appease angry origin spirits, neglected and suppressed under state socialism, their “misfortunes become linked with memories of historical oppression...shamanic interpretations allows individual to situate themselves in the larger history of multiple oppression and marginalization within Mongolia, which in turn has been oppressed by geopolitical powers” (Buyandelger 2007:143). An examination of people’s spiritual practices and narratives, in moments of rupture, both real and figurative, provides an important analytical lens to understand the relationship of marginalized groups to those in power.

In this article, I draw attention to the peculiar space of India’s mountainous borderlands which are at the geographic and cognitive peripheries of the nation-state. The contemporary politics of this region has been heavily shaped by colonial spatial order and knowledge systems that saw ‘hill people’ as ethnically distinct from those in the plains (Chowdhury and Kipgen 2013). Today the Himalayan region is the site of many separatist and secessionist movements that arise from the notion of ‘ethnically exclusive homelands’ (Baruah 2008). Ashis Nandy (1989:264, 265), commenting on the disorienting nature of colonialism which leaves the colonized with “someone else’s present as their future” presents the figure of the shaman, as a “modest symbol of resistance to the dominant politics of knowledge”. In the Indian context, Nandy’s (1989:266) shaman demands an attention to “the insurrection of the little cultures” that have been subsumed within the upper-caste, elitist historiography. Many “little cultures” in

India, existed at the margins of both the British Empire and the contemporary Indian state. The sense of displacement under colonialism is especially exaggerated for these groups whose local culture and histories have undergone multiple iterations of erasure.

In the Himalayan context, heightened ecological precarity is activating claims that have ancient roots but offer important clues for the present. In the following section, I offer a brief historical context to Sikkim and the indigenous Lepchas who have been at the peripheries of both the Indian and the Sikkimese state. I then draw on interviews with Lepchas in the Dzongu reserve, to illustrate how people's spiritual narratives display both spiritual indeterminacy and a loss of authenticity. I discuss how the politics of recognition that indigenous groups like the Lepcha's find themselves unwittingly enrolled in, require stable narratives. These narratives are activated in times of crisis and rupture but do not address spiritual and cosmological anxieties which are far more indeterminate. I then close with a discussion of the necessity of broadening our definition of politics in the context of real and figurative indeterminacies in the Anthropocene era.

4.3 Taming the Sacred Hidden Land

The early history of Sikkim starts in the 8th century, when it is believed that Guru Rinpoche (Guru Padmasambhava in some accounts) introduced Buddhism to this *beyul*, a sacred hidden land (Balicki 2008). Accounts of Guru Rinpoche's time in Sikkim, reveal that the introduction of Buddhism required the taming of existing supernatural beings, which many interpret as a metaphor for the "taming of the mind, of society, of the environment or even of the country" (Balicki 2008:88). Scholars have attested to the presence of similar beyuls across the Himalayan region and believe that the description of Sikkim as beyul was an encouragement for Tibetans fleeing religious persecution, to migrate and settle here. The 13th century witnessed the

signing of a blood brotherhood treaty between an indigenous Lepcha king and a Tibetan prince which is said to have laid the foundation for the Buddhist Namgyal dynasty. With the establishment of the Namgyal dynasty, Buddhism flourished but indigenous Lepchas, who were sworn protection under the treaty, were ignored and their cultural practices languished. This ancient story, part mythology, part factual history still frames present day political and cultural conversations in Sikkim.

Several centuries later, prized for its strategic geopolitical location, the kingdom of Sikkim was offered protection and minimal external intervention by the British. However, in order to balance the pro-Tibetan monarchy, the British started settling Nepalis in the Southern and Western parts of Sikkim (Hiltz 2003). In 1947, after India gained independence, Sikkim became a protectorate of its powerful neighbor (in 1950) and was subsequently annexed to it in 1975. Presently, the Nepali community constitute the demographic and political majority. The Lepchas, and Bhutias (also known as *Lhopos*), who trace their lineage to the 13th century Tibetan settlers, are recognized as indigenous to Sikkim and are beneficiaries of affirmative action policies. The Bhutias and Lepchas formed a political alliance and within this, the Lepchas consider themselves the subordinate partner. The anti-dam movement saw a revitalization of myths, oral, and supernatural histories which were interpolated into protests narratives to highlight the political subordination of the Lepchas. Most Lepchas in North Sikkim, where this study took place, follow a syncretic blend of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism and Lepcha shamanism, with recent years witnessing a steady decline in the latter's influence (Bentley 2007). My fieldwork in 2014, took place during India's national and Sikkim's state elections, where many of these concerns, including those around growing ecological precarity,

took center stage. It is in this charged political climate that the following conversations take place.

4.4 Spiritual and Cosmological Indeterminacy

Heightened ecological precarity in mountainous environments is generating a politics of urgency that echoes broader global climate change anxieties. These political framings further specific concerns but obscure others that do not carry the same urgency despite also being reactive and constitutive of multiple forms of power. This section illustrates how concerns raised by lay Lepchas in Dzongu regarding the earthquake signal tensions between Buddhism and shamanic Lepcha practices. Loden, my guide and translator, had one of the clearest articulations of this tension. Walking back after an interview with an old *bungthing* [Lepcha shaman] who related the earthquake to the slow erosion of shamanic practices, Loden shared his own experience,

Loden: When there is a death in the family *lamas* [Buddhist monks] come, they do their rituals but none of the family members understand what is being said in the rituals. Once I asked one of them what are you saying in your prayers? Maybe you can stay a while after the ritual is over and explain to the family members what was just said. Then some of them got angry at me. They demand a lot of respect and get angry if we don't treat them like royalty.

Loden then wondered out loud how a lama could guide his father's spirit to paradise since he would be performing the rituals in Tibetan but his father only spoke Lepcha, wouldn't that confuse his father's spirit? In interviews, questions about the earthquake were often explained using the language of sin and pollution. Sin was understood as a spectrum of moral lapses and failures. Almost everyone I interviewed considered polluting and desecrating a sacred landscape, a sin, for which hydropower projects were responsible. But there was less certainty as

to whether the lack of observance or mistakes made during certain ritual practices could also constitute sin. One of the main sites of this confusion was an irreconcilable difference between Buddhist and shamanic spiritual practices. Shamanism requires animal sacrifice and the ritual spilling of blood which Buddhism prohibits and considers a sin (Balicki 2008). In one of the villages in Dzongu, I was asked to film a shamanic ritual performance which required among other things, the offering of chickens. Later when we watched the video where one of the villagers bludgeoned the chickens in preparation for the offering, someone remarked in jest, “Gosh, look at all that blood! We must be accumulating a lot of sin. We are such bad Buddhists!” These uncertainties around what constitutes sin in shamanic and Buddhist cosmology, also relate to larger anxieties around human culpability in triggering future natural calamities.

This spiritual indeterminacy reveals a more complex relationship with natural elements and the spiritual world. In Lepcha mythology, *Itbu-Rum*, the creator goddess creates *Matlee Punu*, the earthquake king. She then creates Mount Kanchendzonga and places him on the chest of Matlee Punu in order to control him¹⁸. Mount Kanchendzonga is revered as the protector mountain deity of Sikkim by Nepalis, Bhutias, and Lepchas alike. Within Dzongu, there are specific shamanic rituals dedicated to Kanchendzonga and neighboring mountains. Lepcha cosmology is similar to many other indigenous groups who enter into social contracts with spirit beings of the landscape. These social contracts are premised on the observance of taboos and ritual practices (High 2013). Within Buddhist cosmology, the *Nesol*, a sacred ritual text, warns devotees that desecrating the scared landscape of *Beyul Demajong*, the Tibetan name for Sikkim, can result in natural disasters and socio-political unrest. However earthquakes and natural

¹⁸ Personal communication with Jenny Bentley, 2014.

disasters in Lepcha cosmology, similar in many aspects to Buddhist cosmology, have a stronger correlation to the failure to appease mountain deities through ritual offerings rather than the desecration of sacred landscapes.

Fig 4: A bungthing offers chi (millet beer) during a ritual for the villages' safety and protection (Source: Author, 2014)



The *bungthing* is the gatekeeper and mediator between the human and spirit world. Ritual offerings carried out by bungthings are required to appease mountains deities who prevent earthquakes. Those who were closer to the shamanic tradition expressed concerns that fewer people knew how to perform rituals of safety and protection. Would performing these rituals incorrectly anger the deities even more? Could the deities be trusted to protect those who performed shamanic rituals or were they capricious, punishing everyone equally? Others like Kunga, in his early 30's, spoke of bungthings disappearing and their powers diminishing,

Kunga: My grandfather was a very strong bungthing. In his *baari* [garden], if people went without asking or picked something, their hands would hurt for days. He was so powerful that if you looked him straight in the eyes, your eyes would also hurt. Like even if you looked at the fruit and said, “Oh this is so *daami*

[wonderful]” even then your eyes would start hurting. Nowadays we don’t have such powerful bunthings.

While the earthquake served as a political opening for activists to critique state neglect, for others it opened up otherwise stable narratives to a host of cultural anxieties. Lay Lepcha narratives of spiritual indeterminacy, which deities to follow, whether to shed blood or not, how to correctly perform rituals, question our assumption of what is conceived and imagined as political and points to the multiple temporalities and registers of politics embedded in geology and social history (Clark 2008)

4.5 On Authenticity and Coping with Loss

Samten: Maybe the young people will leave the forests because they don’t work here anymore. It’s not like we can keep shouting at them...it will be bad for them once we die. Slowly people have stopped doing the rituals and there are fewer bunthings. In schools they are teaching Lepcha language but the young ones come and ask me instead of the teachers about the meaning of these words. These teachers are drawing a salary for teaching Lepcha but they know nothing (laughs).

Spiritual explanations for the growing intensity and frequency of earthquakes in Sikkim also highlight the rapidly shifting relationship between people and the mountainous environments they live, work, and worship in. Samten, in his 80’s, conflated economic, political and cultural concerns when asked about the earthquake and recent shifts within Dzongu. His response highlights concerns that are prominent among Lepchas around loss of territory, language, and shamanic practices (Bentley 2007). This section illustrates how despite their different registers both activist and lay narratives are rooted in the recognition of the loss and erasure of indigenous cultural practices. These sometimes contradictory, sometimes complementary, narratives show how people’s relationships to territories that are in rapid ecological flux are mediated through fragile networks and associations that are both externally and internally contested.

The notion of Lepchas as a ‘vanishing tribe’ was popularized by colonial authorities, who believed that the tribe was, “in great danger of dying out, being driven away from his ancestral glades by the prosaic Nepali and other materialistic Himalayan tribes” (Brown 1917:4 in Kennedy 1991). In 1987, a Lepcha author, Arthur Foning from the neighboring Darjeeling district, wrote his influential book, *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe* which further popularized this narrative. More recently these claims have been activated by the anti-dam movement. While highlighting their marginalization these claims also draw attention to how spiritual traditions of many ethnic minorities like the Lepchas, have either been erased or subsumed within the “great traditions” of Hinduism and Buddhism with their “perceived purity, historical longevity, and textual authority” (Shniederman 2010: 309). Historically, Lepcha cultural practices shaped by religious syncretism and hybridity, have served as a political tool to build alliances with other ethnic groups like the Bhutias, who are more economically and politically influential but conversely in moments of political discord these underlying tensions resurface.

For Lepcha activists, the anti-dam movement created a space for dissent in a state where civil society activism had almost no precedent (Huber and Joshi 2015). As large infrastructural projects and climate change destabilize both the ecology and civil society of India’s mountainous borderlands, ethnic minorities like the Lepchas must speak now or forever hold their peace but using language that the state recognizes. While loss and recovery of self are a theme in both activist and lay narratives, the former is tasked with enrolling these claims in a politics of recognition that demands stable categories and narratives. Lay Lepchas expressed concerns about the erasure of indigenous practices but were willing to live with this indeterminacy, for example in the continued practice of both shamanic and Buddhist practices,

Palden: In our house we practice both Buddhism and Lepcha rituals. If you see in our house, our father has been trained as a lama and he does all the Buddhist rituals but he's never paid much attention to bungthing rituals. Last year he got sick, his one leg was almost paralyzed. He went to the hospital; he went to the *rinpoches* [Buddhist spiritual leaders]. Then we started doing our Lepcha clan ritual and he started getting better. We are nature worshippers, we can't leave that.

Palden doesn't believe that one tradition is better than the other however he does emphasize that Lepchas cannot walk away from their past without any consequences. Bentley (forthcoming) in her research on Lepcha shamanic practices and prophecies, closely examines an oral account of a magical contest between a Lepcha religious practitioner and a Buddhist protagonist, who some believe is Guru Padmasambhava, who introduced Buddhism to Sikkim in the 8th century. Similar accounts can also be found in other parts of the Himalayan region where Buddhism was integrated with the local shamanic practice. Bentley (forthcoming) argues that these accounts cannot be read merely as Buddhism subjugating local beliefs, as many believe them to be but are to be read as, "delineating fields of religious competency and ritual activities" (xx). Lepcha shamanic practices have their time and place as do Buddhist rituals. However the activist narrative is more potent since it can be translated into a critique of unjust state practices and the political subordination of Lepchas. The politics of recognition that many ethnic minorities find themselves enrolled in requires fixed goals and certainty of identity and categories (Middleton 2013). As scholars who profess a commitment to these groups, we must attend to moments of rupture that open up stable categories and narratives employed by activists and academics alike.

4.6 The Limits of Politics or what counts as Politics

In the highly seismic Himalayan region, an attention to people's interpretations of natural hazards can open spaces to examine both personal and communal life as well as state practices. Earthquakes and landslides in Sikkim are being actively deployed by both Lepcha activists and

opposition party members to critique the ruling government's many failures. These conversations are occurring in the broader context of the shifting relationship between the Indian Himalayan states and the Indian state. While there is a strong critique of state abandonment in the region there is also a desire for inclusion in the state's modernizing project. The politics of recognition, which takes the form of affirmative action for ethnic minorities, is an important tool of this modernizing project. As, I have demonstrated in this article, lay Lepchas while concerned about cultural loss and the future of their tribe, do not seek immediate resolution to their spiritual and cosmological anxieties. However in order to stake claims to state benefits, marginalized groups are pit against each other, each having to prove the authenticity of their historical injuries and losses through stable narratives and categories.

Rancière notes, "Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time." (2004:13). Climate change anxieties in the Anthropocene activate a politics of urgency that prioritize specific projects and goals while obscuring others that are far more indeterminate. As growing ecological precarity in these mountainous environments spur geographical research and interest, we must also be willing to let the "indeterminacies and ambivalences of 'our planet' " (Jazeel 2011:89) challenge disciplinary understandings of what categories and narratives are worthy of critical inquiry. While postcolonial and indigenous scholarship present an important critique of euro-western theorization it must also contend with the fact that marginalized groups are often employing the same universalizing language and categories we critique. The temporality of geological and cosmological processes might resist immediate political traction but a commitment to indigenous and marginalized voices requires

sensitivity to a multiplicity of voices, questioning what counts as political, and the opening up of categories that our discipline has stabilized.

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CHAPTER 5: GEOLOGICAL ANXIETIES AT THE UNRULY BORDERLANDS OF THE INDIAN STATE

5.1 Introduction

In a society where determinism stands guard on the frontiers of democracy, indeterminism cannot but be political. (Feenberg (1992:8))

Earthquakes birthed by ancient planetary forces can shake loose all sense of certitude in a matter of mere seconds. September 18th, 2011 a 6.9 magnitude earthquake shook Sikkim, a small Eastern Himalayan state in India. The initial earthquake was followed by several aftershocks, forcing many people to spend the night outside their homes in parked cars and school playgrounds. The earthquake coupled with heavy rains, triggered catastrophic landslides blocking NH-31, the only highway connecting the eight Northeastern states to mainland India (see **Fig 5**) The symbolic meaning of this event was not lost on locals who have felt cut off from the Indian state both historically and currently. Since the 2011 earthquake, Sikkim has witnessed an earthquake every year without fail.¹⁹ The frequency of these quakes is rapidly turning public opinion against hydropower projects. Extending Feenberg's (1992) argument²⁰ to include geo-physical indeterminism, I suggest that heightened seismicity coupled with large infrastructural projects, in the Himalayan borderlands provides a political opening to challenge the hegemony of Indian "national interest".

¹⁹ Earthquakes below 5.0 on the Richter scale are considered light intensity and are felt indoors and mostly on upper floors of buildings. The damage in this case is minimal (U.S. Geological Survey website). Following are the dates and magnitudes of earthquakes in Sikkim from 2012 to 2015. 18th September 2012 – 4.1; 13th October 2013 – 5.0; 10th October 2015 – 4.7

²⁰ The indeterminism Feenberg spoke of was in the context of technological development in modern societies and its unpredictable outcomes, but can very well be extended to include ecological factors.

In the past decade, Indian Himalayan states²¹ have witnessed a massive push for hydropower development alongside an increase in natural hazard events. Hydropower projects and ancillary infrastructure meant to secure these vulnerable borderland states have instead destabilized both the region's ecology and civil society. Across the border, Nepal's destructive 7.9 magnitude earthquake of April 2015 raised similar concerns about the country's nascent hydropower industry, funded in large parts by its neighbors, India and China (Thapa and Shrestha 2015). As large infrastructural development in the Himalayan region meets an unruly borderland, geology and politics find themselves inextricably linked.

Fig 5: The turbulent Eastern frontier



The Siliguri corridor' also known as the 'chicken neck' is a 23 km wide corridor that connects this region to mainland India. In 2002, Sikkim was included in the North East council, effectively making it the eight state of Northeast India. The report, which is the source of this map, is titled, "India's troubled northeast: Insurgency and crime". Multiple international borders, ongoing secessionist, and ethnic unrest in many Northeastern states, have popularized an understanding of this region as a turbulent frontier. (Source: IISS, *Strategic Comments*, Vol 10, no 6 July 2004)

²¹ The Indian Himalayan Region (IHR) as defined by the Government of India consists of Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, hill districts of West Bengal and Assam, and the other northeastern states of Sikkim, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura, and Arunachal Pradesh.

Before its annexation to India in 1975, Sikkim was an independent Buddhist kingdom. Even today Buddhist cosmology is deeply ingrained in Sikkimese social life. The *Nesol* a sacred Buddhist ritual text warns that destroying hills, rocks, and cliffs within Sikkim can cause epidemics, famines, natural calamities, and socio-political unrest (Balicki 2008). In clear violation of this warning, hydropower projects in Sikkim require blasting tunnels through mountains. Official reports attribute earthquakes to Sikkim's "adverse geological conditions" that are "unpredictable" and "volatile" (in Kohli 2011:21). Many locals acknowledge these scientific explanations but also believe that mountain deities displeased by the desecration of Sikkim's sacred physiography caused these natural disasters. Hydropower developers soon discover these projects don't flow uninterrupted into inert, empty spaces (Tsing 2005). Instead they encounter "geological surprises" (Government of India 2008:27) which delay projects or worse, result in the loss of human life laying bare the ecological and cosmological limits of capitalism.

The Indian Himalayan Region, a climate change hotspot, is witnessing a surge in large infrastructural development alongside a dramatic rise in natural hazard events. In this article I argue that geophysical indeterminacy coupled with controversial development projects is reorienting the relationship between the Indian State and its Himalayan margins. Through interviews with indigenous groups and state technocrats, I examine how ecological precarity is actively deployed by borderland communities and regional technocrats, to critique hegemonic state development practices. Here I define technocracy as ideas of development promoted by technocratic elites considered more scientific and modern wherein technological rationality becomes political rationality (Nandy 1988; Feenberg 1992). While indigeneity is understood as both territorially rooted and a product of trans-local solidarity (Karlsson 2003; Castree 2004). I

suggest that though designed to promote nation-building at the ‘frontier’, these projects have led to a growing antagonism against the Indian state among indigenous groups and state technocrats. Project developers from mainland India are viewed as insensitive to Sikkim’s spiritual sanctity and its ecology since they do not have to live with any of the repercussions. Additionally, regional technocrats are rarely consulted on any projects instead locals affected by these projects have often employed their help in suing national or private project developers. This disdain for mainland India, as I discuss later in the article, is rooted in historically and contemporary state practices that have contributed to the region’s marginalization. While based in the Indian Himalayan context, theoretically this article seeks to further an understanding of the racial and geographic unevenness of environmental vulnerability, an undeniable reality of the Anthropocene era. Methodologically, in its engagements with geoscientists and indigenous groups, this article makes a case for multidisciplinary inquiry that values a plurality of knowledge systems.

I conducted ethnographic and participatory research over two predissertation research surveys (2011, 2012) and ten months of fieldwork (2013-2014) in Gangtok, the capital town of Sikkim and Dzongu, a reserve of the indigenous Lepcha tribe in North Sikkim. My M.A. research in 2007 was also based in Dzongu, where I examined how indigenous youth navigate inter-generational anxieties as they out-migrated for higher education and employment. Since 2007, Dzongu has also been the site of a well-known anti-dam movement, where young Lepcha activists, after three years of protests (2007-2010), successfully cancelled four of seven hydropower projects planned within the reserve. My fieldwork in 2014 took place during India’s national and Sikkim’s state elections. In addition to interviews with indigenous activists and regional technocrats, I was able to witness how questions of economic and ecological precarity,

e.g. youth unemployment and earthquakes, were conflated and took central place in electoral debates and political rhetoric. In this article I draw on interviews with state geologists, disaster management officials, and residents of Dzongu. Through these interviews I interrogate how geological indeterminacy mediates and produces a regional subjectivity rooted in geo-physical and spiritual particularities. I draw attention to the material and cultural processes that interrupt the centralization of state authority and environmental governance in the Himalayan region. In this my attempt is to attend to how “indeterminism cannot but be political” (Feenberg 1992) and the theoretical and practical importance of a “critical geographic mobilization of place” (Jazeel 2011) for post-colonial environmental politics in the Anthropocene.

5.2 Living with Indeterminacy in the Anthropocene

If climate change pundits are to be believed, we live in profoundly uncertain times on the brink of an eco-apocalypse. The Anthropocene, despite its contested categorization, is the surest reminder of the planetary and geologic scale of humanity’s material impact. But despite its emphasis on humanity as geologic agent, the Anthropocene has evoked humility rather than hubris, in a dramatic departure from the certitude of enlightenment thinking (Lövbrand et al. 2009). This concept has prompted profound introspection about the dialectical relationship between humanity and nature, where both are figured, sometimes simultaneously or alternately, *as risk* and *at risk*. Clark (2011) highlights, a central thread of inquiry that runs through this scholarship: the tension between human culpability (think Amazonian deforestation) and human vulnerability (think Hurricane Katrina). While not eschewing the role of humanity, Clark (2011:14) argues that “our planet is quite capable of taking us by surprise”. Indeterminacy then is a hallmark of the Anthropocene mentality and requires a “bleaker subject position” (Kirsch 2015:2) since the future now exists as “a site of anxiety, full of unknowns, that is not amenable

to human intervention” (Reith 2004: 393 in Lövbrand et al 2009). The fundamental precepts which modernity is predicated on – order, certainty, and control – are being challenged in this new geologic epoch.

Here, I use indeterminacy to signal the unpredictability and contingency inherent in anthropogenic climate change and industrial modernity, which generate political openings that are up for grabs by multiple actors. Feenberg (1992) noted that technological development was based on the assumption that, “our (Western-European) technology and its corresponding institutional structures are universal, indeed planetary, in scope” (1992:6) but this thesis breaks down, since technology does not have predictable outcomes and is “overdetermined by both technical and social factors” (8). More recently, the notion of indeterminacy has emerged alongside other concepts within the social sciences, such as assemblage, chaos, multiplicity, emergence, and others that draw on developments within the natural sciences and mathematics (Venn 2006). Shaw (2013:613) in his attempt to make sense of objects, worlds, and events that “tear apart the fabric of sense and habit in the world”, draws on Alain Badiou’s concept of ‘inexistence’²², i.e., latent elements that exert pressure on the status-quo and their appearance becoming the source of radical transformation in the world. He theorizes the ‘geo-event’ as the “transformation of a world by inexistent objects and the resulting change caused by their appearance” (622). Shaw describes ‘inexistent objects’ as “clandestine, autonomous, and volatile” and the “primary site of contingency within the world” (622,623). The multiple crises that mark this epoch also mean a proliferation of inexistent objects and geo-events. For many

²² Though for Badiou the inexistent are human subjects; people, marginalized and excluded by politics, whose appearance changes the rules of the game. Shaw draws on Graham Harman’s object oriented philosophy to push Badiou’s inexistent, to include “hurricanes, nuclear bombs, volcanoes, CIA drones, coals, and railways” (2013:640), acknowledging that scholars of Badiou would not be too pleased by this take on his work.

radical scholars this indeterminacy generates conditions that are ripe for radical projects, an argument that this article also pivots on. However as Clark (2011: 687) notes the materiality of the earth and such events “might under certain conditions spark political action, but none has a privilege affiliation with any political leaning”. An important reminder, that the earth doesn’t play favorites.

We find an analogous understanding of the ‘inexistent’ in Beck’s (1992) ‘Risk Society’ where he theorized that technocratic expertise produces a world where ecological and technological hazards are knowable only when they are entrenched in the social landscape. When these risks surface, they illicit a response from civil society that ultimately widens the scope of democratic involvement in environmental and technological issues thereby producing the ‘Risk Society’, a social order organized around the politics of risk. While natural disasters like earthquakes in the Himalayan context are not a direct result of the hydropower industry²³ the tunneling and blasting required for run-of-the river projects had even before the earthquake caused landslides and damages to concrete structures in the vicinity (Government of Sikkim 2010). Many argue that the earthquake shook loose what had already been shaken by project construction. In the context of Himalayan hydropower, we find an intersection of concerns related to an unpredictable earth, risks inherent in industrial modernity, and conditions that force marginalized populations to occupy hazardous landscapes that are simultaneously full of potential for radical struggles.

²³ Although across the border in China, the Three Gorges Dam has been held culpable for dam-induced seismicity (Hvistendahl 2008), a claim that some tried extending to the Sikkimese context but were subsequently found to be improbable.

Although Beck (1990) noted that ‘risk industries’ are increasingly being resettled in Global South countries with cheap labor, Braun (2003) believes that in Beck’s thesis, the proliferation of risk meant they would now be experienced more generally by everyone. However Braun (2003:178) argues there is ample evidence that, “who lives *most* at risk in the United States [and globally] remains quite specific, overdetermined by capitalist development, racialization, and the social production of space, place, and nature”. While risk abounds in modern life in both the Global North and South, it does so in ways that can be traced back to histories and configurations of colonization and slavery (Haraway 2015; Moore 2015; Last 2015). Saldanha (2013:xx) argues that in seeking radical political alternatives we must pay attention to how “the ecology of global capitalism (is) intrinsically racist, making white populations live longer and better at the expense of the toil and sufferings of others...the Anthropocene is in itself a racist biopolitical reality”. Similarly, Moore (2015) has argued against the “fictitious human unity” presumed under the Anthropocene and suggests ‘Capitalocene’ – the age of capital, as the more appropriate term for the present era.

In the context of Himalayan hydropower development, Baruah (2012:41) suggests that the energy produced by these projects is almost entirely for use outside the region, thereby generating a “great unevenness in the distribution of potential gains and losses – and of vulnerability to risk”. Therefore it becomes important to locate risk as it unfolds in geographically specific settings and in racialized bodies. As I show in the following section, hydel projects and extractive industries promoted in the Himalayan region are built on patterns of regional marginalization introduced by the colonial British State and perpetuated by the Indian State. Jazeel (2011) drawing on Massey’s relational understanding of place, argues that place as a geographical unit of analysis is the most effective scale of engagement with indeterminate

categories and events, geophysical, or otherwise. However place is not synonymous with a grounded or static reality, rather it is a busy crossroads, in the context of this article, of the spiritual, technocratic, and geological. In the next section, I provide context in which to understand large scale infrastructural development in the Himalayan states, focusing on hegemonic and universalizing claims that rendered these spaces as unruly margins despite their deep historical significance as economic and cultural crossroads.

5.3 Unruly Borderlands, Unruly Natives

The Himalayan Mountains, ‘young’ in geological terms are still on the move with the Indian tectonic plate slowly sliding under the Eurasian plate, making the region prone to seismic activity. These mountains also bear the brunt of the monsoon rains which cause flashfloods and landslides, with poor infrastructure making the region very difficult to access during this season. Superimposed over these subterranean fault lines and eroding hillsides are multiple international borders that also relentlessly push and shove against each other. These geo-political and geo-physical particularities inform both official and popular understandings of the Himalayan borderland region as sensitive, remote, and peripheral to ‘mainland’ India. This understanding also informs how the region’s inhabitants and their cultures are viewed as untouched, archaic, and hence, exotic. Gellner (2013:14) notes, despite the peripheral status they are accorded, borderlands are in fact central to both discursive and material constructions of the nation-state. This is particularly evident in the Indian state’s representation of the Himalayan Mountains as its ‘natural’ northern frontier (Krishna 1994).

Mathur (2013) notes that the trope of the Himalayas as a ‘natural’ demarcation of India, first appeared in British colonial-era accounts and was carried over into the postcolonial Indian

states assertion of the country's 'god-given' boundaries. Contrary to these understandings of the Himalayan frontier as an impenetrable 'natural' barrier, the Himalayan range has a number of traversable passes that have historically facilitated the flows of ideas, peoples, and materials (Mathur 2013). Despite this rich history which harks back to Silk Route traders and Buddhist missionaries to East Asia (Murton 2013), the cartographic logic of the British Empire reduced the region along with its inhabitants to the fringes of Indian imperial geography. Zou and Kumar (2011: 143) note that in spite of imperial claims of absolute sovereignty, the "indeterminacy of boundaries" frustrated colonial concerns for order and stability in the ever-shifting "turbulent frontier" in the Northeast. Ultimately it was the Anglo-Burmese war of 1824-26, that caught the British off-guard, which provided the impetus for imperial surveys which led to the demarcation of both internal and external boundaries in the northeastern frontier (Zou and Kumar 2013). Colonial territorial techniques effectively created the vision of a 'wild' or unruly frontier that required disciplining through spatial strategies, resulting in an erasure of historical corridors, a profusion of boundaries where none existed, and the conversion of fluid borders into hardened lines of control. Both the northwestern and northeastern fringes of the British India consisted of kingdoms with dynamic cultures and histories of trade with neighboring regions, which suddenly found themselves cut off, isolated, and in a relationship of dependency to the core.

As in other colonial contexts, maps served an important tool in "frame[ing] and classify[ing] the world in order to comprehend and control it" and this logic was especially at work in "'wild' or unconquered territories" (Crampton 2010: 96). Colonial territorial techniques did not recognize local maps that drew on oral traditions of cosmography and creation myths which in stark opposition to a "horizontal map of bounded territories delimited by modern state interests" (Anderson 1991:171), recognized deities inhabiting heavenly realms as well as an

underworld teeming with supernatural beings. This spatial logic and the concept of a vertical axis, can be found in the cosmography of many Himalayan groups (Allen 1978; Ramble 1996), wherein ‘up’ correlates with the North, representing benevolent supernatural beings while ‘down’ or the South, signifies malevolent beings. Bentley (2013) notes in the Lepcha context, annual rituals performed by Lepcha shamans, would appease malevolent beings that tend to move along the spatial axis bringing cosmic disorder. The secular mapping enterprise of the British not only instituted a new relationship between people and territory through systems of taxation and territorial chiefdoms but also led to an erasure of indigenous sacred cartography (Zou and Kumar 2011).

The colonial system of oriental classification, on encountering the people residing these regions, saw them as relatively more egalitarian than the rigid hierarchical caste system they encountered elsewhere in India. The colonial sociology of knowledge that drew on European systems of classification and categorization (Cohn 1985; Appadurai 1993) saw the highland frontier and its people as ethnically distinct from the population of the plains resulting in the “master oppositional binary” between the hills and the plains (Baruah (2008:16). This oppositional binary spawned exclusionist policies that served to protect British regional economic interests such as tea plantations. While these policies to some degree “insulated hill people...from the exploitation of lowland capitalists, but ... [also] curtailed tribal access to lowland markets.” (Zou and Kumar 2011: 160). These regional protectionist policies created a hill-plains dichotomy that is evident not only in the present political economy of the region but also in how people from the region consider themselves ethnically and culturally distinct from mainland ‘Indians’ (De Maaker and Joshi 2007; Smith and Gergan 2015).

Kennedy (1991) notes two prominent colonial categories in which highland people were placed, the first was the ‘martial race’ category with associated features of “courage virility, and pugnacity” (60) and the second was as ‘guardians of edenic sanctuaries’ who were “simple, guileless, noble beings, nurtured in the healthy embrace of nature, untouched by the depravity that pervaded the social and religious life of the Indian masses” (71). Po’dar and Subbar (1991) argue that many of the early Indian anthropologists were “home-grown Orientalists” who subscribed to the same colonial categories and for whom the “Himalayan tribes are just a new Orient”. They note how statements such as the following one about the Lepchas, betray the colonial roots of Indian anthropology: “their [Lepchas] apathy towards hard manual labor and lack of competitive zeal...are some of the major features responsible for their comparative inefficiency [in] agriculture” (Das 1978:60 in Po’dar and Subbar 1991). These powerful colonial tropes still inform dominant Indian representations of the region and its people as either warring tribes or as simple natives inhabiting exotic locales.

The imperial logic of governing the frontier and its peoples was passed onto to the postcolonial Indian state and today we find four layers of borders at the frayed northern edges of the Indian state. First, the two hundred year old enclaves shared by India-Bangladesh which represent remnants of precolonial border-making, second the India-China border, a colonial relic of failed negotiations in the early twentieth century between British, India, Tibet, and China, third, the India-Bangladesh border, a result of the partitioning of British India in 1947 and fourth, the India-Pakistan border in Kashmir which became contested after the partition (Schendel 2013). Schendel (2013:268) notes that these histories of “uncertain border-making” and “apprehensive territoriality” in the Himalayan borderlands have produced sensitive borders that “tend to be patrolled by armed men in state uniforms, [resulting in] volatile borderlands.” The

partition of India in 1947 and the resultant ‘cartographic anxiety’ (Kirshna 1994) resulted in an obstruction of historical networks of trade and commerce contributing to the geo-political isolation of the northeast and northwestern borderlands. Given the cognitive and geographically marginal position of the Himalayan borderlands, today, the region “readily serves as a site of India’s negation – seen through neat chauvinist, nationalist categories” (Zou and Kumar 2013: 168). While not all borders are volatile, especially the one in Sikkim where tourists clamor to shake hands with Chinese soldiers at the Nathu-la border between India-China, the relationship between the Sikkimese citizens and the Indian military is marked by indifference at best and hostile accommodation at worst. In the next section, I provide the Sikkimese context and its place in the larger Indian Himalayan region, before delving into the ethnographic case study.

5.4 Sikkimese Political Landscape

In 2002, Sikkim was included as the eighth state of India’s Northeast region. The Northeast region comprised of seven states²⁴ which are also referred to as the ‘seven sisters’ and with the addition of Sikkim, the region is now known as ‘seven sisters and one brother’. Sikkim’s position within the Northeastern states is just as odd as the awkward new sobriquet suggests. By most accounts, Sikkim is considered to be one of India’s most peaceful states while in a gross generalization, the other Northeastern states are seen as a hotbed for insurgency and ethnic conflict. Sikkim is also held up as ‘model’ state, an exemplar in the field of sanitation, eco-tourism, organic agriculture, and hydropower development. Sikkim’s history as an independent Buddhist kingdom with a traditional feudal system and its transition from monarchy to democracy provides an important background to understand its ‘success story’ in the region.

²⁴ Manipur, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Assam, Tripura and Mizoram.

Since its annexation in 1975, Sikkim has had only two full-term Chief Ministers who have enjoyed absolute majority in the state legislative assembly during their successive terms. Pawan Kumar Chamling, the present Chief Minister under the Sikkim Democratic Front party, is now serving his fifth consecutive term (1994-2016). In addition to this, the state is considered a special category state and the 36th Amendment to the Indian constitution guarantees Sikkim special constitutional provisions under Article 371F, which among other things, grants Sikkimese subjects complete exemption from income tax. These provisions instituted to ensure the cultural integrity of Sikkim post-annexation, have in many ways made Sikkim beholden to the center.

With the recent ‘Look East’ policy of India which attempts to foster stronger economic and strategic ties with Southeast Asia as a counterweight to China’s influence in the region has led to growing concerns over the economic development and stability of the Northeast region, an effective corridor for the enactment of this policy (Rana 2014). Chamling’s gradual consolidation of power has ensured relative political stability within the state, making it lucrative for outside investors. Hydropower development in the state then has to be understood in the context of Sikkim’s position to the rest of India and Chamling’s strong political hold which many have referred to as a ‘benign dictatorship’ (Clement 2014). But as Huber and Joshi (2015:15) have argued in the context of Sikkim, “hydropower has served to catalyze a politicization of environmental and political decision-making, a counter-hegemonic mo(ve)ment, which exposed a long-standing democracy deficit”. Writing in the regional context of hydropower projects in the Northeast India, Chowdhury and Kipgen (2013:207) argue that while resistance movements against projects may not have not resulted in a “politically conscious ‘ethno-regional identity’” but “recent development of forging identity beyond the local level

renders hope that in the near future a regional level identity might be conceived.” Here, my attention will be directed to Sikkim where ecological indeterminacy coupled with large infrastructural projects, while destabilizing current political configurations with the state, is sowing resentment against mainland India. My focus here will be on the Dzongu reserve in North Sikkim. With a population of 5,000, in the Upper Teesta valley, Dzongu is a protected reserve for the Lepcha tribe and just as the Himalayan region exists at the geographic and cognitive peripheries of the Indian state, Dzongu, connected to Sikkim by three bridges, exists at the peripheries of the Sikkimese state. In the following section, I present a fine-grained analysis of the spiritual, geo-physical, and technocratic renderings of these shifts, through interviews with indigenous groups and state technocrats, two groups that are often pitted against each other.

5.5 Encountering Animate Landscapes

“North Sikkim is facing natural disasters as its sanctity has been sold for money. All the Sikkimese people must come forward for a holy battle to save truth and religion of Sikkim. We don’t need money, we need happiness, and security that cannot be purchased by money” (P.S. Golay, Sikkim Krantikari Morcha, [SKM] Opposition Party President)

Polemic statements about the earthquake, like the one above, though hyperbolic and decidedly self-righteous, (especially coming from a politician who had been embroiled in corruption scandals himself), capture the flavor of election season in Sikkim. Since the September 18th earthquake in 2011, every September people in Sikkim tense up a little, making nervous jokes about the earthquake and if it would celebrate its “birthday” again this year. During my fieldwork, September came and went but just as the “earthquake birthday” jokes were getting stale, on October 4th an earthquake of moderate intensity shook the state (Fig 6). Ironically, at the time of the quake, government officials were assembled in the state Secretariat,

in a meeting on earthquake preparedness and finding themselves quite underprepared fled the building.

In the midst of journalistic exposes regarding corruption in the distribution of earthquake relief funds, local newspapers noted that most earthquakes in North Sikkim, including the September 2013 one, were located close to hydropower project sites. Conducting fieldwork in this heightened political climate, I expected people's response to questions about heightened seismicity to be guarded, falling along party lines, since the Chamling led Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) government had repeatedly assured people of the State's preparedness and that earthquakes were unconnected to hydropower projects. However I was surprised to find that regardless of political affiliation, many people in Dzongu who I spoke with, when asked about the earthquakes would connect them to hydropower projects. The only exceptions to these were some *panchayat* (village governance) officials, who because of their affiliation with the ruling government, would speak of earthquakes as natural occurrences which one had to adapt to and develop resilience through government sponsored earthquake proof housing. However for many like 32 year old Tashi, a private contractor and a self-identified 'social worker', unaffiliated to the anti-dam movement, the connection was all too clear:

Tashi: The epicenter was in Dzongu and most of the projects are here. Maybe it's because of that [the earthquake came] this is where the *devi-deuta* [deities] reside you know, in the hillsides, mountains. The projects have drilled tunnels in all these really beautiful places and maybe that's why the gods got angry.

Though Tashi prefaced his comments with "that's what people here believe", he spoke at length about the 'bad times' we live in, the rise in corruption and pollution, and how people in Dzongu had forsaken their indigenous practices and beliefs. He also spoke of how historically both Dzongu and Sikkim were known to be sacred places of exceptional beauty and bounty.

Most people in Dzongu, with the exception of recent converts to Christianity, practice a syncretic blend of Buddhism and indigenous shamanic practices. I discuss elsewhere, the tensions between these two belief systems but in this context, it is important to note that concerns around ‘vanishing’ indigenous practices existed decades before the anti-dam protests. During my M.A research, lay Lepchas within Dzongu spoke of this loss in terms of the declining use of Lepcha script and language, Lepchas marrying non-Lepchas, and the growing number of ‘outsiders’ in Dzongu, however the ecological dimensions of loss²⁵ had never been as evident before hydropower projects and the anti-dam protests.

Fig 6: Geology and Politics in Sikkim



The newspaper *Sikkim Express*, known to avoid controversial subjects like hydropower projects, noted that the epicenter of the October 4th, 2013 earthquake was located close to the Stage V Dam. The news heading on the right, reports how the Chief Minister Pawan Chamling who was addressing a public gathering, when the earthquake struck, reassured everyone that the state could handle future disasters. (Source: *Sikkim Express*, Friday, October 4th)

²⁵ An important ecological loss that was noted during my M.A and PhD research was the decreasing cardamom cultivation, an important cash crop, which was attributed to a virus and loss of soil fertility. Though most people felt this loss had actually helped the Dzongu Lepchas, forcing them to be more industrious instead of relying on the easy money coming from cardamom cultivation.

Tsering, a college educated youth in her 20s, like Tashi, spoke of deities residing in hills and mountainsides, being disturbed by project construction:

Tsering: Local people say *loo-lingzay*... for different deities that reside in *dhungas* [rocks] in *pani-pokhri* [streams and rivers] they are very angry. They have disturbed them. Because of that they come out to give a lesson to the people. They come out in different forms like this earthquake or sometimes it's a landslide or flashflood or lightning and thunder. That's what they say.

These deities' latent in the landscape that erupt as earthquakes and floods when disturbed, seem to be operating with the same logic and force as Shaw's 'inexistent objects', beings and not objects in this case, that are "clandestine, autonomous, and volatile" (622). Though Bentley (personal communication, August 05, 2013) points out that in Lepcha shamanic belief it is not so much deities causing earthquake but them refusing to prevent these events due to the non-observance of ritual offerings and prayers. This interpretation of Lepcha cosmology was quite prevalent among the people I spoke with. However in interviews, most young people would preface their statements with "people believe" or "our elders say". In one of the interviews, I pushed my inquiry a little further:

Q: But what about your generation....like when you're talking right now...you keep saying that's what *they* say...what do you believe in?

Lakpa: Scientifically they have proven this is an area where many earthquakes come so there shouldn't be such heavy construction here. So even scientifically and even in our local culture, it is proven. And these deities, when they take their physical form in bodies [spirit possession] when you see that, you really feel that yes this is true. We have not been able to shake this off, these beliefs. I believe these things.

Earlier in the interview, 25 year old Lakpa, a college educated youth from Hye-Gyathang GPU in Upper Dzongu, recounted a story of the spirit-possession of twin sisters from a nearby village, by an angry mountain deity who claimed to have been disturbed by loud noises coming from the project site. Ironically, the parents of the twin sisters had sold a part of their land to dam

developers and supported hydropower construction in Dzongu. While not all educated youth like Lakpa believe in supernatural beings, for many skeptics the increased frequency of earthquakes, alongside incidents of spirit possession activated their belief in an animate, sacred landscape. The emergence of these spirit beings, in the form of natural hazards or in the bodies of people, seemed to “force thought” and “slow down reasoning” (Stengers 2005) in educated youth like Lakpa, who found himself unable to “shake off” his indigenous beliefs. Indigenous landscapes and bodies, inscribed by universalizing laws and state power structures, are then the inexistent that are the “primary site of contingency within the world” (Shaw 2013:622).

In Lakpa’s statement, we also find instead of the eternal opposition between scientific and indigenous belief systems, a mutual affirmation bolstered by a dynamic, unpredictable earth. Theoretically, just as the ‘vitality’ of matter can shake human hubris predicated on “the image of dead of thoroughly instrumentalized matter” (Bennett 2007) similarly spiritual accounts of matter’s vitality can upend Euro-Western academic hubris. These entangled narratives of geology and spirituality with their different political registers, show how heightened ecological precarity is central to both scientific and indigenous accounts of rapid ecological and socio-economic changes. While these earthquakes activated spiritual beliefs in some people, it also made them question the scientific and political grounds on which hydropower was being brought to the state. Hydropower projects in the Himalayan region require drilling tunnels through mountains and diverting the rivers waters into these tunnels. This water is then dropped onto turbines to generate electricity. Most people I spoke with understood the difference between large reservoir dams in the plains and these diversion dams but statements such as the one below, relay a fundamental mistrust of the Indian state and the actual intentions of project developers.

Pema: These projects aren’t good, they’ve damaged our village and they’ve taken the materials, the *sun-chaandi* (gold and silver), you know the things that are

inside the mountain. They've taken these minerals. From the outside we only see one tunnel but many say that inside there is a more complex network of tunnels.

Sikkim is not a mineral-rich state and apart from copper, lead, and zinc, no other commercially viable mineral deposits have been discovered so far (Government of Sikkim 2010). While gold and silver deposits have never been located in Sikkim, rumors had quickly spread within Dzongu that project developers had been conducting tests to find exploitable minerals. This claim was not entirely unfounded as the State Mines, Minerals and Geology department was founded primarily for mineral exploration and identifying unstable areas and it was only recently that the focus had shifted to the latter of the two. Locals were aware of these official studies but felt that hydropower developers were greedy and would strip Sikkim bare of both its water and mineral resources. In 1963, the National Geographic carried a story about Sikkim, then a Himalayan kingdom where the author reported, "Like hillmen everywhere, the Sikkimese considers himself superior to men of the plains and tends to be suspicious of lowland India." (Doig 1963:422). This understanding stems from the "master oppositional binary" (Baruah 2010) between the hills and plains but carries weight even today.

One evening as I sat with the seventy year old father of Tenzing, one of the main anti-dam activists, he told me the story of dam developers who were conducting tests in the area for the dam's tunnel. During one of the test blasts the developers discovered a hot spring, the first one of its kind in the reserve. As news spread, first locals then tourists started flocking to the hot springs and the developers found themselves unable to proceed with their plans. Tenzing's father said gravely, "now they realize the importance of this land, this land has *shakti* [power] and if you just give it away you will regret it." Many others like Sonam below felt they were now more aware of both the spiritual and material importance of this land especially its subterranean networks and channels,

Sonam: When NHPC [National Hydro Power Corporation] comes in they will have to dig tunnels, and when they dig these tunnels they will take out the minerals, like gold, and when they take out those minerals, in the earth that's what naturally keeps the balance, and you see these *sanu sroth haru* [these small stream] will also slowly disappear because the water will run down those tunnels and escape.

Therefore along with concerns about exploiting mineral resources, people expressed a much more pressing concern, the drying up of small streams and what it meant for farmers,

Samdup: They're blasting the whole place earlier we used to get *thoolo pani* [lots of water] in the field it was *prashastha* [more than enough]. Now many people have just left their land barren, it's mostly because of the lack of water.

Sonam and Samdup, young men in their 20's, were aware of how these projects were disrupting underground water channels and spoke of ecological and economic consequences especially for small farmers. Samdup, spoke quite frankly about his initial mistrust of the anti-dam activists but how after witnessing the earthquake and the recklessness of project developers, many people had changed their minds about the activists. However none of the people I have quoted in this section identified with the anti-dam movement. In fact, one of the prominent anti-dam activists Dawa Lepcha ran for elections as a representative of the new opposition party SKM and lost by a huge margin to the SDF party representative who had been instrumental in bringing the projects to Dzongu. Within Sikkim, while the political dynamics are slowly shifting with the emergence of an opposition party that has a significant presence in the State Legislative Assembly, political allegiances and systems of patronage remain deeply entrenched. While locals recognize the role of a corrupt state in bringing these projects, most of the resentment is directed at 'mainland' India, i.e the Central government and private hydropower developers. While this didn't help the anti-dam activists who were keen on gaining a political foothold during the state elections, it feeds into the historical sense of regional marginalization and mistrust of the Indian state. The crumbling visceral materiality of the geological ebbs and flows of the earth, angry

deities possessing peoples bodies, along with questionable construction practices in vulnerable landscapes are contributing to what Baruah (2012:41) calls a “serious legitimacy deficit” in the Indian state’s commitment to its borderlands and its inhabitants.

5.6 ‘Geological Surprises’ in the Eastern Himalayas

Most hydro projects have been adversely affected by *geological surprises* especially during underground tunneling in the relatively young Himalayan Mountains... Even with the best of geological investigations, occurrences of shear zones and underground lakes and streams can result into (sic) serious time and cost over-runs. (New Hydropower Policy, Ministry of Power (2008:27) emphasis mine.)

Technocratic expertise around hydropower development in the Himalayan region is highly contested. Scientists and geologists have made passionate arguments both for and against hydropower development. Given the increased instances of disasters especially earthquakes, the question of dam-induced seismicity has been brought up frequently. The debates are so polarized with the involvement of environmental and civil society groups, international finance groups, and power dam developers, that it has become rather difficult to have meaningful conversations with concrete policy results. From early on, fears of seismic instability were raised not just by environmentalists but also scientists and civil engineers. However many were quick to dismiss these arguments:

It has been scientifically established that the dams using modern methods of design and construction can safely withstand high intensity earthquakes, while dams not using these techniques can be damaged even with earthquakes of quite a low intensity. The failure of large dams due to earthquake is only a fear which is unnecessarily being projected manifold. (Kampta and Goel 2000:51)

This quote from a national seminar held in 1999 on the environmental management of hydropower projects, suggest that fears of earthquakes damaging reservoirs, were “unnecessarily being projected manifold”. These debates surfaced around the late 80’s regarding the construction design for the Tehri Dam in the Western Himalayan state of Uttarakhand. It was

established many years later that the Tehri Dam did not in fact contain various defensive measures against earthquakes, resulting in “a unanimous conclusion that significant uncertainty remained”, the report continues to say, “This led to the conviction that, from a scientific, non-political, point of view, all was not well... The Tehri dam project has become a crisis of confidence.” (Ives 2004: 124). Even today, we find strong advocates on either side of the debate when it comes to hydropower projects and its role in inducing vulnerabilities in fragile ecosystems. Hydropower developers and the Indian state have argued that flashfloods, earthquakes, and landslides natural hazards are part of this region’s geophysical makeup. However environmentalists have proven how these hastily commissioned and constructed projects are rapidly chipping away at ecological resilience to these hazards (Kohli 2011; Chopra 2015).

In the Sikkimese context, since scientists and geologists I interviewed were government employees, I framed my questions around the challenges of developing large infrastructure like roads, bridges and buildings in a seismically active region in the context of climate change. However most state technocrats, spoke quite openly of the antagonistic relationship between hydropower developers and state departments, something that took me by surprise. Here it becomes important to recognize the difference between Center and state interests and the multiplicity of technocratic expertise. Since state technocrats are not consulted on these projects when locals have approached them with grievances, state technocracy has sided with locals in opposition to the Center. Dr. Y, from the Disaster Management Department, spoke at length about the negligence on the part of the dam developers:

There was a case in Sikkim of the Dikchu dam where the project developers did not consider the rim treatment. Before filling up the reservoir they have to do rim treatment so that there is no water seepage. After the earthquake and even before

there were landslides in close by villages that were triggered not because of earthquake but because of lack of rim treatment. Because hydel power production is a highly lucrative business... they want to complete it in a very short time...so for that they are doing some mistakes that will hamper the situation...to the area.

Despite their position as government officials and mine, as a researcher, there were no attempts to sidestep my questions or spin these projects in a positive light. This interactions with geoscientists in the field provided an important insight into the different scales of technocracy as it interacts with the local context. Castree (2015) argues that the Left which stands “aloof from contemporary science, variously critical or grateful but rarely involved” (3) must engage more deeply with “geoscience’s formal radicalism” (19), infusing it with its social and political critiques with a view to challenge the present capitalist system. Noting the contribution of recent geoscientific inquiries, such as those of Nobel Prize winner Paul Crutzen, who first suggested we are living in a new geologic epoch, the ‘Anthropocene’, Castree (2015:2) draws our attention to how geoscience’s “leading practitioners are calling for a new *modus operandi* in response to the evident failure of political-economic elites to close the yawning ‘sustainability gap’ ”. While Castree is calling for a much more in-depth engagement with geoscience and geoscientists than the one presented here, my own experience interviewing state technocrats who also happen to be geoscientists, challenged some of my deeply held stereotypes of government scientists. When asked about dam-induced seismicity in the Sikkimese hydropower context, most scientists I interviewed reject it but also noted that proper geo-technical studies had not been conducted by project developers. Dr. X, from the Department of Mines, Minerals, and Geology had this to say:

Actually they have not carried out the geo-technical studies and investigation and they have not followed whatever norms are to be followed... we are trying for proper investigation and proper compensation for last 3-4 years. But due to the fact that these are public undertakings under the government, they are least bothered. Public undertakings think they are the boss, they don’t want to take any suggestions given by the state government.

Scientists also spoke at length of how the lure of money was obscuring deeper scientific considerations especially given the dearth of research related to hydrology and geology. This moral language of greed and corruption was often employed to talk about public undertakings like the National Hydro Power Corporation, who functioned with impunity since they were only answerable to the Central government in Delhi. Many projects in North Sikkim were handled by private developers through in Public-Private Partnership (PPP) with the Sikkim state so I inquired if private developers behaved any different from public undertaking like NHPC.

Q: Do you think private developers are more cooperative compared to public ones?

Dr. Y: No, no they are also not cooperative. In them the government thing is not there but with them they still want to finish their project immediately. And they also have other problems like getting money they have to get money from World Bank or some other bank. And sometimes you know their project stops because of lack of flow of money, these are the things facing them.

So what happens when technology deployed by shortsighted corrupt actors meets the fierce capacity of nature which upends its well-laid out or in this case, not-so-well-laid-out plans? While there was uncertainty around *why* there was a growing frequency in seismic activity but when it came to *who* was responsible for aggravating ecological vulnerability, some more unquestionably more guilty than others. With changing climatic conditions and variations in ecological flows, many state technocrats also believed that hydropower projects may not even come through on its promises. During my fieldwork, there were fears around a glacial lake outburst in the higher reaches of North Sikkim which had further activated these fears. Sikkim's difficult terrain and the high altitude of glacier made it difficult to conduct extensive research. The difficult terrain of the region as Chowdhury and Kipgen (2013) point out is also held responsible for the inability to provide electricity generated from hydropower development to

certain parts of the region, signifying that “from the very beginning the aim was to develop electricity for consumption outside the region” (200-201).

Erik Eckholm (1976) writing in the context of Nepal’s environmental crisis, popularized the Theory of Himalayan Environmental Crisis (THEC), which blamed accelerated erosion in the steep-sloped areas on population growth of humans and livestock. These theories have been extended in the Indian Himalayan context where ecological problems in the region have often been blamed on short-sighted local practices like forest clearance for agriculture or overgrazing (Sivaramakrishnan 1995; Ives 2004). However Blaikie and Muldavin (2004:521) have argued how theories like THEC “drew upon notions of backwardness, technological incompetence, and neo-Malthusianism” and has since been challenged and rejected by many social and physical scientists. In the quote below, we see an inversion of this logic, which identifies state sponsored development in the region contributing to the ecological precarity of the region. In specific reference to the Sikkim physiography an official report published by the Sikkim State Disaster Management Authority and the Land Revenue and Disaster Management Department, notes:

The Sikkim Himalaya has never been and will never be free from [the] ubiquity of weak geology, slope instability, frequent seismicity, soil erosion...human exploration in terms of development of tourism, intricate network of roads, hydro power projects etc. if not executed in an environmentally and systematic manner, shall in the near future lead to emergence of drastic man-made disasters in the mountains (2013:66)

While state forest policies still impose bans on overgrazing and forest clearance, from interviews it was clear that the blame game could go both ways. State reports also identified the lack of hill-specific policies when it came to urbanization. While earthquakes wreak havoc quite evenly it has been established that it isn’t the earthquake but structurally unstable infrastructure that kill people (Blaikie et al 1994). This same report mentioned above also noted, “A tough

mesh of rampant and unplanned urbanization has trapped its people” (2013:54) and went on to state that more damage from landslides and earthquakes occurred in areas where hydropower projects were located. The development and provision of infrastructure, from the mundane to the spectacular, has historically been central in the deployment of state power (Akhter 2015; Scott 2009; Mitchell). Akin to colonial cartographic logic that made legible these borderland spaces, large scale project also see to impose order, making both nature and subjects legible. Large scale infrastructure operates as a hegemonic, universalizing project that imposes a narrative of truth, i.e. development and modernity, embodied in architecture and the built environment.

Dam building is not a new technocratic enterprise for the postcolonial Indian state. However the new hydropower policy called for a reorganization of both space, i.e. from Central India to the Himalayan region, and technology, from large reservoir dams to diversion dams²⁶. The Himalayan projects necessitated a shift in technology because of the mountainous terrain and its fast flowing rivers. With the promise of minimal displacement these projects were expected to be completed much faster than their Central Indian counterparts. In addition to protests from indigenous and ethnic groups, project completion in Himalayan states like Sikkim along with the expertise of engineers, technocrats and bureaucrats have been slowed down by a geologically active and structurally unstable landscape.

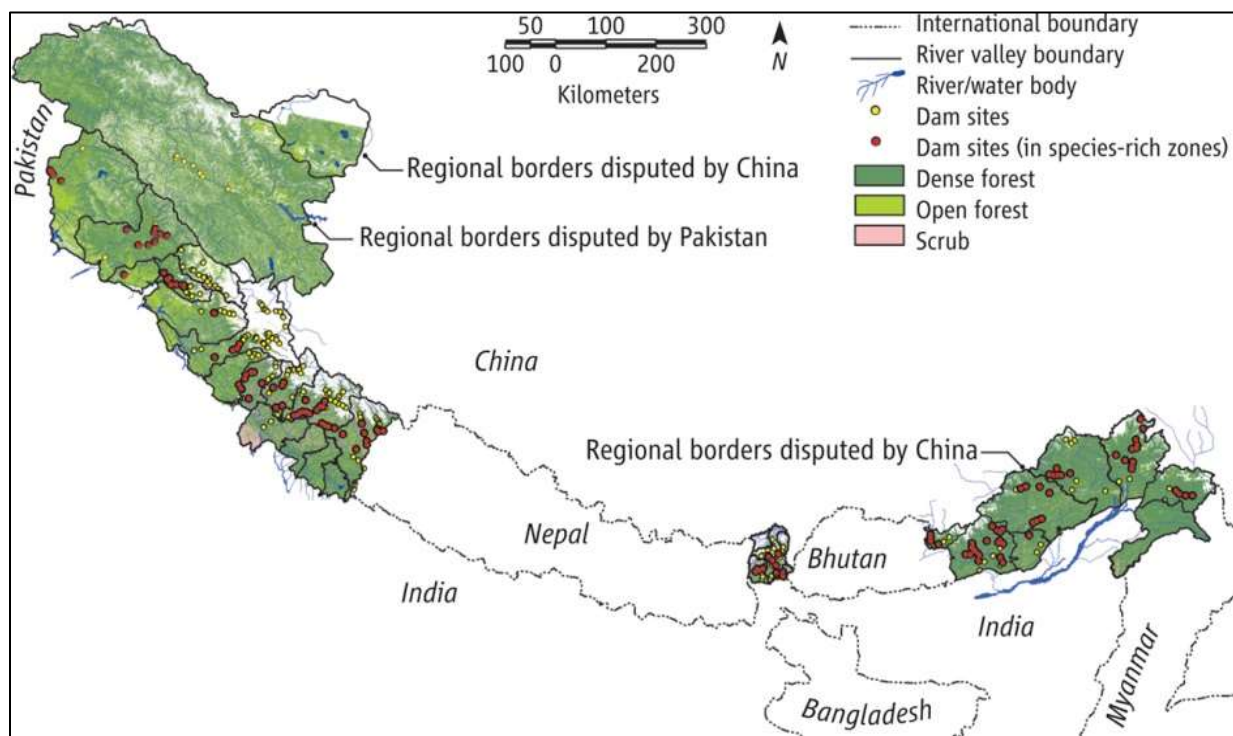
5.7 Conclusion

In June 2013, the Western Himalayan state of Uttarakhand which has over 197 dams planned across the Ganger River and its tributaries, witnessed destructive flood during the peak

²⁶ Most Himalayan dams are diversion or run-of-river projects, which divert the rivers water through tunnels onto turbines to generate electricity. These dams are touted to be more environmentally safe since the return the rivers water instead of impounding it like large reservoir dams however as Dharmadhikary (2008:25) notes, “Many run-of-river projects can have serious impacts by disturbing downstream river flows. Some run-of-river projects divert the water into tunnels, leaving downstream sections dry, and thus cause even more severe impacts downstream.”

Hindu pilgrimage month. An expert committee appointed by the Indian Supreme Court, declared that the Uttarakhand flood disaster was made worse by existing hydropower projects (Chopra 2015). This report has led to a drastic shift in the risk perception of hydropower projects for insurance companies, raising serious challenges to the hydropower industry (Thakkar 2015). The expert committee also recommended the creation of a National Himalayan Policy and a detailed study of the hydrogeology of all Himalayan states where dams are coming up (Chopra 2015). Himalayan hydropower projects are now being viewed as risk-laden endeavors in the light of frequent natural hazard events.

Fig 7: Himalayan Hydropower and ‘Sensitive’ Borderlands (Source: Grumbine, R. E., & Pandit, M. K. (2013))



Hydropower projects meant to bring the mountainous peripheries into the political fray of the mainland has instead enabled a regionalism that is questioning centralized state authority. Akhter (2015) writing in the context of the Tarbela Dam controversy in Pakistan in the 1960's

draws on Lefebvre's three notions of state/space relations, i.e., physical, social, and mental space, that enables the production of a homogenous and controllable state space. In this article, my focus has been on the 'material-natural terrain' that is 'mapped, modified, transformed by the networks and circuits and flows that are established within it' (224-225) but Lefebvre as Akhter (2015) notes, also understand this process to be 'simultaneously homogenous and fractured' (2009:233). In the Himalayan context we find varied material and spiritual forces at work that are interrupting the production of state space. While in the case of Sikkim, as the state election results revealed, there would be no violent or democratic overthrow of the state however these critiques open a space for people to articulate what kind of central intervention is desirable and permissible.

Large infrastructural projects are being imposed by the industrial North on the South under the guise of renewable energy in what many call a "greenwashing" of hydropower development (Fletcher 2010). But just as the North imposes its hegemonic knowledge and categories on the South, the South has its own margins and frontiers, its own personal "Orient" (P'odar and Subba 1997). In the context of this article, while indigenous groups and state officials are positioned differently in relation to the State, the visceral quality of ecological precarity experienced 'in place'— crumbling hillsides, buildings with cracks running through — are difficult to ignore for both groups. Heightened seismicity has been crucial in drawing attention to the specificity of the Himalayan region exposing the underling tensions between the Centre and the state where state technocracy were passionately arguing in defense of the region and the need for mountain and hill-specific policies. The shared experience of ecological precarity has prompted however momentarily, "solidarity out of anxiety" (Beck 1990:61)

between indigenous and regional technocratic concerns. Both concerns²⁷ emerge from an embodied engagement with a degraded environment laying the ontological foundation (Loftus 2012) to challenge the hegemony of ‘national interest’.

The growing concern around disaster and ecological precarity in the Himalayan Mountain states came to a head in the meeting of the Integrated Mountain Institute, held in Kohima, Nagaland, that brought together policy makers, environmentalist, and politicians from all ten Himalayan states. I attended these meetings and witnessed both politicians and civil society members alike questioning state neglect and the need for hill-specific policies. The “onto-politics” of ‘natural’ hazard events and their “capacity to force thought” (Stengers 2005; De la Cadena 2010), has led to an opening up of a variety of concerns for “political interrogation” (Whatmore 2013; Clark 2011). In Sikkim, geo-physical indeterminacy opened a space to question hegemonic state projects and cultural practices that threaten to destabilize the fragile political and cosmological future of the state.

Despite differences in strategies and goals, both indigenous groups and technocrats employ a moral language to criticize a corrupt state that has sidelined public welfare, spiritual and religious sentiments. In the case of Sikkim and the Himalayan states, disasters and development projects are making visible these margins and their inhabitants, who are actively making demands on the state. Furthermore, in taking these two seemingly incongruous realities, i.e. indigeneity and technocracy, I have demonstrated how political action and inquiry in the Anthropocene needs to take into account, a multiplicity of knowledge systems and place-specific

²⁷ I make these arguments with the following caveats a) this doesn’t mean indigenous groups and technocrats sees the other as an ally b) While there has been significant opposition to the state, with the re-election of the Sikkim Democratic Front, and Chief Minister Pawan Kumar Chamling for the fifth consecutive term many now fear speaking out openly against the state.

articulations. Such an inquiry can also challenge existing binaries between indigenous and scientific knowledge and action to examine how they interact with local and regional politics.

As we think of our way forward, developing strategies of ecological and communal resilience in the Anthropocene, requires an attention to the sites where ‘geo-events’ unfold and those bodies that suffer most (Gibson-Graham 2011; Clark 2008). Theoretically, for many indigenous and postcolonial scholars this has meant challenging existing frameworks such as post-humanist theory and its tendency towards ontological flattening, which has its limitation. As Ahuja (2015:xx) notes, “neoliberal crisis thinking often makes an idealist turn toward the material worlds of animals, bodies, and the planet in ways that foreclose attention to difference and inequality within/across human social groups”. Drawing on Gayatri Spivak, geographers have drawn attention to her ‘planetary’ framework which is the most recent iteration of a decade’s old critique voiced by subaltern, indigenous, and postcolonial scholars around notions of untranslatable difference and radical alterity (Chakrabarty 2000; Spivak 2003). Drawing attention to the euro-western roots of critical social theory, these scholars argue that the Anthropocene presents a challenge not just to our fossil-fueled modern lifestyles but also to, “our sense of human universals.... [and] our capacity for historical understanding.” (Chakrabarty 2009:201). Explicit in its geo-physical language, Spivak’s (2003) ‘planetary’ is a call to engage with indeterminate categories, events, and experiences that are not “immediately comprehensible by the violent normalization of a universal claiming to speak for the particular” (Jazeel 2008:88).

Drawing on the work of Guadeloupian writer Daniel Maximin (2006), Last (2015:61) demonstrates how a focus on geophysical forces and natural disasters, “can [even] liberate us from over-looking everyday disasters – the apocalypse that is performed daily, routinely, even happily and with permission”. An engagement with the geophysical then is crucial for the project

of decolonization because of the manner in which “postcolonial life continues to be shaped by external utilization of geography, and infrastructures around it, in detrimental ways” (Maximin in Last 2015: 60). Geological indeterminacy ruptures the thin veneer of order and structure modern lives are predicated on while revealing precarious living conditions, corrupt state practices, the erratic rhythms of the earth, and collective adaptation strategies. Hydropower development designed to promote nation-building at the ‘frontier’ has instead destabilized the fragile Himalayan ecology and provoked political mobilization along regional lines. The very same geo-physical and cultural particularities that contributed to the exclusion of this region, activated by these geo-events are now being enrolled to speak back to the State.

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CHAPTER 6: CONCRETE OR CLAY²⁸? ECO-TOURISM AND THE CONTENTIOUS POLITICS OF DESIGNING INDIGENEITY

6.1 Introduction

There are big changes afoot in Dzongu, the indigenous Lepcha reserve in the tiny Himalayan state of Sikkim, India. Large hydropower projects are being planned and protested against, and there is growing resentment against state apathy amongst Dzongu's burgeoning population of educated unemployed youth. Located seventy kilometres, north-east of Gangtok the state capital, Dzongu exists at the geographic and political peripheries of the Sikkim state. Many consider it to be the last bastion of Lepcha culture, a culture presumed to be threatened and 'vanishing' (Mainwaring 1876; Foning 1987). For several years, the state had been unsuccessfully trying to promote eco-tourism within the reserve to tackle its underdevelopment. However in the last few years, Dzongu's eco-tourism industry has taken off but it is not due to state-sponsored eco-tourism. On the contrary, this success is fuelled by a now well-known movement against state sponsored hydropower projects in Dzongu (2007-10) that led to the cancelation of four dams. This anti-dam movement was supported by local and transnational environmental activists but within the reserve most village leaders welcomed the projects and were critical of the movement (Little 2010; McDuié-Ra 2011). While the struggles of Dzongu youth against large dams ended up alienating them from state officials and village elders, it has produced a compelling narrative for the conscientious 'eco-tourist'.

²⁸ The title of this chapter is 'inspired' by the title of Matthew Gandy's influential book, "Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City."

Within Dzongu, eco-tourism is now emerging as a profitable venture, for the growing ranks of educated unemployed youth. Like many other reserve youth, 29 year old Jigme from Hye-Gyathang Gram Panchayat Unit (village unit) lived and studied outside Dzongu since an early age but unable to find secure salaried employment, decided to return home.

Fig 8: “Keepers of the Land”



The caption reads, “Understanding the ancient environmentalism of Sikkim’s Lepchas”. Run by one of the anti-dam activists, Gyatso Lepcha (in the right hand corner), the *Mayal Lyang* homestay has been featured in many travel magazines and boasts of having hosted the Royal Prince of Norway and his family. [Source: National Geographic Traveller]

Even for someone like Jigme, who wasn’t directly involved in the protests, the lack of opportunities for educated youth in Sikkim and the partisan nature of local bureaucrats, has led to an increasingly antagonistic relationship with the state. However in his years outside, Jigme has

accumulated enough cultural capital, evident from his clothes, comportment and English slang, to know that for eco-tourism, concrete just won't do.

Jigme: You [state government] talk about eco-tourism but you start creating concrete structures in every corner of Dzongu. That's not eco-tourism. Our present MLA [Minister of Legislative Assembly] doesn't know anything about village tourism or eco-tourism or homestays.

Sikkim was the first Indian state to frame an eco-tourism policy in 2011. Since then it has been aggressively promoting community-based tourism through state sponsored projects, even tweaking central-sponsored housing schemes for the poor, to include an extra room and western-style toilets for guests (Kumar 2014). However, state-sponsored housing schemes have led to the proliferation of concrete structures much loathed by the 'eco-tourist'. Jigme and other educated youth are eager to retain traditional architectural styles and the associated skill and knowledge, aware of its purchase among travellers looking for an 'authentic' experience of an indigenous Himalayan reserve. But since young people like Jigme lack political clout, they have little control over what plans and projects enter the village. His frustration at the local MLA, in the quote above, indicates that decisions related to Dzongu's built environment are incendiary issues, closely linked to ongoing political and cultural negotiations.

Writing in the North Indian context, Jeffery (2010:465) noted that even as investment in higher education is increasing, there has been a steady decline in the availability of salaried jobs leading to "temporal and spatial insecurities [among] marginalized young men"²⁹. Sikkim holds

²⁹ While many women were involved in the anti-dam activism and I interviewed a number of them, not many had returned to the reserve after the protests. While the reasons for this are beyond the scope of this present article, from interviews a common theme was the lack of opportunities for educated women within Dzongu especially those who weren't interested in getting married soon (Fieldnotes 2013, 2014).

the unfortunate distinction of having the highest national unemployment rate as well as the highest unemployment rate, among ages 15-29 (Ministry of Labour and Employment 2014). Many young people I spoke with in Dzongu connected this with another alarming statistic; Sikkim has one of the highest rates of suicide in the country (National Crime Records Bureau 2013). Although in official reporting, there isn't a strong correlation between the two statistics, youth unemployment and suicide rates, there is a pervading belief that the two are connected (Author's Fieldnotes 2013). For Dzongu activists, their involvement in anti-dam activism has added to this precarity making it incredibly difficult for many to find coveted government jobs, despite their educational qualification (Gergan 2014).

At this contemporary moment in Sikkim, the state's political leaders are facing a crisis of confidence among its young electorate. While the concerns of Dzongu youth around eco-tourism and the built-environment might be unique to the site, my intention is to understand how marginalized young people in the face of heightened precarity, produce and contest power structures and political identities, embedded in the built environment and the material landscape. More specifically, I focus on Dzongu youth's material and discursive engagements with the natural and built environment in the form of architectural aesthetics, infrastructural development and their political aspirations. I also draw on interviews with local bureaucrats and their perception of educated unemployed youth and their relationship to the state. In this my attempt is to examine in the context of indigenous eco-tourism, how contestations over design, aesthetics, and architecture of eco-tourism infrastructure are intimately tied to ideas of indigenous authenticity, inter-generational gaps, and democratic politics. In the larger national and international context, Lepcha activists' eco-tourism initiatives are in conversation with transnational activism and global indigenous discourse which has earned them the sympathy of

environmentally conscious foreign and domestic tourists. Though this is an important bargaining chip, indigenous Lepcha youth still have to contend with significant material and political obstacles.

Between 2011 and 2014, I spent fifteen months in Sikkim, following the lives of these young activists as many of them made their way back to the reserve. My fieldwork in 2013-2014 was conducted in the heightened political climate of the 2014 Sikkim assembly elections. Many of the Dzongu activists joined Sikkim Krantikari Morcha (SKM) and Dawa Lepcha, one of the activists was contesting for the position of Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) of Dzongu. My fieldwork included semi-structured interviews on various aspects of being young in Dzongu, ranging from struggles with unemployment, self-employment initiatives, involvement in village and state-level politics and knowledge of Lepcha culture and tradition. I conducted 13 interviews with panchayat members, 54 interviews with young people, 25 of whom had either supported or been involved in anti-dam protests. Most of the young people I cite in this article were educated outside the reserve and identified themselves as ‘educated unemployed youth’. Building on scholarship on infrastructure and the built environment with a focus on the everyday production and contestation of the state, I draw attention to the spatial politics of marginalized groups like indigenous youth. This article explores how indigenous youth navigate the treacherous terrain of unemployment and state apathy to craft new political subjectivities to highlight the intimate linkages between indigeneity and young people’s encounter with materials, spatial ideas, and state practices.

6.2 Built-Environment, Rural Spaces, and Development Schemes

Substantial work within geography has paid close attention to the built environment and infrastructure as an important template to examine a host of disciplinary strategies and state

practices (see Kooy and Bakker 2008; Ekers and Loftus 2008; Heynen et al 2006; Gandy 2003; Smith, 2001). Foucault's panopticon is one of the most powerful illustrations of how truth and power come to be embodied in architectural artefacts. Gandy extends this Foucauldian lens, in tracing the flow of water, drawing our attention to the critical role of urban infrastructure like sewers and pipes, in the rationalization of modern cities and the production of modern subjecthood through discourses of sanitation and hygiene (Gandy 2003). While much of this scholarship has been located within the Global North, there is a growing body of work that interrogates how infrastructure is an important part of urban politics and everyday life in the Global South (Ranganathan 2014; McFarlane and Rutherford 2011; Anand 2011; Rademacher 2009; McFarlane 2008; Gandy 2008). Given rapid urbanization in the Global South, this recent work provides an important lens in understanding the role infrastructure has played historically in producing the 'modernist ideal' of city spaces (Graham and Marvin 2001 in McFarlane 2008) and contemporary process of fragmentary capitalist urbanization (Gandy 2003)

However, its significant contribution notwithstanding, this scholarship still exhibits a "methodological cityism" that makes the city and urban spaces a "privileged analytical lens for studying contemporary processes of urban social transformation that are not necessarily limited to the city" (Wachsmuth 2012:518; Angelo and Wachsmuth 2015). Discursively, the city and the countryside produce each other through an oppositional moral binary (Cronon 1996) and materially, cities are dependent on the countryside for raw material and cheap labour while providing it economic sustenance (Wallerstien 2011). While many scholars of urban space and politics draw on Lefebvre, his theorization did extend beyond the city's borders to account for the "urbanization of the countryside" (1973:479) and how the survival of capitalism was increasingly dependent on the expansion of an "urban fabric" which "grows, extends its borders,

corrodes the residue of agrarian life” replacing it with “large-scale urban projects, new towns . . . roads and highways” (Lefebvre 2003a: 3, 79). This analysis is not to be mistaken for a naïve romanticization of the countryside especially when these developments are welcomed, even desired by rural populations. Instead this analysis draws attention to the processes that expand capitalist social relations and the territorial power of the state, producing abstract space, i.e. “space that is fetishized, that reduces possibilities and cloaks conflicts and differences in illusory coherence and transparency” (Lefebvre 1991:393) which though “not homogeneous; [it simply] has homogeneity as its goal” (Lefebvre 1976; 1991:304).

Given this expansion of the “urban fabric”, examining infrastructure and the built environment in rural spaces is an important theoretical and methodological intervention into the relationship between infrastructure, spatial politics, and modernity in the Global South. In the Indian context, Gandhi’s vision of *gram swaraj* (village republics), which saw village communities as the moral and economic foundation of a newly independent India, soon gave way to a Nehruvian vision of technocratic development and modernity which necessitated a shift from rural to urban. Infrastructure, both spectacular and mundane, was a central feature of this modernity in the post-independence Nehruvian state (McFarlane 2008; Prakash 2006). As McFarlane (2008:31) notes an “anti-rural discourse was closely related to the Nehruvian view of the city as an important site for the expression and negotiation of modernity”. However a closer examination of official rural development programs reveals how the same logic and parameters of modernity that are at work in urban spaces, are being geographically produced and imagined through technological interventions and infrastructure in rural India.

A recent illustration of this can be found in rural development schemes such as the *Adarsh Gram* or model village (more recently, “smart villages”) which envision ideal rural

spaces as those that “retain their unique cultural and ecological heritage” while being “connected to the internet...[along with] access to clean water, sanitation and low-carbon energy” (Government of India 2014). Chakraborty and Das (2014) commenting on the lack of attention to questions of rural infrastructure and sustainability, speak directly to Lefebvre’s analysis, in this observation: “India’s rural landscape is now intersected with numerous built forms, such as road networks, water management systems, and land development” that have implemented “straight-jacketed norms for scheme implementation ignoring physical heterogeneity” (33). Rural poverty alleviation schemes like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA or simply NREGA³⁰) geared towards employing people to work on infrastructure projects like roads, water infrastructure, housing etc. are rapidly altering the built environment and traditional architectural forms in rural India.

In the context of rural spaces in the Global South, scholars have noted how development projects and schemes are mediated by existing dense networks of political patronage and bureaucracy (Ferguson 1990; Gupta 1995; Corbridge 2005). While rural development interventions work to expand the “urban fabric”, they simultaneously extend bureaucratic state power into the everyday lives of people. Scholars, who study ‘everyday’, unexceptional encounters with the state, note how tactics of patronage and victimization are ubiquitous features of the mundane experience of the state in rural India (Gupta 1995; Corbridge 2005). These projects also enroll rural citizens in projects of neoliberal governmentality that produces self-disciplining subjects fuelled by their “will to improve” (Li 2007). In the rural Indian context, this self-disciplining is evident in official discourses around sanitation and hygiene infrastructure

³⁰ The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) now called the Mahatma Gandhi NREGA (MGNREGA) guarantees 100 days of employment for one able bodied person per household. Employment is generally in the form of hard manual labor on various infrastructural development schemes.

especially with regards to open defecation practices or efforts to make villages “alcohol-free”, often led by women groups in the village. The plethora of rural infrastructure projects and schemes, then work to produce “urban microcosms” that are simultaneously spaces of discipline and civilization (Richards 1985).

Ferguson (1990) noted how ‘development’ is often presented as something that only happens through government action and the lack of development is understood as the result of governmental neglect. However he argues that this understanding fails to capture the political character of the state and its class basis, the uses of official positions, and state power by bureaucratic elite and other individuals, cliques and factions, and the advantages to them of bureaucratic “inefficiency” and corruption. Writing in the context of water-supply projects in Rajasthan, Birkenholtz (2013:15) notes how the complex network of “reservoirs, treatment facilities, distribution centers and supply pipelines” that were meant to ameliorate water scarcity ended up exacerbating those very same conditions, “necessitating yet more development programs”. Even though these plans and projects often fail to achieve desired development objectives, they end up promoting urban forms of built environment as the ideal while producing modes of governance within the village that perpetuates political cronyism and neoliberal subjecthood (Ferguson 1990; Li 2007).

Decisions related to the rural built environment then are mediated through a tight grid of control, favours, and reciprocation (Gupta 1995). In the Indian context, the state exerts its control at the grassroots level through local bureaucrats, mostly *panchayat* (village governance) members and MLAs (Member of Legislative Assembly) who in turn facilitate the expansion of abstract space. These bureaucrats and village officials, determine where roads get built, who will be the beneficiary of a tube well, or a rural housing scheme. Ferguson (1990) also drew attention

to how, political parties almost never appear in the discourse of development institutions and the role of formal institutions such as village development councils like *panchayats*, in the Indian context, which often serve as channels for the ruling party. Corbridge (2005) makes a similar observation and points out that the focus on civil society and participatory development in the rural context has been at the detriment of analysing the role democratic and official party politics can play. Representative democracy in India is heavily shaped by caste, ethnic, and regional allegiances, while this presents several constraints for marginalized groups contending against upper-caste and dominant religious forces, party politics can also be enabling for those very reasons.

6.3 Spatial Politics of Marginalized Groups

Caste politics brings together important concerns around infrastructure, politics, and spaces of exclusion in rural India. While Gandhi imagined village-industries and village life as the key to India's development, Dalit (ex-untouchables) leader, Ambedkar critiqued the oppressive nature of villages wherein caste hierarchies were embedded not just in social relations but also in the spatial arrangement of the village. In their work in Rajasthan, India, O'Reilly and Dhanju (2013) note how caste/class power and caste distinctions are maintained through the infrastructure and institutions of the drinking water system. Rao (2006 in Loynd 2009) notes how "the repeated experience of exclusion from public spaces was an important element of Dalit narratives" and something that had significant material ramifications. Most villages in India have important public infrastructure, like schools, hospitals, places of worship, wells, etc. towards the centre of the village where upper-caste families reside while lower caste groups are restricted to the village outskirts. Space and its organization are meant for the convenience of dominant groups.

But these practices of exclusion have also fueled struggles to reclaim public spaces and attempts by political actors to align spatial arrangements with political ideologies, for instance through the construction of museums, statues, and the renaming of roads, institutions and buildings (Loynd 2009). The capacity of marginal groups to refashion spaces of social control into sites of resistance was well recognized by the Lefebvre. For Lefebvre (1993), when marginalized groups appropriate space for their own aims, they disrupt the homogenizing aims of abstract public space. An attention to the built environment then can also be extended to understand how marginalized groups experience and contest social exclusion and oppression through the specific arrangement and planning of space.

I contribute to this discussion on the spatial politics of marginalized groups by focusing on indigenous youth who struggle against racialized and exclusionary state practices as well as a layering of tropes of ‘the lazy native’ and ‘apathetic youth’ (Gergan 2014). Recent geographical literature on infrastructure and the built environment has not paid much attention to young people even though young people’s everyday experiences of public and private spaces have been a template to understand larger questions of exploitation and marginalization (Bunge and Bordessa 1975; Valentine 1996; Skelton 2000; Aikten 2001; Katz 2004; Skelton and Valentine 2005; Dyson 2008). Holloway and Valentine (2000a) have argued that an attention to the spatialities of young people’s lives can highlight unequal power relations embedded in the material environment. These questions become more pertinent in the light of neo-liberal economic restructuring and how it has radically transformed people’s experiences of youth and early adulthood across the world (Jeffery and McDowell 2004).

In rural Indian contexts, the localized experience of neo-liberal restructuring, among other things has led to a surge in rural out-migration to nearby urban centers. Among marginalized

ethnic groups and indigenous communities, this trend has strained inter-generational relations leading to fears of losing cultural practices and traditions. Writing in the context of Mexico and India, Robson and Nayak (2010:280-281) note that, “demographic, cultural and environmental change through out-migration can alter the configuration of institutions, capital and values that characterize traditional resource-dependent communities.” As rural youth out-migrate in search of education and employment opportunities, on one hand they struggle to find gainful employment in urban centers (Jeffery 2010) while on the other hand they are slowly severed from cultural and political obligations and rights at home (Robson and Nayak 2010). In this article, eco-tourism has emerged as an important avenue for Lepcha youth to gain economic stability and the respect of their community members.

Lepcha youth counter understandings of modernity inherent in government sponsored concrete housing and infrastructure, by presenting their brand of eco-tourism as more sustainable alternative, an understanding that draws on global discourses of indigeneity which in itself are a product of modernity (Karlsson 2003; Castree 2004). Indigeneity, in this context, is based on claims of ancient ties to the land and spiritual and material connections to the surrounding environment. While equating indigeneity with environmentalism is rife with problematic essentialisms, a discussion that is beyond the scope of this article, these discourses draw attention to site-specific concerns of marginalized groups. As Mandelman (2014: 186) argues in the context of Hawaiian articulations of indigeneity, “any essentialism at work in Native Hawaiian claims to history, landscape, and material culture cannot be separated from efforts to decolonize the indigenous experience”. As Valdivia (2005:300) notes, in the Ecuadorian Amazon reproducing images of indigenous groups as environmental protectors rather than developmentalists, has been a powerful strategy for gaining the support of environmental and

cultural rights advocates, highlighting how, “the struggles of mixing and choosing from different world- views and ways of knowing the world are intrinsic to formulations of indigeneity.”

It is also important to note that the aestheticization and commodification of ethnic heritage of subordinated indigenous groups will have different consequences depending on who deploys it. Indigenous cultural production in Latin America, an important context for theorization on indigeneity, while challenging the state, exists “within a transformist hegemony, [where] resistance takes place under conditions of inequality that limit the power of the subordinated subjects to redefine their status and their place in and contributions to the imagine national community” (Alonso 1994:398). In the Lepcha context, anti-dam activists and their opponents in the reserve (who are also indigenous) exist within a larger nationalist discourse of developing frontier regions like Sikkim and Dzongu. Both anti-dam activists and their opponents, maneuverer to access more political rights by drawing on and reproducing different narratives of modernity, the former narrative, associated with sustainability and environmentalism and the latter associated with “urban forms” of housing and infrastructure.

The problematique of eco-tourism promoted in indigenous spaces, then exemplifies how indigeneity is produced through material practices and the built environment and is mediated through existing political networks and allegiances. Alonso (1994:399) notes that research on social movements and resistance that focuses on oppositional culture without considering the political and economic power available to subordinated subjects and the possibilities for institutionalizing and inscribing popular alternatives, risks becoming a form of wishful thinking. Harvey also noted how social movements though “relatively empowered to organize in place but [are] disempowered when it comes to organizing over space” (1989:303). Much of the power to organize space in rural contexts like Dzongu is derived from capturing political power through

representative politics. It was this knowledge that led many anti-dam activists to join the newly formed opposition party, Sikkim Krantikari Morcha (SKM) and field Dawa Lepcha, as an MLA candidate for the state elections. Indigeneity then is in conversation with multiple forms of power and it is important to pay attention to different indigenous interlocutors and the articulation between indigenous communities, nation-states, and the international order (Povinelli 2002; Rappaport 2005). In places like Dzongu, contestations over spectacular infrastructure like dams are spilling over into concerns over mundane infrastructure, drawing attention to how both are the product of intense negotiations between and within state and indigenous groups.

6.4 Background: Civil society and Tourism in Sikkim

As Sikkim steps into its 40th year of being a part of the Indian union, lingering bitterness at the Indian state for annexing the independent Buddhist monarchy in 1975, is slowly giving way under the weight of more pressing concerns. In May 2014, Pawan Chamling of the Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) party was re-elected as Chief Minister for his fifth consecutive term, making him one of the longest serving Chief Ministers in India. Chamling introduced hydropower development to Sikkim, promising to boost the economic fortunes of the state through infrastructural development, private investment and generation of employment opportunities (Lama 2001). The last of these, steady employment, was something many young people were eagerly looking forward to. However recent years have seen growing opposition to these projects in the face of hydropower corruption scandals, growing ecological precarity, and little to no improvement in employment generation.

The 2014 elections saw the emergence of a new political party, a rarity in the Sikkimese context, the Sikkim Krantikari Morcha (Sikkim Revolutionary Front) under the leadership of P.S Golay, an ex-SDF party member. During the 2014 political rallies, Chamling reportedly urged

local officials to withhold benefits from those who supported the opposition (Fieldnotes 2014). In the months leading to the 2014 elections, corruption related to hydropower development, youth unemployment and Chamling's tactics of patronage and victimization (Clement 2014) were central themes raised by the opposition. Emboldened by the presence of an opposition force, a nascent Sikkimese civil society became more vocal in its critique of the ruling party and its contradictory practices of promoting sustainable, organic agricultural practices, and eco-tourism on one hand and large scale hydropower projects on the other.

During interviews within Dzongu, ecotourism was brought up repeatedly by educated youth regardless of their political affiliation as well as bureaucrats and *panchayat* members, as a future avenue of employment within the reserve. Their hopes are not misplaced since Sikkim's tertiary sector, which includes a range of infrastructure related to the tourism industry, is the single largest contributor to its economy (Rizal and Asokan 2013). Nationally, the state has won several accolades from the central government for its tourism projects. In 2014, the *Lonely Planet Guide*, declared Sikkim as the number one region for travel, noting that the state had "set new benchmarks for responsible travel in the county" with "checkbox tourism having made way for...sustainable community-based tourism" (Lonely Planet 2013). Tourism in Sikkim therefore is an important sphere for the control and production of space, closely regulated by the state.

While tourism, broadly defined, is an important sector of economic growth, it has always held a special ideological position in Sikkim (Cooke 1980 in Arora 2009). Sikkim has been promoted as a former Buddhist kingdom but the predominance of Buddhist iconography and architecture belies the fact that the majority of the population (67%) are Nepalese Hindus, a factor of historical and colonial processes of migration. Arora (2009:55) notes that the visual representation of Sikkim in tourist brochures and postcards, present it as a Buddhist landscape

since a “Nepali Sikkim is not commercially attractive to the domestic and international tourist”³¹. Chief Minister, Chamling is known to have casually remarked to communities trying to promote tourism, that adding Buddhist prayer flags to nearby lakes would attract more tourists (Fieldnotes 2014). Recent years have witnessed a growing interest in village based tourism in Sikkim and as *Lonely Planet* notes, “rural home stays are a big draw for foreign tourists as well as the nature-loving Indian tourist” (Lonely Planet 2013). Alongside these developments, we find ethnic groups like the Limbus and Gurungs, also promoting ‘culturally conscious’ eco-tourism in Sikkim. In the broader regional context, we also find many groups engaged in struggles for the recognition of their tribal identity, which in addition to demands for affirmative action also calls on the state to construct museums, statues, and religious sites that honour their unique cultural practices (Shneiderman and Turin 2006; Chettri 2015).

Eco-tourism in Dzongu then is in conversation with local politics of ethnic revivalism, regional development policies, and a global discourse of indigeneity. Dzongu is being promoted as an indigenous reserve where inhabitants live in harmony with nature practicing a syncretic blend of Buddhism and their shamanic traditions. For the purposes of tourism, indigeneity trumps Buddhism or better still in Dzongu, it provides a mix of both worlds. For the anti-dam activists, promoting eco-tourism is a way to challenge the state’s version of sustainable development (which also involves eco-tourism) while providing employment for the growing ranks of educated unemployed youth in Dzongu. The author is aware of critiques of ecotourism in indigenous reserves and protected areas especially those encouraging white western tourists and its close parallels with colonial, orientalist desire to see natives in their untouched habitats

³¹ Though recently there have been attempts to promote Hindu pilgrimage sites within Sikkim, most foreign tourists are drawn to Sikkim’s Buddhist landscape and architecture.

(Gilbert 2007). While these tendencies are surely at work in the Dzongu context, a discussion of these concerns is beyond the scope of this article and the focus instead is on how infrastructure and built-environment related to ecotourism provides an important lens into how indigenous youth navigate their political marginalization and exclusion.

6.5 The Benevolent State and Entitled Young People

Unemployed indigenous youth find themselves struggling against societal tropes of being ‘apathetic youth’ and racialized colonial tropes of the ‘lazy native’ (Gergan 2014). This section deals with official state narratives of unemployed young people in Sikkim and Dzongu and how these are challenged by Dzongu youth. During fieldwork I attended a workshop on Youth, Livelihood and Sustainable Issues, organized by Sikkim’s Human Development Report (HDR) cell, which sought input from young people across Sikkim for the forthcoming state HDR. Many young people present, raised concerns around the lack of opportunities within Sikkim. The response of the government official moderating the meeting, turned into a patronizing speech about a benevolent Sikkimese state and the wayward unemployed youth:

Government official: Is it the government’s responsibility to give jobs to all the people? Tell me? Now what has happened in Sikkim is that it is a *‘chopey ko state, maya gareko state’* [a state that protects and spoils its people]. The government does so much for those who are unemployed, we give trainings, and we give loans. When I was the BDO [Block District Officer], I’ve seen this...this person who got a loan of 1, 50,000 rupees for a poultry farm. I asked him, “Will you actually open a poultry farm”? And he said, “No, I just want to buy a motorbike.”

This caricature of an unemployed youth was a recurring trope in many interviews I conducted with government officials both in Gangtok and Dzongu. The government official’s reference to Sikkim being a state that “protects” and “spoils” its people, draws on the fact that the state government is the single largest employer in the formal sector. Much of this has been enabled by special subsidy packages that Sikkim, being one of ten special category states,

receives from the Central government (Lama 2001). In addition to this, Sikkimese subjects also enjoy special provisions under article 371F of the constitution, which among other things includes complete exemption from income tax. At the regional level, this has granted Sikkim the reputation of being a state that is ‘spoiled’ by the Indian government and which in turn ‘spoils’ its people. The Sikkim Democratic Front with Chamling at its head, while being embroiled in several corruption scandals has consistently funnelled central assistance into the provision of public welfare schemes and projects targeted mostly at the rural poor. While these programs have done much to alleviate poverty within the state, even state officials agree that these benefits have come at a price. The author of the 2001 Human Development Report of Sikkim, Mahendra Lama noted that “past subsidies were used as government handouts and had *spoilt* the people by killing local initiative and traditional self-help” and that the focus should now be on, “loans for entrepreneurship, skills-building, and microcredit for farmers” (Dixit 2003, emphasis mine). This quote from Mahendra Lama, reiterates the sentiment of the government official quoted at the beginning of this section, who lamented how all the training and loans provided to unemployed youth were squandered away by a generation too accustomed to state assistance. Since the writing of Sikkim’s HDR in 2001, not much has changed other than the inability of the public sector to absorb the growing ranks of educated young people. In interviews with panchayat members in Dzongu, a similar theme emerged when I spoke of what opportunities were available to young people who were returning to the reserve:

Panchayat member: The government has several schemes like NREGA or handicrafts especially for educated unemployed youth but till now I feel young people have not really actively been looking for work. There are so many young kids who have returned to the village and are just sitting at home. What I’ve seen is that those who have done their graduation or completed their school, they feel like they’ve become big people. It’s actually those who have only studied up till class 5th or 8th, who participate in these trainings and benefit. So it’s not like the

government hasn't done anything, there are several schemes. If these young people were to look around carefully there are all these opportunities.

In rural spaces like Dzongu, the government sponsors trainings and workshops for unemployed youth in a range of fields like handicrafts, poultry farming, horticulture, animal husbandry etc. Along with the lazy unemployed youth, we find another trope of the arrogant educated unemployed youth, who think they are above manual labor. This panchayat member was not wrong in her observation, most young people who returned to the reserve, were not very involved in these programs. When I inquired why this was the case, the young people I spoke with challenged this understanding. Thendup, one of the anti-dam activists who had recently switched camps and had joined the ruling party in hopes of getting a secure job, expressed his frustration at panchayat members who spoke of NREGA and handicrafts as viable alternatives for educated unemployed youth:

Thendup: Just imagine someone who has put so much effort studied all their lives and then has to learn handicraft. They won't like that. It's like if someone is used to playing games on the computer will they like to play marbles? The training programs need to be according to the level. Those who are not educated should be involved in these things like NREGA or handicraft and for us there should be something more professional. NREGA is not something we asked for it is just something that has been implemented by government of India.

The desire to be employed according to your "level" and the failure to achieve this is reflective of the larger global youth employment crisis, wherein many educated youth find themselves struggling with both unemployment *and* underemployment. In a 2011 report the International Labor Organization warned of a "scarred" generation of young people who had the "bad luck of...entering the labour market in the years of the Great Recession" and how in the long run this would result in a "distrust of the political and economic system." (ILO 2011:6). In Dzongu, this distrust was apparent on both ends, with high numbers of unemployed youth joining the opposition party and on the other end, panchayat members, who viewed young people

as entitled and arrogant. Though many like Thendup, felt it was a safer bet to stick with the ruling party, many anti-dam activists said their reasons for returning to the reserve were to challenge the ruling party's control over grassroots politics, wean themselves away from government subsidies, and make way for educated youth. Conversations with the educated unemployed reserve youth revealed an intense desire to control the projects and programs that were presently being executed by village leaders backed by the powerful ruling party. Mayalmit, one of the prominent women anti-dam activists, who had decided not to return to Dzongu after the protests, expressed a longing to do something for the village but felt heartened by the efforts of those who were running successful homestays despite the lack of government support:

Mayalmit: The youngsters, they are really determined to do something for the village, *Anum* [brother] Tenzing is doing good work and *Anum* Gyatso, even though he is from the law background instead of practicing in the chamber, it has become like a compulsion for him to do something for the village. At the end they can tell the government with full confidence that we are not even dependent on you. Instead they are showing the government the alternative of development. Young people are trying to explain what is development.

As young people returned to the reserve after the anti-dam protests, they discovered that despite being educated and politically articulate, they were marginalized because they did not support the ruling party. Instead they found themselves completely dependent on the government in most spheres of life, having to ingratiate themselves to panchayat leaders and local politicians who supported hydropower projects. This exclusion from the political life of the reserve was especially apparent with regards to development schemes related to village or eco-tourism. Dzongu presents a unique set of challenges since the land cannot be sold to outsiders (the exception being the state and hydropower developers) therefore one can't really earn a profit from land unless you're cultivating it. Activists like Tenzing and Gyatso refused to sell their lands to dam developers which were in prime location and started developing those plots for both

agriculture and eco-tourism. Eco-tourism emerged as an important option for the young activists due to a combination of reasons ranging from the lack of skills for farming and underdeveloped market connectivity. As Lepcha youth attempt to reinsert themselves into the dense political networks that characterize these rural spaces, decisions related to infrastructure and built environment, are slowly emerging as extremely contested arenas.

6.6 The Aesthetics of Lepcha Indigeneity

The political articulation of indigeneity has been predominantly analyzed through the lens of place-based movements contending with looming threats to land and other natural resources however, much less attention is given to the multiplicity of indigenous actors vying to define indigeneity and its effects on representations of indigenous culture and the material landscape. In Dzongu, anti-dam activists and government officials had very different notions of indigeneity which informed their claims over material culture and debates over what counted as authentically Lepcha. Anti-dam activists had engaged with national and international environmentalist and their time outside the reserve had exposed them to debates on sustainability in school and college. During an interview with one of the activists, who ran a very successful eco-tourism homestay, I was asked if I was familiar with the work of Halfdan Siiger. Siiger, a Danish anthropologist had visited Dzongu almost half a century ago and was extremely taken by Lepcha houses in the reserve. It is worthwhile quoting him at length here:

The Lepcha timber house, *li*, cannot but attract the attention of the traveler...far from dominating or contrasting with their natural surroundings, the massive wooden structures and extended thatched roofs of the Lepcha houses seem almost to be growing out of the ground like any other feature in the landscape....The ordinary Lepcha house is a sturdy one-storey wooden building on piles. The floor is raised about three to six feet above the ground, and in the open space between the ground and the floor the domestic animals shelter against bad weather and wild animals. When one of the occasional landslides thunders through a village...it all merely rolls away under the houses without destroying them. The

piles rest on big, flat stones...and as neither nails nor screws are used, the house is, so to speak, elastic; the tremors of an earthquake may cause it to sway heavily from side to side, but that is all. [Siiger 1967:63]

Siiger's romantic account of the traditional Lepcha house, that "seem to be growing out of the ground" has now become a part of the Dzongu activist's jargon. Though much has changed since Siiger's visit to Dzongu, for instance, today one would be hard-pressed to find a house with the traditional 'no-nails' style of architecture [See **Fig 9**]. But most houses still adhere to the basic architectural style, like the raised floor of the house with an open space below for storage or livestock.

Fig 9: The traditional Lepcha house with its "no-nails" style of architecture



The raised foundation of the house in a traditional Lepcha house is supported by these beams. Inside the house a similar architectural style can be found that uses a lock-in system rather than nails. This style of architecture is a rarity today. (Source: seanhellman.blogspot.in)

One of the activists, who also runs a homestay, drew my attention to Siiger's observation that Lepcha architecture had adapted to the local environment, making special accommodations

for landslides and earthquakes. This was especially significant, in light of the fact that Sikkim was extremely earthquake prone. September 11th, 2011 Sikkim witnessed an earthquake of 6.9 magnitude which had its epicentre located very close to Dzongu. Speaking of the tragic aftermath of the earthquake, activists spoke of how traditional houses were safer than concrete and had not been damaged as much. With traditional houses people could easily reuse the different materials while rebuilding their homes but this was impossible with concrete structures where not much could be salvaged and reused.

In rural India, concrete along with being a marker of modernity also represents prosperity. In the official census, when determining families that fall Below the Poverty Line (BPL), an important indicator is whether the house is *kaccha* meaning temporary a more direct translation would be raw or unripe, or *pakka*, meaning solid and permanent. The Indian government has many central housing schemes for BPL families, such as the Indira Awas Yojna (Indira Housing Scheme), which aims to ameliorate rural poverty through the provision of permanent housing which generally means construction using stone, brick, cement, and concrete. Many a times these housing schemes are integrated with post-disaster recovery schemes, as was the case in Sikkim. In Sikkim, after the 2011 earthquake, the post-disaster housing scheme, the Reconstruction of Earthquake Damaged Rural Houses (REDRH) came with set guidelines for construction using a government hired contractor. However as Jigmey, quoted at the start of this article, points out these houses are more expensive than using traditional construction materials. Jigmey was a contractor himself but was interested in starting his own eco-tourism homestay:

Jigmey: Ok, we have REDRH government houses that are supposed to have a stability of 100 years, ok? We can make that using natural ingredients and not using concrete. The traditional house it's cheaper than this nine-post concrete house and I guess it's more earthquake resistant also. Because the typical Lepcha house is, I guess it's also earthquake proof. We have a lock in system we don't

use nails. If we implement only those kind of house. So for Dzongu we are the ones to decide, what kind of houses we make.

Jigmey, then went on to explain what his own homestay would look like and how he would only use local ‘organic’ materials from within Dzongu. Not only was this construction style more sustainable he pointed out but there was also the matter of what is aesthetically appealing for the tourists, especially Western tourists. In my own experience, many Western tourists, mostly white Europeans, that would come to stay in the homestays of the anti-dam activists, would have long conversations, encouraging them, offering advice, and feedback on how to promote eco-tourism. There was a general agreement that government hired contractors lacked the aesthetic and design sensibility that would appeal to the “eco-tourist”. This became especially evident in the heated debate over the Lingdem hot springs in Upper Dzongu. These hot springs, owe their existence to the Himagiri dam developers who accidentally discovered it while drilling in the area during the exploratory phase for the project in 2009 (Sikkim Times 2009). Locals who had sold their land for the project, requested the developers to stop drilling the area and instead allow them to develop it for tourism. The Lingdem hot springs soon became a huge draw for both locals and tourists and only a small fee had to be paid to the land owner. A few years later however the local panchayat and tourism department decided to construct a more permanent structure and charge people a higher fee for accessing the hot-springs. Tsering, one of the anti-dam activists running a homestay, spoke specifically about the design failure of the new construction and how it would not be profitable in the long run:

Tsering: We don’t want another big museum, another big statue no? Like keeping it simple the way it is. Earlier the hot spring was such a nice place, such a nice ambience, like stone, protected kind of but now they have made a concrete house. And when you look at it it’s not feasible also. You have steam out there so everything gets damp and the wood gets destroyed. We thought earlier was a simpler one, less expensive like open air dipping. It’s a natural nice way of doing it. I guess it’s also long term sustainable tourism. And we don’t have to put any

effort but tourists are going to pay more than what they are paying for that. There will be a rush for that.

Fig 10: Lingdem Hotspring in Upper Dzongu



The image on the left is of the hot spring before the construction and the one on the right, is the area post-construction (Source: Right Image: <http://hotsoaksofthehimalaya.blogspot.com/> and Left Image: Sikkim Online Updates, Facebook page)

Others like Gyatso, who runs one of the most well-known homestays in Dzongu, *Mayal Lyang* (featured in **Fig. 8**) mentioned how much “foreign” tourists enjoyed the natural feel of the old hot spring but that after the construction he doesn’t take tourists there anymore. He expressed his frustration about the hot springs, connecting it to broader issues related to hydropower development and climate change.

Gyatso: We talk about “tourist, tourist” but to get them also you need to have some proper infrastructure to show. Like proper as in not man-made kind of things, *Aboh!* [Gosh] we itself are so rich in culture and stories and infrastructure it’s just that you need to take proper care of it and we are doing it. Like that hotspring, like utilizing it without destroying the ecology...because there’s already two projects [dams] and later on it’s going to make a huge difference. Like it never used to be so hot like this time this year, like after the Dikchu dam the ecology has changed drastically you know?

Many young people framed differences in opinion with panchayat and government officials as their inability to relate with the older generation. Another example, that exemplifies, these highly politicized intergenerational tensions, was the case of the Hye-Gyathang monastery

in Lower Dzongu that had been damaged during the 2011 earthquake. Under the government's earthquake relief scheme, funds were also released for the construction of a new monastery. The village panchayat along with the support of several villagers agreed to tear down the old monastery and construct a brand new one in its place. However anti-dam activists including one of the young panchayat members got together and challenged the panchayat, collaborating with an architecture and design studio in Gangtok, to begin the restoration and conservation of the monastery. 31 year old Kalzang, who contested as an independent candidate for panchayat elections and later joined the opposition party, sympathized with the activists which alienated him from the other panchayats

Kalzang: The first issue that came to us was, destroying the monastery. The older generation wanted a new thing to come up so they wanted to destroy the old one. But Tenzing said, like it's kind of a memory, you know you will regret it later.

Small monasteries in villages may not attract much tourist attention but are an important space for the social and cultural life of the village. I had been there on several occasions with Tenzing [mentioned in the quote above], one of the anti-dam activists involved in its restoration. The monastery built eighty years ago by the village people, isn't remarkable in any way. The outside structure and paintings in the interior seemed typical of most monasteries and was not very well maintained. Many other monasteries in Sikkim are bigger, better, and more beautiful by far. But the activists felt the monastery was an important heritage site because it was built almost a century ago by village members themselves. This monastery could be promoted as Dzongu's heritage and attract tourists. Activists were able to request the government to divert some of the earthquake relief funds for this purpose and even raised money from well-wishers. However since the construction of the new monastery had already been sanctioned, its construction was also underway in the same compound.

Fig 11: Concrete or Clay?



On the left the old monastery in the foreground and the new monastery, peeks from behind. Right, a close up of the new monastery with its construction almost complete (Source: Author's photograph, 2014)

The Echostream consultancy, a design studio based in Gangtok has been involved in the preservation from its early stages. Efforts to preserve the Hye-Gyathang monastery, connected designers like Sonam to the anti-dam activists in Dzongu and its context. As Sonam notes, poignantly,

Sonam: Professionally, it made me rethink and recontextualise design and our agenda for Sikkim vis-à-vis art, craft, culture, heritage, education, industries, tourism and village development plans. Personally, I found out that there is very little I know about Sikkim and its people. There is much more to Sikkim than Khangchendzonga, the beautiful landscape, weather and *momos* [dumplings]

During the run up to the April 2014 elections I realized that many civil society folks in urban parts of Sikkim, like Gangtok were deeply invested in Dzongu and had developed relationships with many of the anti-dam activists. Dawa, the anti-dam activist who along with Tenzing had spear-headed the hunger strike in 2007, was running for the MLA of Dzongu against Sonam Gyatso, the present MLA, who was also the Power Minister. While most people dismissed Sikkimese politicians as corrupt, Dawa who was declared as the “poorest candidate”

based on his personal assets, became a talking point for what that meant for the future of Dzongu and Sikkim, if someone like him could win the elections.

6.7 Electoral Imaginaries and a Landscape of Dissent

As the state elections (April 2014) drew closer in Sikkim, the tension was palpable in the air. In August 2013, when I had just started fieldwork, the orange, red, and green flag of the opposition party, SKM, was hoisted only by a handful of households in Sikkim. In Dzongu, it was only the anti-dam activists who dared hoist the SKM flag. However with each subsequent trip to the reserve I noticed SKM flags cropping up at quite a steady pace across the Sikkimese landscape. I would often travel to Dzongu from Gangtok, with Chetan, a well-known author and architect who was helping with the Hye-Gyathang monastery conservation. Chetan was an ardent SKM supporter and traveling with him was always an exercise in memorization, “I don’t remember these houses having an SKM flag”, he would say looking out from his jeep, “I think these are new. Oh those ones are definitely new. Look at them right in the middle of a sea of SDF flags.” With every subsequent trip to Dzongu, with or without Chetan, I would find myself looking out the window, counting the new flags. During this time most interviews and interaction with the activists would begin and end with, “when our party comes into power”. Young people like Kalzang below, expressed an intense desire to control the plans and projects within Dzongu, by winning the elections:

Kalzang: First we need to change the entire political scenario of Dzongu. Because power is the most important thing you know? If hopefully we come to power tomorrow, we will only implement good things and not like putting NHPC [National Hydro Power Corporation] forcefully. No, like getting self-employment, doing organic farming, we will concentrate more on that.

Fig 12: A Landscape of Dissent



Right: Posters for Dawa's campaign in Dzongu in the foreground and the SKM party in the foreground, with the slogan "Say No to Drugs. Yes to SKM". In Dzongu, many SKM posters would be torn overnight. Left: the flags of the ruling SDF and the opposition SKM (safron and green) appear to be locked in battle.

Capturing political power became one of the only ways for these young activists to implement their designs for the future of Dzongu. Both SDF and the SKM, were drawing large crowds to their campaign rallies within Dzongu and as a researcher, I had access to campaign meetings on both sides. During one such rally in the Hye-Gyathang GPU, both *panchayat* members and the present MLA, Sonam Gyatso, spoke openly and at length about how there would be repercussions for those who were coming out to support SKM. Sonam Gyatso, likened the youth supporting SKM, as "dangerous bulls trying to gore people", adding, that when he came back to power, such young people would be disciplined (Authors fieldnotes 2014).

However as Pempo's comments below show, these young people had already been disciplined.

Pempo: It's like you go for the training [for unemployed youth] but you get so discouraged. At the end of the training the say you have all these documents that you have to move from office to office to get a loan. Before that you have to go to the MLA and you have to get a NOC [No Objection Certificate] from the

panchayats. Then they will say this boy or girl is from the opposition party they will not get anything but they don't do it directly. They just keep delaying. They won't do your work on time and that's how you get discouraged. The department people say, "you don't support our government what can we do". Only in very rare case ones get the chance.

Even those young people, who made attempts to avail opportunities for unemployed youth like training programs and workshops, found that their political ideology was more important than their qualifications. Another youth, Tsering, expressed similar frustrations and commented on the futility of attending government organized trainings when you lack political power.

Tsering: These cooperative societies [for unemployed youth] have been opened by the government of Sikkim but the government is running under one political party. Whichever party runs the state it's their scheme. Once you get into a [cooperative] society you need to work according to the principle and ideology of that political party. But not everyone agrees with that. Not everyone likes that one party. We have many youth who don't like the ruling party because of that we get no *izaat* (respect) even though we work so hard.

Anyone who has had a brush with bureaucracy and red-tapism in India can attest to how draining the process can be. Corbridge (2005) writing of this very experience, notes that most ordinary, poor people never encounter the state, i.e., political representatives, in their daily lives. Instead they encounter the *babus* (colloquial term for government bureaucrats) and *chamchas* (sycophants) in government offices. These are the encounters where people "see the state" and engage with it through myriad practices such as bribes, using personal connections, etc. with varying degrees of success. Many young activists, who studied outside the reserve, had never had to enter a government office or ask for favors, the way poorer folks have to on a regular basis. In addition to this, most young activists were educated youth from relatively prosperous families within the reserve. It was their involvement in the anti-dam protests that had relegated them to the sidelines of village life. Despite not being as educated and qualified as them,

panchayat members and local politicians wielded all the power within the reserve. Both Pempo and Tsering, spoke of how while frustrating, this had been a humbling experience which helped them gain a better understanding of how governance and political patronage worked in Sikkim.

On the day of the state election result, everyone was glued to their phone, radios, and laptops. As the counting for the Dzongu constituency began, with every new update, tense murmurs slowly gave way to a disappointed silence. Sonam Gyatso defeated Dawa by a huge margin much to the disappointment of the anti-dam activists. For many of these young people, their open support for the opposition party and Dawa's defeat meant another five years of political exclusion within Dzongu. A few days after the election, I saw Dawa and asked him what his next steps would be. Without a moment's hesitation Dawa replied, "Panchayats. That's where we have to focus our energy not being Chief Minister or something but winning panchayat elections...that is the most important thing now." (Author fieldnotes 2014). While it is important to pay attention to social movements and their revolutionary potential, another important facet of grassroots politics, as Ferguson (1990) and Corbridge (2005) both argue, are local development councils. Government intervention in the form of infrastructural projects or other public services meant to improve rural life will always be mediated through these highly politicized channels. While indigenous social movements can be an important site of analysis for the production and deployment of indigeneity, our engagement with these groups should not end with the movement. Instead what is required is a sustained and in-depth engagement with representative politics and its material impacts in these spaces.

6.8 Conclusion

In Dzongu an 'authentic' indigenous landscape is being shaped by young activist's engagements with transnational solidarity networks, civil society groups and local designers and

architects, demonstrating the centrality of the material and built environment in the production of indigeneity. However as the divide between the older political leaders and these young activists sharpen, these inter-generational and political tensions manifest most explicitly in contesting visions of what infrastructure counts as authentic and indigenous. Material aesthetics and architectural design are closely tied to the representation of places and become especially important when considering indigenous involvement in tourism. Indigeneity is both a discursive and a material, place-based process that promotes a certain vision and representation of indigenous lives and livelihoods. Scholars also understand indigeneity as “the cultural and political work of articulation” (Murray Li 2000) which is ‘customized’ by the interlocutors (Greene 2009). This articulation and customization also has real material effects involving negotiations over the production and control of space and its built environment and infrastructure. Eco-tourism is an industry that valorizes the indigenous subject while codifying many customs and practices that are central to the tourist’s authentic experience. While this notion of fixity and an unchanging indigenous culture are highly problematic, in the Dzongu context alternatives like eco-tourism can offer solutions, however temporary they may be to a very rigid state structure that has left very few options for dissenting parties.

The spatial politics of marginalized groups offer important insights into how power and meaning is negotiated through the built environment and infrastructure. A discussion of Escobar’s (2008) ‘figured worlds’ can further highlight the process of this negotiation. ‘Figured worlds’ are defined as “locally situated, culturally constructed, and socially organized worlds that make visible people’s purposeful and reflective agency, that is their capacity to remake the world they live in” (Escobar 2008:219). These are the spaces wherein activists are “literally, figuring worlds through a variety of practices, articulations, and cultural artifacts” (219). In Dzongu, this

‘figuring’ is enacted by activists, through both discursive and material practices which involve an explicit engagement with aesthetics, infrastructure, and democratic politics. Aitken (2013) writing in the context of eco-tourism in Fanjingshan National Nature Reserve (FNNR) in China, also draws on this notion of ‘figured worlds’ to trace the connections between eco-tourism, local activism, and community networks. While ecotourism in Aitken’s (2013) context was being promoted by the state where locals have little control over the projects, he notes how marginalized groups are simultaneously privileged and disadvantaged by these changes and in a context of limited opportunities ‘figuring’ implies having to juggle multiple priorities and strategies. This articulation then helps us locate indigenous groups like Lepcha youth and their material and political strategies as they maneuver and bargain for agency and autonomy within these restrictive conditions.

At the grassroots level, party politics can bring about drastic social change especially when they are led by marginalized groups. Despite their tenuous relationships at home, the activism of Lepcha youth has rendered the tribe more visible to the state and the global indigenous community. Dzongu is slowly becoming a favoured tourist destination and, with the emergence of a SKM, an important political constituency. This emergent indigenous identity which valorises the indigenous subject while positing the state as an antagonistic force is familiar, however, in Sikkim where the state government has been lauded for its ‘pro-tribal’ policies (Shneiderman and Turin, 2006; Turin, 2014), this discourse of indigeneity marks a shift from the more prevalent institutional discourse, which appeals to the state for recognition and benefits. This shift is a product of the Dzongu protests and, more specifically, young indigenous people’s experience of exclusionary state practices and their engagements with transnational solidarity networks. Lepcha activists imagine a future in which educated youth will have a say in

development. Young people's activism is bringing the territorial margins into the political and geographic imaginary of the state. These young, articulate, politically and environmentally conscious Lepcha activists indicate the shifting terrain of indigeneity.

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CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION: PRECARITY AND POSSIBILITY AT THE MARGINS

For many in the West, the Himalayas conjure up images of furry yaks, fluttering Buddhist prayer flags, and majestic snow-capped mountains. These images evoke a sense of tranquillity and permanence but the reality as most astute observers find out quickly, is one of cultural, political, and ecological upheaval. Hydropower projects, growing ethnic unrest, and natural hazards, are recent iterations of problems that are centuries old, rooted in colonial and post-colonial state practices. The contested history of incorporating these political margins into the Indian Union both informs and complicates contemporary development interventions in the region. Along with political instability, the geo-physical instability of the region can in some cases provide fertile ground for radical political struggles. This research argues for a more thorough understanding of cultural, ecological and geophysical processes and histories, to theoretical frameworks related to racialized and ethnic minority groups. Through its engagement with marginalized groups at the Himalayan margins, I have sought to illustrate how “borders and marginality constitute nodes of engagement within which broader patterns are negotiated and worked out in unequal dialogue with those living within them” (Cons and Sanyal 2013:6). The Himalayan region is in a state of geological and political flux that requires an attention both to geological time and to the pressing weight of future anxieties around economic uncertainty and cultural and ecological loss.

For geographers, the concerns of this region and its people open up several important analytical categories for examination, especially given the growing interest in the Anthropocene. This dissertation contributes to the growing body of scholarship on this region with specific regard to interdisciplinary conversations around indigeneity, marginalized subjectivities, and environmental justice. Here I will briefly summarize the main theoretical argument of each dissertation chapter; In **Chapter 2**, I present a theoretical framework that informs many of the subsequent arguments in the dissertation. In this chapter I've argued that materialist and post-humanist work in Geography has ignored indigenous theorizations of the sacred, sentient, and supernatural and that an inquiry into these belief systems provides crucial insights into both extraordinary and everyday politics. I extend this argument in **Chapter 4** in which I draw attention to overlooked forms of political action and knowledge through serious engagement with indigenous narratives of geological and supernatural events. In this I highlight the relationship between natural hazards, sacred landscapes, and indigenous groups, to argue for a more holistic approach to uneven impacts of climate change on mountainous environments and their inhabitants. **Chapter 2** draws on ethnographic data to demonstrate how young people's bodies and futures are actively deployed in contestations over natural resources and material benefits between the State and indigenous groups. This chapter also illustrates how contestations between State and indigenous groups often pry open profound contestations within these groups, in this case between young people and reserve elders and urban political elite. In **Chapter 5** I draw on interviews with indigenous groups and state technocrats to interrogate how heightened indeterminacy is mediating and productive of a borderland subjectivity grounded in the geo-physical and spiritual particularity of the region. In this I draw attention to the importance of geo-physical and political indeterminacy and a 'critical geographic mobilization of place' for

environmental politics and marginalized subjectivities in the Anthropocene. **Chapter 6** draws on interviews with young people, state officials and local panchayat members and highlights the intimate linkages between indigeneity and young people's encounter with materials, spatial ideas, and state practices. In this I demonstrate how indigenous youth navigate the treacherous terrain of unemployment and state apathy to craft new political subjectivities.

This dissertation research while firmly grounded in an ethnographic engagement with the local context of Sikkim and the broader Himalayan region is also in conversation with several recent national developments. I will briefly highlight a few developments that provide an important context to the questions and concerns raised here. While conducting fieldwork in the heightened political climate of the 2014 Sikkimese state elections, the outcomes of which felt fairly unpredictable at that time, it was easy to overlook that elsewhere in India the national elections were also unfolding though with much less ambiguity. The outcome at the national level were far more predictable, the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) ousted the incumbent Congress led United Progressive Alliance (UPA), in a landslide victory winning 336 of the 543 seats of the Lower House of India's Parliament. In Sikkim, discussions among activists and civil society members opposed to the SDF were marked with expectancy and a longing for political change after two decades of political incumbency. These conversations were in stark contrast with those taking place at the national level among environmental and social activists, which were marked instead with both resignation and trepidation. BJP's Prime Ministerial candidate, Narendra Modi who went on to win the elections and is currently the Prime Minister of India, is a Hindu Nationalist and member of the right-wing organization, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). He is a controversial figure whose alleged involvement in the 2002 anti-Muslim riots in his home state of Gujarat under his Chief

Ministership earned him both national and international notoriety. For many environmentalists, Modi's promise to usher in *Acche Din* (good days) through his pro-business policies meant a further deterioration in environmental, political and cultural rights of the most marginalized groups in India.

Under the decade long rule of Congress led UPA (2004-2013), India had witnessed its fair share of destructive industries alongside a slow erosion of the environmental and cultural rights of indigenous groups. However within the first 100 days of the Modi administration, several key environmental norms and regulations such as the Forest Rights Act and Forest Conservation Act were significantly altered to aid industrial development (Times of India 2014). While many see this as no different from the underlying market logic that guided the previous regime (Mohan 2015) what is markedly different about Modi's rule is the growing climate of intolerance against any form of civil society dissent. In April 2015, Greenpeace India's registration was suspended for six months citing failure to report and underreporting foreign funding (Lakshmi 2015). Many prominent environmental activists believe this was a direct response to the organizations protests against coal mining projects in central India. Along with environmental concerns, at present the nation is witnessing a massive wave of student protests against the growing suppression of civil and political liberties in several prominent university campuses across India. These protests were spurred by the suicide of a Dalit student, (University of Hyderabad) Rohit Vemula following his indefinite suspension and the arrest of university student leaders (JNU, Delhi) under sedition charges for making "anti-national" statements (Wazir 2016). While these events at the national level don't map on neatly to the events unfolding in Sikkim, an attention to the points of intersection and divergence can illuminate a few key issues.

First, the focus on hydropower and infrastructural development in the Himalayan region provides an important entry point given the capitalist market mechanisms that are aggressively pushing for the development of the Northeast and Himalayan region. These development projects encouraged by both national and regional development policies show no signs of ceasing under Modi's administration. The 'Look East' policy which has identified the Northeast Region as an important economic corridor to South East Asia has important geopolitical implications for the entire region. Even as investment in the Indian hydropower industry has witnessed a gradual slowdown (Schneider 2014) both China and India are investing in the hydro futures of their neighbours, Nepal and Bhutan (Vidal 2013). Modi's first international diplomatic visit was to Bhutan to inaugurate the India-backed 600 MW Kholongchhu project and over 75% of the energy generated by the Bhutanese hydropower industry is being supplied to India (The Hindu 2014). Conversely, diplomatic relations between India and Nepal (whose hydropower industry is being funded by China) have significantly deteriorated after India's critical response to the country's new constitution which is alleged to discriminate against Madhesi and Tharu groups living along the Nepal-India border (Pant 2015). The Chinese-backed Nepalese and India-backed Bhutanese hydropower industry while altering the ecological, political and cultural fates of these countries also serve as proxies for the geo-political and economic ambitions and anxieties of these powerful economic giants. Murton (2013:16) argues that the growing investment and rapid development of Himalayan highways is a "strategic and effective way for both China and India to create new markets as well as link existing and expanding economies that since the 1940's have been largely segregated" while also noting that these developments "challenge[s] the historical relations between center and periphery and state and subject that have long characterized the Trans-Himalaya." Even as Indian state interventions in the Himalayan

region enters a new phase of rapid expansion this is also leading to the conflation of environmental, cultural, and political movements in the region, giving rise to new forms of state dissent, political strategies and subjectivities.

Second, the focus on environmental social movements, representative politics both at the local and regional level provide an important lens into nature of this shifting relationship between the center and its peripheries. Ferguson and Gupta (2002:988) have noted in the context of the resistance engendered by development projects that “new forms of transnational connection are increasingly enabling ‘local’ actors to challenge the state’s well-established claims to encompassment and vertical superiority in unexpected ways”. In the context of the Northeast Region and states like Sikkim that have a contested history of assimilation into the Indian Union along with local histories of cultural erasure and political marginalization, representative politics and social movements bring together a diverse range of concerns. The growing resentment against hydropower projects is taking the form of social movements across the Himalayan region. Though fragmented at present, these movements have the potential to turn into a regional alliance of civil society concerns that can effectively check state power (Chowdhry and Kipgen 2013). However focusing merely on instances of resistance can also obscure the “explicitly-expressed hope for the state” that can provide “functional transport, education, health services, and justice.” (Karlsson 2013: 329). Through a focus on how social movements like the Lepcha anti-dam movement morph into political parties at the village and state level, I have attempted to show the importance of established political channels and modes of representation for an emancipatory politics for marginalized groups. Especially for educated unemployed youth who find themselves at odds with both community elders and the state, these political platforms provide an important space to voice state critiques.

Third, while environmental regulations continue to be weakened under the Modi administration which means we will continue seeing negligent and shoddy construction practices but as Huber and Joshi (2015: 22) note, the scale of these projects have made their disastrous consequences visible even to the untrained eye. Along with resistance on cultural and political grounds, hydropower projects have run into technical roadblocks that are worsened by natural hazards and “the exceptionally high concentrations of mud, silt, and grit carried by Himalayan rivers...and the ragged-edged grains of quartz and feldspar constantly overwhelm settling basins and chew up pipes and turbines.” (Schneider 2014: xx). While there are several functioning hydropower projects in the region that have been able to overcome both technical and geo-physical challenges their future is uncertain in the context of climate change and its impact on the hydrology of the region. There is also growing concern over the uneven impacts of anthropogenic climate change, especially hazards and disasters, on mountainous environments and their inhabitants. I have attempted to highlight how disasters and hazards even as their effects are borne unevenly by marginalized communities, can also present a limit to capitalist expansion in the Himalayan region. However given the present political conditions it is unlikely we will see a decline in hydropower development in the region anytime soon. As Ferguson (1994: 176) demonstrates in his seminal work that despite their apparent failure development projects “do, however succeed in expanding the field of bureaucratic state power in people’s everyday life” and that this “recognition that this often unintended consequence of “development” is its main achievement argues for a new politics of opposition.” Therefore the question we must ask when it comes to Himalayan hydropower is not why they still persist despite their apparent failure but what this “new politics of opposition” should look like. Perhaps this requires a broadening of the field of politics or what we count to be political.

Fourth, in the wake of both political and ecological upheavals it becomes important that we pry open the meaning of politics and how people relate to these drastic events. In this dissertation, I have paid attention to people's spiritual and religious articulation as it illuminates their relationship to an animate landscape but also as analytical categories that help in understanding the socio-political histories of religious and ethnic minorities. In the Indian political context, religion has played an important though mostly divisive role. Modi's brand of nationalism with its narrow political interpretation of Hinduism has been understood as an extremist variant of the faith. Following Nandy (1998), Bachetta (2000) writing about the Babri mosque anti-Muslim riots, argues that this *Hinduism-as-ideology* must be differentiated from *Hinduism-as-faith* that does not propagate such intolerance (though Dalit and lower caste groups may disagree on that count). In Sikkim, Tibetan Buddhism while nowhere as extreme as Hindu nationalism heavily influenced both the contemporary and historical landscape of the state, often suppressing and subjugating local indigenous beliefs and practices. The political ideology of Tibetan Buddhism must also be separated from the practice of Buddhism that has for centuries co-existed with local beliefs (Balicki 2008). Spiritual and religious traditions, as they morph and change from one generation to the next, must be placed in conversation with both historical and contemporary realities.

Fifth and lastly, young people across the Himalayan region are becoming increasingly politicized as they are faced with uncertain futures where despite their education they find themselves struggling to find employment³². These concerns mirror the larger national context

³² Sections of this paragraph have been drawn from a previously published book chapter. The original citation is as follows: Smith S.H. and Gergan M. D. "Life, Love, and Activism on the Forgotten Margins of the Nation-State. In Matt Benwell and Peter Hopkins (Eds). *Children, Young people and Critical Geopolitics*. London: Ashgate. 91-106.

which has also witnessed a steady increased in educated unemployed youth. In the Himalayan states, young people become a focal point as they prepare for a future in which their homelands' relation to the nation is uncertain. Ecological precarity bears directly on young people's lives and labour, which are intimately tied to the natural environment (Katz, 2004; Dyson, 2008; 2014). Himalayan youth find themselves responding to this layering of tropes painting them as both 'apathetic youth' and the 'lazy native'. Young people's bodies and futures are the template on which territorial, ecological and moral anxieties play out (Smith, 2013). Through their anti-dam struggle young Lepcha activists are actively developing an ecological rendering of territory and the future, which weaves together their ancient ties to the land with a critique of state-led development. Despite their tenuous relationships at home, the activism of Lepcha youth has rendered the tribe more visible to the state and the global indigenous community. These young, articulate, politically and environmentally conscious Lepcha activists indicate the shifting terrain of indigeneity. Young people's activism is bringing the territorial margins into the political and geographic imaginary of the state. Lepcha youth activism then demonstrates how young people's practices reconfigure ideas of territory and the future. The recent student protests across India are reflective of the struggle of young people against the state led corporate colonization of their mind, bodies, and futures.

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APPENDIX

Questions for Panchayat Members and Village elders

- 1) What is your name, age, occupation?

तपाईं को नाम के हो र तपाईं को उमेर? तपाईं के काम गर्छ?

- 2) Have you lived or studied outside Dzongu? Do you have property or rented accommodation outside Dzongu?

के तपाईं द्जोंगु देखि बहिरो बसु या काम गर्नु भएको छ? के द्जोंगु देखि बहिरो तपाईं को घर छ आफ्नो या किराई को माकान?

- 3) How many children? Any in the age group of 16-35 who are living and working outside Dzongu?

तपाईं को कति नानी हरु छ? के तपाईं को 16-35 उमेर को नानी छ जो चय द्जोंगु देखि बयरा काम गर्छ अनि बाहिरो नी बस्छ ?

- 4) Do you feel they will return? Do you want them to return? If not/yes then why?

तपाईं लाई के लाग छ तपाईं को छोरा /छोरी र अरु जवान केटा केटी हरु आफ्नु school/college या नौकरी सकेरा द्जोंगु फर्केर आँछा?

- 5) What things would need to change within Dzongu for young people to return?

द्जोंगु मा कुन-कुन चीज हरु को परिवर्तन हुनु परछ जिस ले गर्दा यहाँ को केटा केटी हरु फरकेरा आँछा ?

- 6) What do you think about government efforts with regards to a) cardamom b) cane c) organic farming and d) eco-tourism?

तपाईं लाई के लाग छ कि सरकार ले गरदर्ई गरेको योजना हरु, जस्तो कि एलैची को खेती, बेथ को training, organic farming, eco-tourism इत्यादी योजना हरु, सफल भएको छ?

- 7) Do you see a lot of young people getting involved in these govt. schemes or perhaps taking initiative on their own?

या को जवान हरु यो योजना हरु मा भाग लिए को छ जस्तो लग छ कि लाग्दैन? यदि उनीहरु भाग लिए को छैन भने, के अरु काम गर्छ उनि हरु ?

- 8) If they are unemployed and not involved in these projects, what kind of activities are young people involved in mostly? Are there places that young people within Dzongu 'hang out' within your village is there a shop or an area, like the *khola* or someplace where young people gather to talk politics or just hang out?

यदि उनि हरु बेरोजगार छ अनि यो योजना हरु मा भाग लेको छईना भने, यहाँ क जवान हरु कस्तो पारा ले आफ्नु समय लाई बिताउना गर्दा छ, ढेर जस्तो। के यहाँ एस्तो ठाँउ हरु छ, ज कि जवान केटा केटी हरु बेहला भैरा राजनीति र अरु विषय हरु को कुरा गरछ?

- 9) In your GPU what is the level of political awareness and participation of young people like attending the gram sabha, raising questions there or showing interest in being a panchayat member?

के तपाईं को GPU मा यहाँ को जवान केटा केटी हरु ले राजनीत को कुरा मा कति को चासो छ र भाग लिने गर्दा छ --- जस्तो कि ग्राम सभा मीतंग मा भाग लिने र आफ्नो कुरा राख्ने र पंचायत को चुनाव मा लड्ने इच्छा राख्ने गर्दा छ त?

- 10) Has the level of participation and interest in politics changed with the upcoming state elections?

यो आउंदा राजनीतिक चुनाव गर्दा क जवान हरु को भाग लिने सोचाई अर्कै किसम को बदलिएय को छ त?

- 11) I want to shift the questions a little bit to more of the spiritual and cultural aspect of living within Dzongu. Do you think this generation is sensitive to culture, like language, festivals, rituals? There is a certain section those who are educated who seem quite active but at the ground level what is the situation?

मो अलिक अर्कै विषय माथि एक दुइ वात्त प्रश्न तपाईं लै सोदना चाहन्छु ल. के तपाईं लै लग छ कि दजोंगु को जवान हरु रोंग संस्कृति, जस्तै बोल्नु, चाढ-परुआ हरु मा भाग लिने गर्दा छ त? किनकि अलिकेती बाइर गएरा आको र अलिकति पदह लिखा भएको जवान हरु यो विषय मा पुरा active छ तर गांव को जवान जो बाइर गएको छैन उनि हरु को एस विषय मा चासो छ कि छैन?

- 12) Dzongu has always been a place which has attracted researchers from all the over the world for its culture and ecology. In the last few years esp. several things have brought

more attention to Dzongu - the cardamom virus, and in 2011 it was the earthquakes – there are official scientific explanations for why these things are happening not just within Dzongu but outside as well. But within Dzongu do people have their own theories of why cardamom died mysteriously and these earthquakes are happening with the epicenter very close to Dzongu. Like spiritual or religious explanations?

दज़ोंगु को संस्कृति र पर्यावरण लै देखेरा संसार को विभिन्न जगन बाट मान्छे हरु धेरै विषय हरु मा रेसेअर्च गर्नु लागि औनी गर्दा च. तर दज़ोंगु मा यो दुइ कुरा, एलैची को virus अनि 2011 को भुइचल मा सिक्किम र भारतीय scientists हरु मा पनि धेरै इन्तेरेस्ट आइको छ. Scientists हरु को आफ्नु theory छ कि यो भुइचल र virus किन आइको छ तर दज़ोंगु मा मान्छे हरु के भन्छ यो विषय मा? जस्तो कि धार्मिक या देवी- दयूता ले गर्दा हो कि अरको कारण हरु ?

Extra questions if time permits:

What happened after the earthquake (relief efforts)?

Opinion on relief efforts, do they feel safe and prepared for future earthquakes?

Spiritual beliefs about the reserve

Opinion on cardamom and non-government initiatives like JICA, organic farming, orange and ginger.

Hopes for the future, optimistic or not?

Survey Questionnaire for youth

1. Name, age, education, occupation

तपाईं को नाम के हो र तपाईं को उमेर? तपाईं के काम गर्छ?

2. Have you lived or studied outside Dzongu? Do you have property or rented accommodation outside Dzongu?

के तपाईं ज़ोंगु देखि बहिरो बस्नु या काम गर्नु भाको छ? के ज़ोंगु देखि बहिरो तपाईं को घर छ आफ्नो या किराई को माकान?

3. How many siblings do you have? Are any in the age group of 16-35 who are living and working outside Dzongu?

तपाईं को कति भाई - बर्इनी हरु छ? इन्ही हरु बीच मा 16-35 वर्ष सम को चैइ ज़ोंगु देखि बायर काम गर्ने अन्ही बस्ने कति छ?

4. Do you feel they will return? Do you want them to return? If not/yes then why?

तपाईं लै के लग छ तपाईं को भाई- बइनी या साथि हरु जो बायर जानु भाको छ, आफ्नु स्कूल college या काम सकेर जोगु फर्केरा औछ?

5. What things would need to change within Dzongu for young people to return?

जोगु मा कुन-कुन चीज हरु को परिवर्तन हुनु परछ जिस ले गर्दा यहाँ को केटा केटी हरु फरकेरा औछा ?

6. What do you think about government efforts with regards to a) cardamom b) cane c) organic farming and d) eco-tourism?

तपाईं लाई के लाग छ कि सरकार ले गरदर्ई गरेको योजना हरु, जस्तो कि एलैची को खेती, बेथ को training, organic farming, eco-tourism इत्यादी योजना हरु, सफल भएको छ?

7. Do you see a lot of young people getting involved in these govt. schemes or perhaps taking initiative on their own?

या को जवान हरु यो योजना हरु मा भाग लिए को छ जस्तो लग छ कि लाग्दैन? यदि उनीहरु भाग लिए को छैन भने, के अरु काम गर्छ उनी हरु ?

8. If they are unemployed and not involved in these projects, what kind of activities are young people involved in mostly? Are there places that young people within Dzongu 'hang out' within your village is there a shop or an area, like the *khola* or someplace where young people gather to talk politics or just hang out?

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10. Has the level of participation and interest in politics changed with the upcoming state elections?

यो आउंदा राजनीतिक चुनाव गर्दा क जवान हरु को भाग लिने सोचाई अर्कै किसम को बदलिएय को छ त?

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12. Dzongu has always been a place which has attracted researchers from all the over the world for its culture and ecology. In the last few years esp. several things have brought more attention to Dzongu - the cardamom virus, and in 2011 it was the earthquakes – there are official scientific explanations for why these things are happening not just within Dzongu but outside as well. But within Dzongu do people have their own theories of why cardamom died mysteriously and these earthquakes are happening with the epicenter very close to Dzongu. Like spiritual or religious explanations?

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Questions for Government officials at Mines, Minerals and Geology Department, Disaster Management, Department of Science and Technology

1. Which areas of Sikkim are the most seismically unstable and landslide prone?
2. What are some of the main minerals being mined in Sikkim? Which areas is the most mineral rich in Sikkim?
3. What are the major projects being undertaken by your department? And are there any collaborative projects being undertaken with other departments

4. Is there a lot of conversation between different government departments, say for example between your department and the Urban Development and Housing Department?
5. What are the biggest challenges geologically speaking in developing infrastructure and large projects in Sikkim?
6. After the 2011 earthquake, what was the biggest challenge for rescue operations? Is there a any way in which damages to roads and other infrastructure could have been minimized?
7. Does your department conduct risk assessment studies? If yes, can you give me some details of where and when these studies were conducted?
8. How can dams and other development projects be planned and executed in a more environmentally friendly manner in Sikkim?
9. Would you consider yourself a scientist first or a government official first? Do you ever find the two things in conflict?