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Hydropower, Anti-Politics and the Opening of New Political Spaces in the Eastern Himalayas[1]

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Abstract

A seemingly universal, global consensus on the need for clean energy, complemented by the increasing liberalization of energy sectors in emerging economies, has led to a renaissance of large-scale hydropower development, globally. The uncritical promotion of hydropower as sustainable development and climate-mitigation imperative represents a sharp reversal in the positioning of dams, from being declared just a decade ago as socially and environmentally untenable. Its endorsement, regardless of these inconsistencies, by a powerful nexus of actors at multiple levels has led to a rapid expansion of dam-building activities into remote, hitherto unexploited Himalayan waterscapes, drawing comparatively little critical (inter)national attention and response. In this article we trace these developments and ensuing conflicts in the Himalayan state of Sikkim, Northeast India, exploring how an emerging order of anti-political eco-governance clashes with contextual, ethnic-political ground realities – with far-reaching effects. To limit popular resistance and to pave the way for hydropower development, various strategies of depoliticization, manipulation and coercion are employed by a powerful nexus of state actors and private developers, aimed at obscuring the profoundly political dimension of this water infrastructure intervention. Yet despite a seemingly apolitical climate in the small mountain state, the multiple conflicts around hydropower development have resulted in a striking politicization of local state-society-environment relations, with the potential to set in motion the state's deadlocked democratic transition process. Our findings contribute to the literature on anti-politics by illustrating how the hegemonic tendency of the 'anti-politics machine' is not linear, but is counteracted by three interrelated factors: one, for its tendency to simultaneously depoliticize and politicize; two, through the active, counter-hegemonic resistance of local communities and civil society organizations, who take issue with the encroachment on their social, cultural and natural patrimony; and three, due to the inevitable resurfacing of suppressed antagonistic tendencies in society – in this case through the reassertion of local political agency, an opening of new political spaces and a reconfiguration of state-society relations.[2]

INTRODUCTION

Only little more than a decade ago, it appeared that the era of 'development through mega-dams […] as shining icons of prosperity and modernity' had ended (McCully, 2001: xvi). Globally, dam building was on the decline, spurred by a spiral of inter-related factors: diminishing financing for mega-water infrastructure, partly due to a seeming scarcity of suitable locations, and over two decades of civil society advocacy on the social and environmental effects of large dams (Khagram, 2004).

Ten years later, there has been a worldwide resurgence of dam-building, above all in emerging economies. Large dams are back on the development agenda of many national governments, driven by a complex intersect of drivers and powerful actors (Moore et al. 2003). This sharp reversal in the politics of hydro-development is particularly evident in the new rhetorical positioning of dams. Thus earlier concerns about large dams being socially and environmentally unsustainable and 'immoral' are being left aside, overshadowed by a discourse that heralds hydropower as a green and carbon-neutral climate mitigation strategy, and recasts dams as the 'moral alternative' to fossil fuel energy (Fletcher, 2010: 5) 'Apocalyptic' imageries of a global climate crisis requiring urgent mediation facilitate such a discourse (Swyngedouw, 2010).

The positioning of large dams as producing 'clean energy' and facilitating green growth represents a consensual politics among actors at multiple levels. The new generation dam projects not only evade earlier socio-political and environmental agreements, such as the recommendations by the World Commission on Dams in 2000 (WCD 2000). They are also sheltered through new institutional instruments and mechanisms, which are supported by a powerful, exclusionary alignment between governments, financiers, industries, donors and large NGOs (International Rivers, 2013).

The most prominent manifestation of this is the funding of hydropower projects under the Kyoto Protocol's Clean Development Mechanism (CDM). This carbon-offset scheme enables 'polluting' Northern parties to meet their climate commitments by financing climate mitigation projects in developing countries (EU, 2004; Newell et al., 2011). As of 2013, hydropower makes up of 26 per cent of CDM-registered projects (UNEP Risø Centre 2013). This happens despite strong contentions on whether, and at what scale hydropower projects can actually help off-set carbon emissions and should serve as a source of CDM-funding (Erlewein and Nüsser, 2011; Haya and Parekh, 2011; Pottinger, 2008).

What is more, the 'climate-mitigation' labeling of hydropower does not appear to be re-considered even in cases where projects are located in critically 'climate vulnerable' regions, such as the Himalayas. India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bhutan alone are planning to construct over 400 dams in the Himalayan region over the next fifteen years, with a combined additional capacity of over 150,000 Megawatts (Dharmadhikary, 2008), even as numerous studies indicate that hydropower projects in these locations will likely exacerbate already evident climate variability in the Himalayan region's water flows and biodiversity (Shah, 2013; Vagholikar & Das, 2010).

The global 'climate' push for hydropower is complemented by a drive among emerging economies, to urgently accelerate their energy-security, so as to maintain high rates of economic growth and modernization (Dixit and Gyawali, 2010). Facilitated through the increasing neoliberalization of national energy sectors, private capital is now boosting the rate and speed of dam construction in countries such as China, India, Brazil and Turkey (Moore et al., 2010). Hydropower generation is not only considered to be a profitable business due to ostensibly cheap operating costs – since the necessary fuel (water) is in theory freely available. Also the possibility to receive CDM funding attracts many private investors (Erlewein and Nüsser, 2011).

In India, liberalization of the national hydropower sector in 2003 has prompted a rapid expansion of hydropower development into remote parts of the Himalayas and Northeast India – areas previously left outside modernized development. Partly due to difficulty of access many hydropower resources still lie untapped in these areas. This provides a vast playing field for private power producers, who stand to gain enormous profits from the sale of electricity in the open market (mostly to urban and industrial centres in power deficit states such as West Bengal, Orissa, Jharkhand and Bihar), while power transmission is facilitated by the state-owned Power Grid Corporation of India Ltd. (Dharmadikary, 2008). However, the resulting commodification and transformation of Himalayan riverscapes often has far-reaching effects for local populations, for whom the riverine environments to be exploited represent a critical livelihood basis, and an important cultural and spiritual heritage (Menon et al., 2003). These dynamics have resulted in numerous open as well as latent hydro-related conflicts in dam-building states.

The focus of this paper rests on exploring the 'glocal' political dynamics, which enfold during this rapid expansion of hydropower development (Swyngedouw, 1997). By examining hydropower governance processes and ensuing conflicts in the small, Eastern Himalayan state

of Sikkim, Northeast India, we trace what happens when global, apolitical climate rhetoric, along with national and private agendas for growth and modernization come into conflict with contextual, ethnic-political, spatial and temporal ground realities (Jasanoff, 2010) – with unintended implications. Specifically, we seek to illustrate how a hydropower anti-politics – i.e. the depoliticizing promotion of inherently political water infrastructure interventions by state actors and private developers, coupled with more coercive practices of government aimed at paving the way for hydropower development – can have strikingly politicizing effects on very localized societies and environments.

Our study was originally motivated by the question why the large-scale, high-impact, state-led hydropower mission had provoked comparatively little popular resistance and response. We found that in Sikkim large dams for hydropower had been presented as a moral imperative and a win-win development solution, while obscuring the profoundly political character of this mega-infrastructure. What is more, by assigning the planning and implementation of dam-building to the technological-managerial realm of private entrepreneurs, the issue was effectively removed from the realm of political negotiation. Localized instances of open contestation and popular resistance in turn had been actively suppressed through coercive strategies of othering and withdrawal of patronage.

These government techniques are underlined by a stark power asymmetry in the state, between the drivers and promoters of hydropower and those directly impacted by the projects: state actors, private project developers and local elites, slated against economically marginal, ethnically diverse mountain communities, whose political literacy and knowledge to articulate concerns in meaningful ways is limited. Conflict or dissent with the monopolistic, single-party state government – at any level, on any issue – has never been a common practice in this fragile democracy (a monarchy until recently), where state-society relations continue to be characterized by entrenched patron-client dependencies (Schaefer, 1995).

Yet, as we illustrate in this paper, it was precisely this ensemble of depoliticized pro-dam discourse, techno-managerial hydro governance and political coercion, along with the adverse impacts associated with hydropower development, which generated strong resentment among certain project-affected populations, and resulted in crossing the 'tipping point' of decades of a democracy deficit. It eventually catalyzed a striking politicization dynamic in this small Himalayan state, including increased political action and civil society engagement with environmental governance issues. One could say it contributed to the coming of age of a 'political' Sikkim.

The paper is structured as follows. Section two turns to a discussion on the 'political' and its application in conceptual debates around anti-politics and depoliticization. We follow Chantal Mouffe's (2005) reflection on the political to argue that the opening of new political spaces and the creation of new political subjects in Sikkim is a result of the suppression of the antagonistic tendencies inherent in any given society, particularly with regard to such large-scale infrastructure projects. Section three traces the geography and timeline of different hydropower conflicts in Sikkim. It also points out the specific political-economic and ethnic-political configurations which have shaped the politics around hydropower development.

Section four gives a detailed, empirical description of the various factors which, in their combination, have created a high level of malcontent among local communities and civil society groups. These include for one the depoliticization of the state-led hydropower mission by portraying it as a green development solution and a moral development imperative; second, a dam design which, despite claims to its benign and 'green' characteristics has produced a range of destructive impacts; third, the confounding, in compensation arrangements, of state development mandates and project-related liabilities; fourth, the treatment of local communities as apolitical, gullible and dependent subjects with little agency to decide over the larger questions of national and regional development planning; and finally a range of autocratic, repressive and highly politicizing practices employed by project proponents to contain resistance to hydropower in the state.

Section five then discusses how the hydropower conflict has led to a broader politicization and reconfiguration of hitherto deadlocked state-citizen relations. We conclude with a reflection on some of the limitations of such an approach and the wider relevance of this case study.

ON ANTI-POLITICS, (DE-)POLITICIZATION AND 'THE POLITICAL'

Theories about depoliticization, anti-politics and consensual government as increasingly popular forms of political conduct, particularly in neoliberal settings, have proliferated in the academic literature in recent years (Büscher, 2010). Development scholars especially have elaborated on the idea of an anti-politics machine that turns development planning and poverty alleviation into a purely economic and technical exercise, 'depoliticizing everything it touches, [while] whisking political realities out of sight' (Agrawal, 2005; Chhotray, 2004;

Escobar, 1999; Ferguson, 1994: xv; Harriss, 2001; Goldman, 2001; Li, 2007; Mosse, 2004; Tordella, 2003).

The 'anti-politics machine' was originally identified as such by James Ferguson (1990) in his study of the international, donor-driven 'development apparatus' in Lesotho. Ferguson shows how the latter rationalizes, depoliticizes and renders technical, removing 'the state as a political entity' and 'politics outside the state's realm', along with issues of class, inefficiency and corruption, from development discourse. Political and structural explanations for poverty are 'systematically erased and replaced with technical ones', and the development agenda is thus shaped according to the capacities of allegedly 'politically neutral' development experts (ibid.: 66).

Anti-politics in Ferguson's analysis has two 'unintended' effects. For one, 'by insistently reposing political questions of land, resources, jobs, or wages as technical "problems" responsive to the technical "development" intervention', development can perform 'extremely sensitive political operations involving the entrenchment and expansion of [bureaucratic] state power almost invisibly, under cover of a neutral, technical mission to which no one can object' (ibid.: 256; 270). Moreover, by thus 'depoliticizing both poverty and the state', while 'enhancing the powers of administration and repression', planned development 'can effectively squash political challenges to the system' (ibid.: 270).

Other authors have criticized and added to Ferguson's theory that anti-politics should be regarded as a political project of government. Li (2007) for example makes a strong case that the 'rendering technical' of contentious issues in Indonesian rural improvement schemes is a project of government deliberately designed 'to contain a challenge to the status quo', i.e. to limit the threat of popular mobilization against the dominance of particular classes (ibid.: 8). Büscher (2010) looks at anti-politics in African conservation and development (in the form of technocratization) as a neoliberal project aimed at maintaining a system of unequal distribution of economic and political power (Büscher 2010). He advocates for 'a more explicit political conceptualization of anti-politics' with regard to the wider political economy, so as to acknowledge 'how […] development interventions are subsumed under, and at the same time reinforce, the neoliberal political economy within which they function' (Büscher 2010:33).

Scholars have also criticized the idea that the anti-politics machine is automatic, unidirectional and hegemonic, arguing that counter-hegemonic forces (e.g. the targets of development intervention) and the challenges they pose to the anti-politics machine should be

taken into consideration (Bending 2003; Li 2007). Another criticism concerns the fact that the anti-politics machine does not always serve to consolidate state power, partly because not all actors and agencies engage in the same way, and with the same intentionality, in the anti-political project. Moreover, the operation and outcomes of the anti-politics machine depend to a large extent on 'specific political and institutional configurations' in any locality (Chhotray 2011). In fact, Ferguson himself was cautious enough to discredit the automatic applicability of his concept to geographical contexts other than Lesotho.

Debates about anti-politics, however, are not only confined to the world of planned development intervention. The environmental sphere more generally, it has been argued, is a domain where the depoliticizing thrust of the neoliberal political rationality, the 'consensualism in policing public affairs', is particularly well-advanced (Swyngedouw, 2011:2). Notably, the growing interdisciplinary field of political ecology has been engaging over the past decades with the failure of many actors involved in environmental governance, to consider or make explicit the political roots and consequences of the ecological transformation processes they address or cause (Adger, 2001; Blaikie, 1999; Bryant, 1997; Fairhead & Leach, 1998; Heynen and Swyngedouw, 2003; Peet & Watts eds., 1996; Robbins, 2004).

Drawing on Escobar (1995) and Bending (2003), Büscher suggests, that the anti-politics critique of development may well be 'extended to the sphere of environmental governance, especially since with the advent of "sustainable development" the two are often intertwined in theory and practice' (Büscher 2010:31). Bryant (1991) draws attention to the 'techno-managerial perspective' in much writing on sustainable development, which he identifies as 'curiously devoid' of politics and conflict, and which, he argues, 'fails to address political issues that are vital to the success of sustainable development strategies':

> In this techno-managerial perspective, strategies are 'formulated and implemented', seemingly without conflict. But who formulates and implements these strategies, and in whose interest? How may environmentally sensitive strategies be made 'consistent' with social values and institutions riddled with political contradictions? What does 'grassroots' participation mean, and is not the aim of poverty reduction politically problematic? Such research thus fails to address political issues that are vital to the success of sustainable development strategies. (Bryant 1991: 164)

Swyngedouw (2007) suggests that the concept of sustainability (just like that of climate change as a global humanitarian cause) is but one example of an ideology so devoid of properly political content that it is impossible to disagree with its objective.

> A politics of sustainability [is] predicated upon [the] view of a singular – and ontologically stable and harmonious – Nature […] one that is now out-of-synch but, which, if 'properly' managed, we can and have to return to by means of a series of technological, managerial, and organisational fixes. [It] is necessarily one that eradicates or evacuates the 'political' from debates over what to do with natures. The key political question [is] what kind of natures we wish to inhabit, what kinds of natures we wish to preserve, to make, or, if need be, to wipe off the surface of the planet (like the HIV virus, for example), and on how to get there. […] Disagreement is allowed, but only with respect to the choice of technologies, the mix of organisational fixes, the detail of the managerial adjustments, and the urgency of their timing and implementation. (Adapted from Swyngedouw 2007: 23)

In a related reflection (Swyngedouw 2011a), his argument goes that in certain scientific and policy discourses the environment is politically mobilized, for example by taking recourse to a consensual, apocalyptic rhetoric of climate change as a universal, humanitarian threat, and to 'a particular imag(in)ing of what a "good" climate or a "good" environment is' (ibid.: 2011:256). This is done precisely in order to depoliticize its properly political dimension, that is, to obscure the fact that there is no singular nature, but 'that the natures we see and work with are necessarily radically imagined', socio-ecologically co-produced, heterogeneous, and thus by definition antagonistic political constructs.

Swyngedouw relates this process of depoliticization to what a group of political theorists have defined as a 'post-political' and 'post-democratic' condition (Crouch, 2004; Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy, 1997; Rancière 1996; Žižek, 2002), i.e. a 'retreat of the political' and its suturing through 'consensual "good" techno-managerial governance' (Swyngedouw 2011b:2). It is argued that this emergent political condition (at least in many Western societies) is 'one that disavows dissensus and prevents agonistic disagreement over real alternative socio-ecological futures', and therefore requires other – often insurgent – channels for playing out political conflict (ibid.: 268; Mouffe, 2005).

In this paper we want to extend anti-politics theory to the domain of large-scale, state-led infrastructure development. Large dams for hydropower generation are couched in the discourse of sustainable development and green growth, in spite of the highly politically contentious socio-environmental transformation processes they imply. Through our case study we thus observed various anti-political practices of government aimed at obscuring this political dimension, and at suppressing the political. Broadly speaking we understand the political to constitute practices and struggles that seek to engage with the current order (in this case the development intervention), to challenge, contest and possibly dislodge it, to create a new order. As a consequence, anti-politics seeks to counter these political tendencies, by removing issues from the spaces of political contestation, and by obscuring the political essence of inherently politically contentious issues. Anti-political practices include discursive depoliticization (i.e. referring to political issues in apolitical terms), as well as the obstruction of dissent by various means, as will be explained below. As such anti-politics has a hegemonic dimension, to the extent that it aims to establish voluntary consent discursively, but is not disinclined to employ coercive force where dissent cannot be subverted otherwise.

However, in line with Bending (2003), Li (2007) and Chhotray (2011), amongst others, we question the automaticity and inevitability with which this kind of anti-politics depoliticizes hydro-development and reinforces state power. We suggest that this is related to three factors. For one, we posit that anti-politics simultaneously politicizes *and* depoliticizes. We consider anti-politics to include a gamut of practices of government which cannot be adequately captured by the term 'depoliticization', because they – partly – contain strongly politicizing elements. Thinking about anti-politics should therefore consider this complex dialectical relationship between processes of politicization and depoliticization, which renders any clear semantic distinction between different anti-political practices difficult.

Secondly, we follow the line of argument of scholars who emphasize the need to account for the counter-hegemonic that challenge the workings of the anti-politics machine. Our empirical findings indicate that the targets of anti-politics effectively resist the workings of the anti-politics machine, thereby subverting its originally intended outcomes. We argue that such processes are better explained by thinking through the workings of 'the political', as proposed by Chantal Mouffe (2005). In Mouffe's conceptualization of the political, the repression of the antagonistic potential inherent in any society – here by means of anti-political practices of government – leads to an inevitable, counter-hegemonic resurfacing of the political, i.e. the antagonistic tendencies, including in potentially violent ways.

Finally, we see it crucial to reflect on the workings and effects of any anti-politics machine in light of specific geographic, political, economic and cultural configurations, as these determine not only anti-political practices employed, but also the ways in which these are contested through the practice of politics and the resurgent political.

In what follows we provide a geography and timeline of Sikkim's hydropower development agenda and the different political struggles that have accompanied its implementation. Data for this study was collected between January and April 2011 through 58 semi-structured and informal interviews with project-affected communities, as well as focus group discussions and on-site observations in two project-affected areas in North/East and West Sikkim. Interviews were also conducted with 24 activists, journalists, government officials, NGO staff, company representatives and scholars familiar with hydropower politics. Further information was derived from local and national newspapers, (academic) journals and a close following of social media after the incisive earthquake that shook Sikkim in September 2011. The question guiding the investigations was why and how different communities and individuals had responded to the hydropower development intervention, both in its planning and implementation phases, and how their position had changed over time. Relationships with state actors and project developers were central to the discussions.

THE POLITICIZED ENVIRONMENT OF SIKKIMESE[3] HYDRO-DEVELOPMENT

The Indian state Sikkim extends over 7,096 km² of the Eastern Himalayas. A former Himalayan kingdom wedged between the borders of Nepal, the Tibetan Autonomous Region (China) and Bhutan, it counts less than 1% of the Indian territory. Sikkim's 8,000 megawatt (MW) hydro potential (equivalent to about five per cent of the total assessed hydroelectric potential of India – most of it unexploited) is due to the steep flow gradients of the Teesta and Rangit rivers and their numerous tributaries. This makes the tiny mountain state the second most important hydropower state in Northeast India, after Arunachal Pradesh (Vagholikar & Das 2010).

While Sikkim's annexation to India in 1975 triggered a boost in economic and social development, its entirely mountainous topography, as well as the relative isolation from mainland India have permitted little to no industrial activity in the state. Hydropower

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[3] We henceforth use the term Sikkimese as an adjective referring to the state and its population, not to a particular ethnic citizen group – which is another (possibly more) common usage of the term.

development therefore represents an enormous potential for the growth of Sikkim's largely rural economy.

Sikkim's 'hydel mission' (as we refer to it henceforth) is an ambitious one. Between 2001 and 2011, and without a finalized policy on hydropower development through private sector participation, the Government of Sikkim had awarded more than twenty-six hydroelectric projects (HEPs)[4] to over twenty public and private power producers, aiming to harness 5000 MW of untapped hydroelectric 'wealth' by 2015. All projects foresee a Build-Own-Operate-Transfer arrangement. This permits developers to construct and operate a project for thirty-five years, after which it is to be transferred back to the State – free of cost and in good operating condition (Energy & Power Department, 2010). The electricity produced is fed into regional electricity grids, operated by the state-owned Power Grid Corporation of India Ltd. Sikkim's own energy needs have been met after completion of the 510 MW Teesta V HEP by the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC) in 2008.

For private energy companies, Sikkim's hydropower sector proves to be an attractive investment environment. First, the state government has been facilitative in project allocation, in several cases bypassing the legally mandatory competitive bidding process by entering into joint venture enterprises with select private power producers (Syed and Dutta, 2010). Moreover, the reformulated Environmental Impact Assessment Notification of 2006 has made obtaining environmental clearance for hydropower projects nationally a much less cumbersome and time-consuming undertaking for power companies (Choudhury 2010), and inadequacies in adherence to social and environmental regulations, such as environmental impact assessments or protective construction measures, have in several cases been tolerated by the state government (Kohli, 2011; Lahiri, 2012; Menon and Vagholikar, 2004; Vagholikar and Das, 2010; Yumnam, 2012). As the Managing Director of Teesta Urja Ltd., the company owning the 1,200 MW Teesta III HEP in North Sikkim commented, 'We took up the project because the Sikkim government is proactive and quick in decision-making […]. Land acquisition, along with forest and environ-mental clearance, took less than two years' (Jishnu, 2008).

Further, the expected revenues for private investors are considerable. According to the 2008-9 performance audit of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India, due to the lack of

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[4] Two more projects had been allotted to the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC) by 2000. At least six more projects had been planned and/or allotted but were subsequently cancelled or withdrawn by the GOS. Of the remaining twenty-three projects allotted six have been cancelled only recently, in 2012.

an adequate revenue model, the Government of Sikkim has registered a huge loss of potential revenues: at only 12-16%, the royalty on the power generated/sold was insufficient, upfront premiums imposed on investors were meager, penalties imposed in case of delay in commissioning too low, and there was no imposition of specific conditions for regular contribution towards local area development in sixteen cases (CAG, 2009). On the other hand, the current electricity tariff regime shifts the burden of hydrological risk (in case of low water availability and subsequently low power generation) to the buyers, who need to pay higher tariffs, while power producers in that case are allowed to recover full charges, along with incentives (Vagholikar, 2007). In fact, the hydropower business in Sikkim appears so promising that many of the applicant companies (all India-based) are so-called 'Special Purpose Vehicles' (SPV) specifically established for the implementation of singular power projects in Sikkim (and some as little experienced in hydropower development as the state government itself; Vagholikar and Das, 2010).

All projects proposed are large-scale so-called run-of-the-river schemes involve the diversion of river water at the dam site through underground tunnels, usually of several kilometers length, so as to acquire sufficient 'head' to generate amounts of electricity comparable to those produced by large storage reservoirs. The water is then fed back into the riverbed. Eight projects (1,200 MW Teesta III HEP, 500 MW Teesta VI HEP, 96 MW Dikchu HEP, 96 MW Rongnichu HEP, 51 MW Bhasmey HEP, 66 Rangit II HEP, 120 MW Rangit IV HEP, and 96 MW Jorethang Loop HEP) are currently under construction by private power producers, while three projects (510 MW Teesta V HEP and 60 MW Rangit III HEP operated by NHPC Ltd., and 99 MW Chuzachen HEP operated by Gati Infrastructures Ltd.) have already been commissioned and are generating power. Nine further projects (330 MW Teesta II HEP, 520 MW Teesta IV HEP, 280 MW Panan HEP, 97 MW Tashiding HEP, 27.5 MW Kalez Khola I HEP, 54 MW Kalez Khola II HEP, 25 MW Rechu HEP, 25 MW Rahikyoung HEP, 71 MW Sada Mangder HEP) are still awaiting clearance.

The large dam industry touts R-o-R dams as a socially and environmentally 'benign' alternative to traditional storage dams, because they submerge less land, and because no water is permanently withdrawn from the system (Vagholikar and Das, 2010). However, the (cumulative) application of this technology in the geo-physically and ecologically fragile river valleys of Sikkim (part of the Eastern Himalayan biodiversity hotspot; Conservation International, 2013) is controversial, and has been creating a range of adverse environmental impacts, including, amongst others, loss of or damage to land, water sources, property and

livelihoods, caused by the tunneling of mountain slopes and ensuing geological disturbances (Lahiri, 2012; Menon and Vagholikar, 2004). Concerns have also been voiced over impacts on riverine ecosystems, as the cumulative effect of twenty large dams will severely fragment the river system, and because the prescribed minimum flow of 15% in the original river bed is often not maintained, especially during the lean season (Manish, 2011). Another controversial issue is the future safety of these cascade dams, considering the area is seismically highly active (Indian seismic map zone IV out of V), and the failure or overtopping of one dam (provoked for example by landslides, floods or glacial lake outbursts) could provoke a devastating domino effect (Vagholikar and Das, 2010).

Citizen groups in Sikkim have expressed their concerns about this large-scale damming exercise from an early stage on, and have tried to resist the construction of specific projects and/or to negotiate their terms and conditions. However, the Sikkimese experience with (anti)hydropower advocacy has been a gradual learning process for activists and affected communities. Before construction of Sikkim's first large-scale R-o-R projects (the 60MW Rangit III HEP in West Sikkim, and the 510 MW Teesta V HEP at the centre of Sikkim, commissioned in 1999 and 2008 respectively) most Sikkimese had hardly any idea of what hydropower development looks like, and what it implies in terms of ecological, cultural and socio-economic impacts. With little to no activist experience and no strong culture of resistance against the ruling powers, initially the limited number of anti-dam struggles was largely confined to specific projects, and there was no significant coordination among different movements.

The most vocal and intense moments of resistance had been triggered by the fear of cultural erosion and the loss of spiritual-ecological heritage. It is important to bring to mind that in Sikkim ethnic-communal issues have always been politically highly charged (in fact, it continues to be the single most politically charged issue today; Arora 2009; Chakraborty, 2000). At their basis lies an entrenched insider-outsider rivalry which takes its origin from the large-scale immigration of a Nepali labour-force encouraged by the British colonial 'divide-and-rule' strategy towards the end of the nineteenth century. Since then Sikkim's ethnic balance has been markedly tilted, with the Nepali majority – originally conceived of as 'outsiders' – slated against the 'tribal' Lepcha (supposedly indigeneous to Sikkim) and Bhutia (of Tibetan descent) minority groups, who fervently seek to defend their 'insider' status (Schaefer, 1995). While over the years the Nepalis have to a large extent assimilated, the insider-outsider dichotomy and the pervasive fear of cultural erosion and loss of political-

economic priviledges, owned by those who are 'indigenous', is still alive and vivid in the state (Bentley, 2007; Little, 2010a). The rapid and single-handed sell-out of so many hydro projects to non-Sikkimese companies – essentially 'outsiders' – and the employment of the principle of "eminent domain for public purpose"[5] in order to grant these companies access to legally protected tribal areas thus deeply affected Sikkimese ethnic-patriotic sentiment.

Environmentalist ideology – in terms of protecting nature for nature's sake – is not pervasive in Sikkim. However, the fact that cultural and religious identity are intimately linked with ecology (both among tribal animist groups and Sikkimese Buddhists deities and the sacred are said to reside in the natural environment, i.e. in mountains, rivers, lakes, stones, etc.) is a second contentious issue associated with ecologically disruptive hydropower development (and very much related to the issue of ethnic-cultural sovereignty). Thus it is no surprise that the most vocal popular movements of resistance to hydropower development in the state have mobilized on the grounds of religion and ethnic-cultural identity.

The first group to mobilize against dam-building was a coalition of devout Buddhists (including large numbers of monks decending to the capital Gangtok from the numerous monasteries around the state) and environmentalists who, starting in 1994, successfully rose against the construction of a state-owned, 30 MW overground R-o-R project on the 'sacred' Rathong Chu River in West Sikkim. By 1997, their mobilization prompted Chief Minister Pawan Chamling, then newly elected to office, to call off the project, supposedly so as "to honour the sentiments, religion and culture of the people of Sikkim"[6] (cited in Menon, 2003:33).

Despite the movement's success, the Rathong Chu experience was to remain a singular event in the memory of hydro-related advocacy in Sikkim. The MoU for the 510 MW Teesta V HEP in central Sikkim was signed in 2000, in a move that surprised local populations and activists. The Joint Action Committee, an advocacy group founded in North Sikkim when plans for a six-stage 3340 MW cascade development on the Teesta River became known, found itself powerless against the combined powers of the signatories: the state government and the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC). The group's mobilizational

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[5] The principle of 'eminent domain' is contained in the Land Acquisition Act, a law put in place by British colonialists in 1894. It declares the state the owner of all land, water, forests etc., and empowers it to appropriate any public or private land including commons for public purposes, against compensation, and including by use of force, if necessary.

[6] According to Arora (2009:110), other motives cited for shelving the project were 'escalating ethnic tensions, […] the escalating costs of construction, and gaining favourable public opinion before the general elections scheduled for 1998'.

potential was limited and they eventually dissolved, due to the fact that the local population was ethnically heterogeneous (therefore no resistance on grounds of identity was staged), and much local participation in the movement was confined to negotiating land rates and employment in the project.

However, only a few years later, from around 2004 onwards, anti-hydel advocacy in Sikkim was to erupt again, and in a more forceful manner than before. In what was to become Sikkim's most fervent anti-dam struggle to date, a group of Lepcha activists – predominantly young and educated – staged several rounds of protest against six projects planned within the tribal Lepcha reserve Dzongu (North Sikkim), an area historically shielded from the intrusion of outsiders by law. The group, organized under the name 'Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT), capitalized on this controversial assault on what is considered the sacred heartland of Lepcha culture, using again an ethnic-cultural issue as their main motive of struggle. Their campaign included two several months long hunger strikes, led by two figurehead activists and supported by numerous youths, as well as vociferous street protests – both in Dzongu and in the capital Gangtok – and a series of court cases. As we shall argue later, ACT's struggle and successful politicization of the dam issue forms an integral part of Sikkim's hydropower politics, and has served to unhinge the state-led hydropower mission to some extent.

While ACT, with backing of (inter)national civil society groups, was successful in negotiating the scrapping of four projects in Dzongu, the group was in the first instance not able to upscale their protest to a Sikkim-wide anti-hydro movement. However, the advancement of project construction and planning in other parts of the state has been accompanied and contested by the emergence of other advocacy groups, such as the semi-autonomous Bhutia communities of Lachen and Lachung, in the extreme north of the state, or the resistance against three proposed projects on the earlier named Rathong Chu river, in the 'sacred landscape' of West Sikkim.

It is in light of these events that the workings of the anti-politics of hydropower development have to be considered. In sum, until the advent of the large-scale state-led hydropower mission, Sikkim proved to be a rather apolitical polity. The ACT uprising was unprecedented and unusual in a context where civil society engagement with political issues had been historically low-key, and where the tribal population is largely known to be timid, docile and accommodating (Schaefer, 1995). As Schaefer (1995:9) recalls the last significant political uprising in the state, 'even the integration of the kingdom into the Indian Union in 1975 was

carried out without much resistance, with Sikkim literally handed over with only one casualty among the Sikkim Guards.'

While especially with reference to Lepchas, many might argue that docility and peacefulness are cultural traits, it is equally important to recall that during the only recently initiated democratic transition process, democratic values such as freedom of expression or press have not yet fully permeated Sikkimese society. In fact a somewhat anti-democratic regime seemed to have taken hold in Sikkim since the beginning of the autocratic, fifteen year rule of Chief Minister Nar Bahadur Bhandari (from 1979-1994) and his Nepali-dominated Sikkim Sangram Parishad (SSP), when 'no one could voice his resentment against the state government without fear of violent repression.' As a consequence, until today fears of abuse of power are pervasive, and many people still hesitate to voice their opinions, 'even on simple environmental grounds' (Schaefer, 1995: 13). As we will elaborate in the following sections, the state of democracy seems not to have significantly improved since 1994. While the state's leadership reiterates the 'unfettered' nature of democracy in Sikkim, the political canvas in the state is still characterized by clientelistic state-society patronage relations, and a solid single-party rule. Chief Minister Pawan Kumar Chamling and his multi-ethnic-multi-caste Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) have led the state uninterruptedly for more than nineteen years, having held 96 and 100 per cent of assembly seats respectively for their last two terms in office.

Yet as we shall illustrate below, in spite of the absence of a strong and outspoken civil society in the state, the Government of Sikkim with backing by the power companies went to great lengths in order to build consensus on the hydropower issue, even though this necessitated concerted attempts at silencing dissenting voices. It is the aim of this article then, to unravel how and why, under the said circumstance, the protracted hydropower conflict eventually started to create political momentum, leading to an opening of new political spaces (starting with the Lepcha uprisings), a reconfiguration of state-society relations, and increased civil society engagement with the politics of development intervention. In the following we will explore this process step by step, examining first various anti-political strategies employed, before outlining some of the responses of the supposed targets of anti-politics.

ANTI-POLITICS OF HYDROPOWER DEVELOPMENT IN SIKKIM

While anti-politics in the Fergusonian sense strongly builds on depoliticization in the form of expertocratization and 'rendering technical', the anti-political strategies pursued in the promotion of Sikkimese hydropower development (with the aim of curbing debate, establishing consensus and silencing dissent – short – repressing the political) are more varied. Ideological, 'preference-shaping' depoliticization 'relies on normative beliefs' and involves 'the construction of a new 'reality' in which the role of […] politicians is presented as having been, to some extent, eviscerated by external forces or broad societal factors' (Mishra, 2011: 161). In our case it works through apolitical regimes of representation by means of which consensus is sought, so as to displace the political from debates over socio-natural arrangements.

Institutional depoliticization (*ibid.*) on the other hand works through the removal of hydropower from the political realm (the encounter between society and the state), by adopting an expertocratic, techno-managerial approach in which the state to some extent removes itself as the decision-making political authority from the scene of 'intervention'. In its place private project developers and their technical-scientific experts (including those contracted from environmental consultancies) become the reference agents at the interface between the project and the affected populations. State bureaucrats (such as the district collectors) act as mediators where private experts evade political decisions (e.g. who is to be compensated in the case of project-afflicted damage to private property, and to what extent). In the ping-pong game of passing on responsibilities from state to private to state agencies and so forth, the locus of political debate – i.e. the authority at which objections should be directed – becomes obscured. A strategic management of project-related information creates additional uncertainty which to some extent undermines political contestation

To the extent that these anti-political strategies are not sufficient to displace political challenges, dissenting voices are silenced through coercive means, including othering, political pressure, the buying out of dissenters, and, as a more preventive means, the politicking of project-related knowledge. In the following we will address and illustrate each of these strategies, by help of empirical examples.

Apolitical Regimes of Representation

In order to give legitimacy to hydropower development as not only the 'best' but the 'only' viable development strategy for Sikkim, the State Government and other hydropower supporters take recourse to a set of apolitical pro-dam narratives, combining half-established truths and daring promises with a kind of TINA ('there-is-no-alternative') discourse. The Chief Minister's introduction to the Government's 'Energy & Power Sector Vision 2015' – laid down in a pamphlet – thus reads:

> [The] Power Sector is one of the most important Sectors for our State. Its development is vitally important because it will have two fold [sic] effects on the economy of the State. With the easy availability of electricity, the socio-economic condition of the people of Sikkim would favourably rise on the one hand while on the other hand revenue from the export of power will help the State to strengthen its revenue base. Thus, the Sector has to be speedily developed to cater to the demand within and outside the State. (Energy & Power Department 2010:3)

Similarly, in another frequently used parable, Sikkim's Rivers are equated to a treasure that lies untapped, so that the State's wealth is currently being 'washed away', or 'let flow to waste'[7] (Sikkim Express, 2009). On the other hand, 'if utilised with wisdom, these rivers and streams could be converted into a white gold.' (Chief Minister Chamling cited in Little, 2008).

Tapping this under-utilized resource is turned into a kind of moral imperative through the claim that it is the only realistic source of income to ensure economic growth and financial autonomy from the Centre, and a pre-condition for the socio-economic upliftment of the Sikkimese population. The argument about financial self-reliance is particularly compelling as Sikkim's current economic dependence on Central Government funding is seen by many as a sign of backwardness. This is compounded by rumours that the Centre may soon terminate its financial support for the small mountain state – an alarming albeit questionable possibility, considering Sikkim's strategic location bordering China.[8]

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[7] Cited in interview #1 with NGO representative, West Sikkim, January 2011.
[8] It is unclear to what extent allegations about non-continuation of development funding from the centre can be taken seriously. As there are still disputed territories along the border with Tibet/China, it is in the interest of the Central Government (which has a strong army presence in Sikkim) that internal peace and tranquillity, and overall citizen satisfaction are maintained in the state (Little, 2010a).

The TINA narrative is supported by a gamut of promises about the expected pay-offs of hydro development: low variable costs of generation, employment, electrification, rural infrastructure, and plentiful revenues. The numbers quoted are impressive: Rs. 15 billion of annually expected hydro earnings, amounting to Rs. 806 billion over a total of thirty-five years (Energy & Power Department 2010). This would translate into about 650 US$ per person[9] – nearly half of the GDP per capita of India – making Sikkim 'one of the richest states in the country' (Resneck, 2010). By pledging to reinvest these royalties into the key state development objectives – infrastructural expansion, education, poverty eradication, and employment generation – the GOS expects that no later than 2015 Sikkim will turn into a prosperous, poverty-free state and 'a land of opportunities with zero unemployment'(GOS, 2009b:12).

Taking advantage of the fact that hydropower is globally portrayed as a green form of energy, the Government of Sikkim effectively drapes communications about dams in its broader rhetoric of eco-friendly, sustainable development in the state – a discourse it has been reiterating for roughly two decades. In his biography the Chief Minister is quoted as pledging:

> In an ecologically fragile State like Sikkim, terms like sustainability are closely linked with human existence. This we have recognized well in advance and all our developmental efforts will be sustainable without any adverse effect on our ecological balance. In our two priority sectors like hydro-power and tourism, we have taken extra care to introduce a spirit of sustainability. While framing policies, we have taken care not to fall prey to short-term pressure but rely on long-term consideration and their implications in the long run. (Chamling cited in Bali, 2003: 259)

With reference to R-o-R projects he is further quoted as stating:

> The State Government has been treading the path very cautiously. In spite of Government of India's preference for multi-purpose large dam storage type hydel projects, the State Government has stuck to run of the river type of hydel projects. The world over, run of the river project is considered the cleanliest and the most environment friendly source of energy. […] It is because of the apprehensions related to geology that the State Government has taken a stand that all the projects shall be run of the river type and no big dam shall be

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[9] Exchange rate 14.8.2013; http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD (GDP per 2012)

constructed. Run of the river will have the advantage of light construction of storage and water conductor system. This will mitigate the geological risk factors. (The Sikkim Times, 2007b)

The Energy & Power Department, in its 2008-09 annual report, even went as far as to claim that "all the projects being run of the river schemes have no dam or major reservoir for generation of rated capacities during the lean period" (Energy & Power Department, 2009), while a reading of various project reports confirms the opposite. Since after several years into the hydropower mission it is becoming more and more difficult to pass off environmentally disruptive tunnel blasting activities as green, these impacts are addressed but downplayed in official discourse, calling into mind the state's two topmost priorities – development and economic growth:

> 'The State Government's policy has been to synchronize development imperatives with environmental sustainability as our green mantra remaining extra conscious while implementing hydel projects. However, such impact on the environment is mostly temporary in nature and as such, Hydro Power remains the cheapest green power available to the [sic] mankind today. As such, avoiding development of Hydro Power is not the answer to the environmental issues.' (Chamling in Energy & Power Department, 2010)

While it is questionable whether this 'all-benefit, low-impact' narrative about run-of-the-river schemes will satisfy critics among the public of Sikkim (the socio-environmentally disruptive impacts of hydro development are now increasingly visible throughout the state; see Menon and Vagholikar, 2004; Bhutia, 2012) it fits well with the green image that Sikkim gained nationally. For its stringent environmental policies and investments directed at 'greening' the state – be it for afforestation programmes, imposing fines on indiscriminate refuse dumping, or the state-wide ban on plastics and agri-chemicals (GOS, 2009a) – the Government of Sikkim has already won several national awards over the past two decades (GOS, 2013).

What is particularly controversial about these 'fabricated truths' ('low impact hydropower') and promises made ('easily available electricity', 'socio-economic upliftment for all Sikkimese', 'zero unemployment'), is that they gloss over important political questions. For many in the state hydropower development represents not only a solution but a process of transformation beset with problems. Thus the social and environmental impacts intrinsic to the project design (e.g. minimizing river flow, damaged land and property due to tunnel

blasting), necessitate negotiation over priorities and decisions; for example as to what extent the state and the affected populations are willing to make these sacrifices in exchange for a financially autonomous Sikkim. Designating river water as wasted 'wealth' if not harnessed locally – a logic that stirs from economic efficiency thinking – makes for a powerful metaphor, but omits the various uses and values which locals (including downstream communities) currently obtain from the river. Locally beneficial hydropower development moreover consists not only in electricity generation but depends on its reliable distribution at affordable rates. It is this performance deficit – not the lack of available electricity – that largely accounts for the frequent power failures in the supposedly 100 per cent electrified Sikkim. Depoliticization thus consists in not putting forward or making explicit these questions for political debate, instead discursively 'beautifying' the state-led hydropower intervention.

On the other hand, the TINA narrative, i.e. presenting hydropower as an economic, political and ecological imperative, and the *only* development solution (not one amongst others), precludes political debate on normative grounds. Who would ever argue against green development? Who in the state would dispute the desirability of Sikkim being financially self-reliant?

Parallel and much akin to the TINA narrative runs another discourse – reiterated especially vis-à-vis project-affected communities – that portrays hydropower development as a *fait accompli* (along the lines of 'the projects are already here and being implemented'). The decision-making authority over hydropower lies solely with the government as an all-powerful albeit benevolent entity. A statement by the Chairperson of the Sikkim Pollution Control Board (convener of the public hearing for the 1200 MW Teesta III HEP in 2006) exemplifies how hydropower is presented as inevitable – therefore non-debatable and non-obstructable – since the orders for this mode of development are coming from a higher scale: 'You should reap the benefit – because no one can stop this project, no matter which political party comes to power tomorrow. No one can stop this as the Government of India has given the orders. These projects are not meant to harm or bring tension to anyone' (Save Dzongu, n.d.)

The statement also illustrates how government representatives at times seek to detach the supposedly 'non-political' issue of hydropower from the muddied domain of party politics, which the omnipotent hydro-order imparting authority clearly transcends.

In the remote rural areas of Sikkim, in turn, this paradigm of the supreme state authority appears to have been internalized by factions of the population who express a lack of empowerment to defend their interests vis-à-vis their 'benefactor':

> We are farmers and we are poor. It all depends on the government. I am not happy and I am not sad. We are just standing by as the government goes ahead with its plans. ... It's all up to the government, they have a free hand.[10]

<div align="center">***</div>

> After the strikes [in Dzongu] nothing happened, even though they went on hunger strike. That's because it all depends on the government, they are the all-powerful. The protesters can't really influence the government. The people of the village also can't stop the government. Even the landowners are just guardians of the land.[11]

The Anti-Politics of Planning

Another form of anti-politics can be observed during the planning and execution phases in specific project localities. By obscuring the locus of decision-making power and by withholding concrete project-related information itself, also the object and locus of political debate become concealed. Affected citizens no longer know whom to address with their objections, nor what concretely they should agree or disagree with. This will be further explained below.

From interviews with affected communities and NGO workers in West Sikkim, where planning activities for a cascade of three R-o-R projects (the Lethang, Ting Ting and Tashiding HEPs, with a combined capacity of 292 MW) were in course, we basically found that the state government had largely left on-site planning operations to the three private power-producing companies. Project plans were never presented and discussed with the local communities prior to the arrival of the companies' technical and scientific experts. Several villagers reported that their first impact with the project plans had been on the day when the project developers, without prior notice, entered private properties to carry out land and feasibility surveys. The project plans were staged as cast in concrete. Moreover, only

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[10] Interview #2 with project-affected person, West Sikkim, March 2011.
[11] Interview #3 with project-affected person, West Sikkim, March 2011.

landholders whose land was to be acquired were informed and drawn into negotiations, while other community members were left oblivious to the project details or had to rely on word-of-mouth. The

Once confronted with the already finalized project plans, antagonistic responses and objections from the affected communities are (partly) forestalled through diverse strategies ranging from 'systematic buy-off' to the confounding of state development responsibilities and compensation obligations. To win the goodwill of local communities, companies take advantage of traditions used by vote-seeking political parties, such as organizing picnics and participating in community events, weddings, funerals, etc. In one instance, as an activist of a local civil society organization recounts, even the mandatory public hearing, which is to be organized by the state pollution control board (SPCB) in absence of other state actors, was orchestrated: 'Instead of the [SPCB], it was the private companies that organised and controlled the programmes. Even the government officials came to the hearings in cars arranged by them [the companies]. There was large-scale arrangement of food and entertainment' (The Telegraph, 2010). In another account, the company reportedly was so eager to establish a foothold in the community, even before any project clearance had been given, that they visited individual homes, distributing gifts.

When referring to project-related compensation, both state and private project proponents tend to portray the projects as wholly beneficial to the affected persons. Although national and state rehabilitation and resettlement policy defines mandatory compensation requirements (monetary payments for leased/acquired land; one job per fully project-affected household; one percent of generated revenues for local area development; project-related employment according to skills, etc.; see MRD, 2007; The Sikkim Times, 2007b) these are presented locally as enormous individual gains. Such posturing capitalizes on persistent and visible development deficiencies in many rural areas of Sikkim (regarding for example road, electrification and health infrastructure, or employment), despite the uninterrupted flow of central government funding.

While certain charitable practices, including holding free medical camps, handing out scholarships, and organizing sports events could in fact qualify as corporate social responsibility strategies. However, the companies are also to become involved in the development of rural infrastructure, such as water supply, roads, community halls, sanitation and waste facilities, by way of 'local area development' and the adoption and development of so-called 'model villages', as this quote by the Chief Minister suggests:

The far flung areas around the project sites mostly located in the remote corner of the State will benefit by way of development activities like road connectivity, schools and primary health centres. […] The developer [sic] of the larger projects are required to adopt one or two villages in the vicinity of the project sites. These villages will be developed by the developer by providing all civic facilities required as per the concept of a model village. (The Sikkim Times, 2007b)

These are public development services which from a normative standpoint would fall into the responsibility of the state – with or without hydropower development. Yet they are presented as additional sops to the 'affected communities', in exchange for their sacrifices made.

Informing the public about project details and possible impacts is mandated both by the Environmental Impact Assessment Notification 2006, and by the Indian Right to Information Act of 2005. In the project-affected areas of West Sikkim, it was reported that this process was arbitrary and selective, with project information being imparted only to affected landholders, and that primarily to discuss issues of compensation. In fact for some affected citizens the mandatory public hearing (organized by the Sikkim Pollution Control Board to allow affected citizens and others to voice their concerns and objections about a proposed development project) was the first systematic encounter with state authorities and project developers.

Yet precisely such selectiveness in imparting project information can be politically advantageous to project proponents, as it disables or decelerates political contestation and mobilization. In one case the local community basically ended up split over the issue. Those who were promised compensation and other benefits were slated against others, excluded from the negotiations, yet who feared the project would still affect their property and livelihood adversely. While there were attempts to mobilize against the project these were weakened by lack of community cohesiveness.

Uncertainty was another obstacle. This being a remote rural area, many citizens had never seen a completed hydropower project and, due to lack of detailed project information were oblivious to what they should expect. Also the uncertain and intransparent nature of project planning accounts for much insecurity. Given the bureaucratic apparatus and complex clearance procedures, planning can span over years, at times resulting in the complete scrapping of proposed projects. Since it is unclear whether the project will actually materialize and when, where the different project components will be located, which areas are

going to be affected and what benefits will eventually accrue, the very object of political debate is obscured and affected communities are hesitant to invest in political mobilization. In fact even the design of R-o-R schemes facilitates anti-politics, as the majority of infrastructure components is basically concealed underground.

To synthesize, in a situation where large-scale hydropower development is privatized and private enterprises are left free to negotiate their 'own' terms of reference with locals, in absence of the regulatory authority of state agencies, hydropower plans are showcased as a fait accompli for the affected communities. Whether such projects should be implemented is no longer an issue for political debate, nor is the project design - a product of technical-scientific deliberations. Discussion becomes reduced to negotiations about land rates and other compensatory obligations, and is exclusive to those considered, as per official norms, as directly or partially project-affected (i.e. those who lose some or all of their land). Through the withdrawal of state agents from the development interface, the political sphere is partly dissolved – inaccessible to the political demands by the population.

Silencing Popular Resistance

The social unrest (although limited) which has accompanied the Sikkim hydropower mission from the outset testifies that mere acts of depoliticization and anti-political knowledge manipulation have not been sufficient to contain contestation of the hydropower issue. As construction and completion of different hydropower projects is advancing across the state, giving increasing visibility to the reality of hydropower development and the discursive construct shrouding it, many Sikkimese are adopting a more critical stance towards this large-scale damming exercise. Especially the anti-hydro campaign by the Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) exacerbated this trend, eventually constituting a real threat and disruption to the advance of project implementation. To enforce consent in the face of the increasingly politicized climate around hydropower, the government has resorted to more authoritarian and coercive forms of anti-politics – with the effect that the fragile foundations upon which Sikkim's image as a people friendly state and 'unfettered democracy' is built, were unveiled.

Before we go on to explain different coercive techniques of government, it is important to note here that these are contingent on historically entrenched state-citizen patron-client relations, which still pervade the socio-political fabric of Sikkim today. The fact that patronage represents the basis of livelihood provision for large parts of the rural population,

according to Schaefer (1995), is a consequence of Sikkim's relationship of economic dependence on the Centre, starting with the 1975 merger and Sikkim's qualification as one of eleven Special Category States (SCS)[12]. The reliance on preferential central government funding, Schaefer criticizes, has allowed Sikkim to develop into a welfare state that fails to sufficiently promote entrepreneurship and livelihood autonomy among citizens. As a consequence, he argues, much of the state's population is remaining economically dependent on government favouritism.

Such favouritism includes free hand-outs of building materials, seeds, livestock, food rations, water supply and sanitation facilities, and even entire model brick-homes (all in the name of poverty alleviation) to 'conforming' individuals, households and communities. Moreover, since the government of Sikkim is the largest employer in a state where youth unemployment is rampant, access to popular government jobs, business contracts or professional licenses is equally regulated through patronage relations. However the allocation of such 'benefits' occurs selectively, and in small portions: this year a pig, next year material to renovate the roof – if one is fortunate to count among the select beneficiaries. Since the state is small, the likelihood of being watched or overheard is significant, and political pressure can easily be extended across the relatively short chain of politicians, bureaucrats, middlemen, party-associates and village leaders. Voicing contrary opinions in public for many is thus not an option, for fear of being ostracized and 'victimized' as a consequence.

The term 'victimization' is widely used in Sikkim to denote a common and widely dreaded process of 'othering' and punishing those who criticize or oppose hydropower development and the state government more generally. Essentially a scare tactic to discourage such 'non-aligned' behaviour, victimization works on two levels: discursively, in this case through a distinct anti-protest narrative; and materially, by withholding patronage.

The strongly condemning government rhetoric that describes dissenters as jeopardizing the national/Sikkimese project of nation-building, communal cohesion, development and progress, has been reiterated by state actors on numerous occasions. At public events and in official government statements – particularly at the time of the ACT protests – activists are accused of undermining democracy, peace and tranquility in the state. In his 2007

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[12] Special Category Status has been awarded to eleven states with harsh/hilly terrain, sparse and significant tribal population and a low level of infrastructural development, with consequentially high delivery cost of public services, backwardness and social problems. SCSs receive preferential treatment in federal assistance as well as tax breaks to fuel investment in industrial development (Saxena, 1999).

Independence Day speech, the Chief Minister called the Lepcha protestors on hunger strike "marginal, anti-national and anti-Sikkimese", and "politically misguided by outside interests wanting to destabilize all development in Sikkim." In his government's posturing, such a small dissenting minority does not call into question the "public affirmation and public consensus with the government plans and policies [as] evident in the assent of the thirty-one democratically elected representatives [to] the Sikkim Legislative Assembly" – illustrative of Sikkim being the "perfect shining example of a consensual democratic polity" (cited in Arora, 2010: 96).

Likewise, outside activists who visited Sikkim in public support of ACT (including a Lepcha delegation from neighbouring West Bengal and renowned anti-dam/people's rights activist Medha Patkar) were criticized for spreading "fear and alarm […] on grounds of religion, race, caste and residence for their narrow self-interest'" and in defiance of "the development and prosperity of the country" (*Himalayan Mirror* and *The Statesman* cited in Little, 2010a: 122,123). Their acts of solidarity were accused of being politically motivated, interfering with matters internal to the state, and instigated by opposition parties "trying to obstruct the development process" (*The Telelgraph* cited in Little, 2010a:122). Medha Patkar's public comments on the issue were put into question for her lack of historical and environmental expertise. Similar "'outsider as troublemaker' mantras" are repeated frequently and reflect the administration's sensitivity and hostile bearing towards "unplanned and unscripted attention" paid to state affairs (ibid.: 122).

But also at the community-level, individuals who profess doubts, disagreement or resistance to hydropower development report to be subject of political pressure. Either through fellow community members or in the form of political propaganda at public events, dissenting groups and individuals are discouraged from publicly opposing hydropower development lest they risk to be excluded from patronage benefits and/or labeled 'anti-state', 'anti-national', and anti-development. During the Teesta III public hearing the Chairperson of the Sikkim Pollution Control Board thus cautioned affected citizens:

> Anyone who disturbs this project is not a Sikkimese. He might be born in Sikkim but is a useless person if he opposes such a good project. Such people are your opposition and anti-social elements. […] Because you are in the opposition you are opposing the Government. Since you are opposing the Government of India you are an anti-national. (Save Dzongu, n.d.)

Discursive pressure takes different forms, from 'friendly' suggestions and advice, to what respondents may perceive as direct threats, as the following statements by project-affected persons[13] show:

> I don't think this project should come, but I have never tried to convince others of my opinion. If I say anything it will seem as if I'm going against the government.
>
> ***
>
> The majority is against the project but no one will be openly opposing. A knowledgeable person said we should not complain.
> *[Interviewer:] "Who says these things?"*
> Village leaders, members of the political party… Also one month ago the Chief Minister came here to give a speech. He said that project construction will start and we should let it go ahead.
>
> ***
>
> The government is enforcing this project. They have a vision to make Sikkim self-reliant through hydropower. The government advises the opponents not to oppose the project because it will be good for the people of Sikkim. The area MLA also came to this village saying the same.

While one might discount such 'advice' as mere scare tactics, the very material risks associated with victimization are familiar to many Sikkimese who experienced the fifteen year autocratic rule of 'iron-fist' Chief Minister Bhandari (Bora 2004). A villager, when asked whether he would protest against the project once construction starts, explained to us: 'How can I protest? The public of this area cannot protest the government. […] People are afraid of the government; they are totally dependent upon the government. If the people protest then they can't get the benefits the government is giving out.'

Open opposition vis-à-vis the government may thus result in being cut off from hand-outs, losing eligibility for jobs, business contracts and licenses, or – in case of public employees – being transferred to another job or placement location. Even violent attacks on person or property by goons who claim to act in the name of the ruling party (or the opposition, for that matter) are frequently reported in the local news. A female panchayat leader explained to us

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[13] Interviews #4-6 with project-affected person, West Sikkim, March 2011.

that political victimization may also affect entire villages, cutting them off from basic development assistance, where citizens jointly defend their cause (and especially where villages are loyal to opposition parties): 'The community is against the project, most people will be opposing. The Panchayat should listen to the political leaders, but I am with the community. We know that we will get lots of problems. They will likely stop providing some basic services.'

In another interview, the head of the local village council lamented: 'We as grassroots people have a different way of approaching things than the government. However we can't make any agreement with them. We have no power, that's the problem. The government is imposing this project and there is a lot of corruption. The government has [its] channels, so we can't avoid this.'

As interviews in different project-affected areas testified, 'victimization' is thus a powerful tool, as the fear it induces effectively curbs dissent – among poorer households who rely on basic livelihood assistance, but also among government employees, grassroots politicians, teachers, and even retirees, whose professional status is directly linked to the government. As one teacher[14] deplored:

> At the public hearing I opposed the project and spoke out but what to do for the simple public? We don't have any opportunity. I protested three times, but there was no response to my plea. The last time I finally agreed, because of political pressure. Many people here are employed by the government and exist only through its benevolence.

Many of the young Lepcha activists from Dzongu made the experience, that their discursive 'othering' had consequences for family and community cohesion, and thus for their localized movement as a whole. Families and communities experienced a deep rift, as relatives and fellow community members started to redline and steer clear of already victimized activists for fear of meeting the same fate.[15] ACT members moreover reported that victimization of one person can put in danger the livelihood or livelihood prospects of family and relatives. In several instances, government servants and teachers among their family members had been

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[14] Interviews #7 with project-affected person, West Sikkim, March 2011.
[15] The Lepcha community in Dzongu was divided over the hydropower issue for other reasons too, notably because there were important parts of the population who favoured the projects for the benefits they expected to accrue to their household/community (Little, 2010b). Some also felt patronized by the young, educated activists who took it upon themselves to protect their own, "innocent" people (McDuie-Ra, 2011).

subjected to forced relocation from their place of residence to remote parts of the state or country. For the young and educated activists, victimization also effectively rules out many future employment possibilities in the state. The combination of these factors has been a deterrent, even for some of the most determined activists, to further engage in hydropower-related protest (see also Little 2008).

Victimization thus also served as a strategy to disarm collective anti-hydel resistance. Members and potential supporters of ACT were threatened with victimization lest they continue providing support to the movement. Others were 'bought out' by way of employment contracts, occasionally in the hydropower project itself. When ACT protesters were sitting on hunger strike display in the capital Gangtok, the government allegedly discouraged solidary supporters from visiting the site lest they too would be victimized. According to Little (2009), at the time even mere passersby kept their gaze cast downward when approaching the protesters' venue.

The administration has also not shied away from occasional attempts at restriction of basic democratic rights and freedoms in the state. In 2008, when ACT had organized a protest rally together with Lepcha activists from neighbouring West Bengal, the state government went at great length to obstruct the public event. Amongst others it invoked an emergency law (Section 144) that restricts free assembly and that dates back to the time when British colonial India was seeking to topple the growing independence movement. This drastic measure against a peaceful, Gandhian form of protest, which was given the official go-ahead two months earlier, was justified on grounds of pre-empting "a law and order situation" in the state capital (Little, 2010a).

AN OPENING OF NEW POLITICAL SPACES

Although the government's anti-politics strategy was to some extent clearly effective in curbing popular resistance to the hydropower mission, it is also evident that hydropower development has brought with it a change of tide in the state's political climate. Together with adverse project impacts the anti-political strategies employed by the government in project-affected areas and against protesters have created significant malcontent and indignation, particularly at the high-handedness with which the government seeks to push ahead the hydropower mission against the sentiments of parts of the population.

While the ACT protests have to date remained the most powerful popular response to state-led hydropower development, in staging their resistance so visibly the activists have set an important precedent for collective anti-hydropower mobilization generally. Thus following the ACT campaign, and as more and more projects are starting to materialize in different locations, other groups have become vocal in the state.

The Lachen and Lachung communities, settled near the Tibetan Plateau in North Sikkim, have built up a consolidated resistance against several proposed projects in their neighbouring high-altitude valleys. These semi-autonomous Bhutia groups of Tibetan descent have adopted a hostile stance against dams, denying even a cup of tea to any outsider who approaches them with the issue of hydropower. The pristine alpine landscape surrounding the villages is the communities' economic backbone, with huge numbers of tourist vehicles plying the Lachen and Lachung valleys every day. This sector could suffer substantially from hydro-related construction. In a letter issued in 2007, the community leaders warn that "the otherwise peace loving, simple and god fearing people of Lachen" are disposed to turn the hitherto existing situation of peace and security in Sikkim "fluid and explosive if […] pushed too far to the extent of losing their patience […]":

> Let us not create another Kashmir or Nagaland by forcible implementation of the project which has not been accepted by the local people. We have not signed the MoU pertaining to the project and as such we should not be held responsible for any untoward incident resulting from the implementation of the project in question. (The Sikkim Times, 2007a)

This has made planning operations extremely difficult for the government and project developers, to the point where the state government has deemed it sounder to shelve the project plans for the time being.

While Lachen is not aligned with the ruling party government and has been opposing hydropower projects on the Lachen Chu river from the outset, the situation in Lachung was more ambiguous. A former Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), Minister of Power and resident of Lachung had advocated in favour of the Lachung hydropower project, and according to informants was also responsible for channeling development funds to the community (whereas Lachen was not eligible for such subsidies). Opposition to the power project was a more delicate affair at the time. This seems to have changed however in recent years, when even Lachung residents have collectively refuted a project in their constituency.

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In West Sikkim, the conflict surrounding the three proposed hydropower projects on the Rathong Chu river had been simmering for several years, but was intermittent and largely sustained by Buddhist monks and the ethnic-religious interest groups SIBLAC and NASBO who opposed the projects on the grounds that they would destroy a sacred landscape.[16] The Khangchendzonga Conservation Committee, an environmental conservation NGO, and several project-affected villagers and landowners have moreover petitioned against two of the projects which are in close proximity to Sikkim's largest national park, the Khangchendzonga Biosphere Reserve.

In late 2011, start of construction works on the 97MW Tashiding HEP triggered several symbolic acts of protest, including religious rituals, reported in local media. The activists (a group of affected villagers) claim that they had signed their 'No Objection Certificates' earlier, "thinking it to be a developmental project", but not realizing the "far reaching consequences" and "disaster that such manmade projects could bring upon them", as they found exemplified by the geological disasters caused in the area during the recent earthquake (Sikkim NOW!, 2011). The conflict eventually developed into a more broad-based anti-hydel movement, with several local and state-wide advocacy groups coalescing in 'The Common Platform for Joint Action against Hydropower Projects'. Their protest successfully increased the pressure on the state government, which pledged to review one of the controversial projects and scrap the other two.[17]

These examples illustrate the increasing frequency with which hydropower conflicts have manifested in the state in recent years. Likewise, criticisms at the state-led hydro mission are abounding, especially since 2011 when a magnitude 6.9 earthquake with its epicentre in North Sikkim shook the state, and made highly visible the risk associated with dam-building in such a geologically and seismically active area. The quake razed entire villages to the ground, killed over seventy people, and triggered such a spate of landslides that large parts of North Sikkim were cut off from the outside world for weeks. The fact that a particularly large concentration of landslides was found in the vicinity of hydropower construction sites[18], and the preoccupation that dam and tunnel walls might not resist stronger quakes which beckon in

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[16] SIBLAC: Sikkimese Bhutia Lepcha Apex Committee; NASBO: National Sikkimese Bhutia Organization

[17] In January 2012 the state cabinet decided to scrap the upper two projects (Ting Ting and Lethang), and to put the downstream Tashiding HEP, for which construction works had already been initiated under review.

[18] It is assumed that tunnel blasting prior to the quake had destabilized mountain slopes to such an extent that it simply needed a strong rattle to bring the bulk of boulders and debris rolling towards the valley bottoms.

the future[19] (Kohli, 2011) stirred a bout of concern, criticism and exchange regarding the soundness of the hydro mission. This served to catapult the hydropower issue – momentarily – to the forefront of political debate, and was particularly visible in the local news and social media, and among the younger generation whom this "first major brush with tragedy" made question lifestyles and development models (Mazumdar, 2011).

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that hydropower continues to be an extremely politicized issue in Sikkim. The rather traumatic and exhaustive experience of the ACT protests (after which hydropower was widely treated as a taboo topic) are likely still a deterrent for more broad-based popular anti-hydel protest in this 'peace-loving' state. Having said this, lately civil society at large seems to be adopting a more outspoken stance against government posturing and in defiance of the ruling party's upper hand on all activities in the state. This is evident in the increasing societal engagement in public and political life, as for example during the state government's attempt in 2011 to introduce a 'Sikkim Prevention and Control of Disturbance of Public Order Bill', which would ban processions, hunger strikes, squatting, sloganeering and other forms of public agitation. The initiative backfired, causing a state-wide uproar among civil society and opposition parties who, having no representation in the Legislative Assembly, were unable to vote against the so-called 'black bill'. Eventually, this backlash prompted the leading party to recall the proposed law (The Telegraph, 2011). Popular criticism also peaked in the months following the 2011 earthquake, with reference to the skewed management of earthquake relief operations and funds[20]; or after the violent police crackdown on supporters of a new opposition party during an inauguration ceremony[21].

The growing popular demand for change is manifest in a newly founded political party, the Sikkim Krantika Morcha (SKM, i.e. 'Sikkim Revolutionary Front'). While it is too soon to predict an actual reconfiguration of political practices, values or democratic ideals in Sikkim, the founding of the SKM is a promising first step to rattle the state out of its democratic standstill. Other opposition parties were much blamed for not presenting a real political alternative, being interested mostly in 'back-stabbing' and personal gains. The widespread

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[19] Several tunnels of the Teesta III HEP collapsed during the earthquake, which led to the death of numerous construction workers (SANDRP 2011).

[20] http://sikkimnow.blogspot.it/2011/11/rs-3000-for-totally-damaged-houses-and.html?q=earthquake+relief; http://sikkimnow.blogspot.it/2012/01/chungthang-residents-place-grievances.html?q=chungthang+residents+place; http://sikkimnow.blogspot.it/2013/05/no-lessons-learned-no-priorities.html (accessed 31 August 2013).

[21] http://www.newzfirst.com/web/guest/full-story/-/asset_publisher/Qd8l/content/attack-on-skm-party:-a-black-day-for-democracy-in-sikkim; http://northbengalsikkimtimes.blogspot.it/2013/02/das-condemns-lathicharge-stages-dharna.html (accessed 31 August 2013).

support the local party has gained since its recent inception in February 2013 shows the perceived need among the Sikkimese population for political opposition to the monopolistic rule by P. K. Chamling and the Sikkim Democratic Front, which has lasted uninterruptedly for nearly two decades.

Moreover, conflict has effected a series of changes in the existing political fabric of the state, which might serve to fuel Sikkim's (rather deadlocked) democratic transition process. Thus for one, the coercive response to civil society activism has unveiled Sikkim's democratic façade, making highly visible the contradictions between government discourse ("We have a radical, unfettered democracy", "In Sikkim democracy reigns supreme", etc.; Nepali Times, 2003; Sikkim NOW!, 2012) and practice (e.g. attempts at suspending the democratic right to non-violent protest). The adamant anti-hydel protesters have challenged the prevalent patron-client style governance, in spite of the associated economic risks, thereby playing role models to an emerging generation of educated young Sikkimese.

Secondly, recent anti-hydel mobilizations have seen a slow diffusion of ethnic divides, as different ethnic communities across the state are faced with similar problems caused by hydro-induced environmental degradation. This might then well be the first factor with the potential to unite Sikkimese citizens of different ethnic origins over one issue.

There are also clear signs that politicization of the hydropower issue by civil society actors has been effective in influencing the course of hydropower development to some extent. Roughly a dozen proposed hydropower projects have so far been scrapped, delayed or put under review, citing as motivations the concerns and apprehensions expressed by affected communities. Also in response to civil society pressure, the state government has put in place a monitoring committee (with involvement of local civil society representatives) to oversee the implementation of Teesta III – an important step towards a more socially responsible and ecologically sustainable hydropower development process.

CONCLUSION

Large-scale hydropower development is an extremely politicized terrain. The anti-politics mobilized in order to defuse the political storm inevitably triggered by this large-scale intervention must therefore be seen as a profoundly political and politicizing act. Employed by those already vested with significant political and economic power, we posit that it also constitutes an intentional act. As Harriss (2001: 163) argues, "governments and other actors

have an interest in 'depoliticizing' debates on development because exclusion of politics based on instrumental reasoning assists in reproducing state power and its legitimacy, as well as the reproduction of development projects."

Through a) apolitical discursive representations of hydropower and its supposed benefits, b) the techno-managerial management of planning operations in which the state as the political contracting authority is increasingly absent, c) the selective sharing out of project-related information, and d) the coercive repression of dissent and resistance, hydropower proponents in Sikkim seek to contain political engagement with the intervention. The use of these anti-political strategies is motivated by obvious economically oriented political agendas. Interests of capital accumulation and economic growth undeniably underlie the stated objectives of energy security, regional development and climate change mitigation. This is made evident in the rushed allocation and construction of hydropower projects on Sikkim's rivers, irrespective of popular concerns and scientific recommendations. Anti-politics has been instrumental in facilitating this fast-track development initiative.

In this article we have tried to illustrate that the hydropower anti-politics machine does not operate in a vacuum, but is – sometimes more, sometimes less – vehemently resisted. In fact, we suggest that anti-politics, by way of suppressing inherent political tendencies, breeds its own resistance. Thus despite efforts at undercutting the broad-based popular political enagagement with hydropower development, in creating massive malcontent among the population, the Sikkimese hydropower conflict has ultimately led to an eruption of political sutures in the state, through which the 'political' and the inherent antagonisms surrounding the initiative have resurfaced.

This reflects to some extent what Chantal Mouffe (2005) (and others, see Swyngedouw, 2011b) has argued about the role of politics and 'the political' in many polities today. Widespread belief in the end of partisan politics and instead the possibility of a universal rational consensus, including a consensual form of democracy, have led to a refusal to acknowledge the antagonistic dimension constitutive of the 'properly political'. It has also led to a trend to play out the political in the moral register (i.e. through a confrontation not as previously between right/left, but instead between good/evil, right/wrong). By suppressing these political antagonisms inherent in any society, the potential for their resurfacing in the form of (at times violent) conflict is actually exacerbated.

The specific case of Sikkim is instructive in this respect, as it is often thought of as a relatively 'apolitical', or 'politically stable' context, with strong ethnic-communalist imbalances, but not featuring the violent ethnic struggles that continue to upset the political climate in other Northeastern states. And yet the hydropower dams have served as catalysts for a new type of political action and novel political processes in the former Himalayan kingdom. While dam construction has brought with it signs of environmental disruption and encroachment on rural livelihoods, as is typical of large water infrastructure projects elsewhere, it has also initiated a crucial wave of political change that bears the potential to dislodge the democratic deadlock in the state.

Of course hydropower development is not the only factor responsible for changing political and societal dynamics in Sikkim. Persistent investments in social development are creating a growing multitude of educated young adults (many of whom undertake further training or higher education outside the state), which sets these younger generations apart from previous ones. Moreover, not only is Sikkim becoming increasingly integrated within a larger global economy. Social networking and greater interconnectedness through news, communication and social media also contribute to rising societal awareness about the particular political and democratic values characterizing the state. These factors likely add as much fuel to political change making as environmental commodification through hydropower development. However the latter we argue, through its greater visibility and event-based character, has the greater potential to act as a catalyst.

But is it possible to generalize Sikkim's depoliticization-repoliticization experience to other settings? Can we speak of politicization as an 'inevitable' instrument effect of anti-politics? We think that the modalities of Sikkim's anti-politics machine are contingent on historically rooted and geographically determined socio-political-economic configurations that are specific to Sikkim: the state's relative geographical isolation and hitherto limited exposure to large-scale infrastructure development; its preferential economic treatment by the Central Indian government, which has facilitated a welfare system that functions on the basis of clientelistic state-society dependencies; the latter reinforced through a partial rural development deficit – despite significant advances in human development – which is being addressed, but in a selective manner, by fulfilling certain needs while maintaining others; and not least the fact that despite strong ethnic fractures, Sikkim's political setting is relatively 'peaceful' – the state has never experienced significant violent ethnic-political tensions.

These factors largely account for the way in which 'politicization' has taken place. Thus, while in Sikkim the 'political' has resurfaced in largely non-violent ways, anti-political practices in more politically sensitive and volatile settings (especially in situations of insurgent activity) may well lead to more explosive antagonistic responses and violent conflicts.

What is reflected in other contexts, however, are some of conditions that allow anti-politics to operate at all. One example is the weak national socio-environmental regulatory framework that supports skewed development practices as described in this article. Thus past and current research in India shows parallels in other Himalayan states where hydropower development is pushed ahead with similar disregard to socio-environmental concerns and lack of public involvement in decision-making. While socio-environmental regulations are in place in India, the monitoring capacity to ensure their enactment at state-level is insufficient. The recent flood disaster in the state of Uttarakhand has made the risks associated with unrestrained anthropogenic development utterly visible, pulling the trigger for a spate of nation-wide criticisms. That this breeds antagonistic popular responses is obvious in various other states across the country, where local communities and advocacy groups are staging their opposition to development projects that are imposed by state governments without due consultation and environmental assessment processes. Moreover, violent and lethal attacks on environmental justice activists, for instance in the context of hydropower development in Arunachal Pradesh, bauxite mining in the Niyamgiri hills (Orissa), or the Special Economic Zone in Nandigram (West Bengal) illustrate how widely coercion and state-repression is used in association with developmental activities (other versions of this can be found across the globe, in places as diverse as Laos, Turkey, Honduras or Brazil).

The most obvious implication of Sikkim's anti-politics machine for broader policy processes however is simple. A political rationality that assumes that rural mountain communities, due to their remoteness and lack of exposure, can easily be manipulated into a passive consenting role to large-scale state-led environmental transformation processes is erroneous and risks significant adverse consequences. Not only do resulting conflicts jeopardize the socio-political sustainability of development intervention. The sidelining of local communities in decision-making, implementation and monitoring processes foregoes an important base of local knowledge that may be crucial for the social and environmental sustainability of said infrastructure projects.

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