The Politics of Place and the Place of Politics

Large hydropower dam contestations in Sikkim, India

Rinchu Doma Dukpa

Propositions

1. Large dam development literally fractures people and place.
    (this thesis)

2. Dams are political, period.
    (this thesis)

3. Interdisciplinary research makes one a "bastard" of disciplines.

4. Qualitative research gives voice both to the researcher and the researched.

5. Consistency is both a virtue and a vice.

6. Female researchers face more setbacks than male researchers in developing countries.

7. Mental health issues are as real as climate change.

Propositions belonging to the thesis, entitled

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Contents

Abbreviations and acronyms

ACT	Affected Citizens of Teesta
BL	Bhutia-Lepcha
BRO	Border Relief Organisation
CEA	Central Electricity Authority
CPSE	Central Public Sector Enterprises
CWC	Central Water Commission
ECI	Election Commission of India
EIA	Environmental Impact Assessment
GOI	Government of India
GOS	Government of Sikkim
GPU	Gram Panchayat Unit
GREF	General Reserve Engineering Force
HEP	Hydro Electric Project
INC	Indian National Congress
IPP	Independent Power Producers
ITBP	Indo-Tibetan Border Police
JAC	Joint Action Committee
LOI	Letter of Intent
MLA	Member of Legislative Assembly
NBA	Narmada Bachao Andolan
NHPC	National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (Limited)
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MW	Mega Watt
RCHEP	Rathong Chu Hydro Electric Project
RO1	Revenue Order No. 1
ROR	Run-of-River
SDF	Sikkim Democratic Front
SKM	Sikkim Krantikari Morcha
SLA	Sikkim Legislative Assembly
SoB	Sense of Belonging
SoP	Sense of Place
SSP	Sikkim Sangram Parishad
STSC	Sikkim Tribal Salvation Council
WAPCOS	Water and Power Consultancy Services (Limited)
WCD	World Commission on Dams

List of terms[1]

Bairako	Outsider
Bazaare	People of the market
*Chya**	Name of dreaded public ritual performed in Lachung and Lachen
Desh/desh-ko-heet	Country/for the sake of the country
Dhrohi	Traitor
Gaddhar	Traitor
Ghar	Home
Gumpa	Monastry
Haq(s)	Right(s)
Janma-bhumi/Phayul	Place of birth
Khajana	Land tax
*Khyepo**	A tax-payer
*Kiduk**	Bhutia society
Lhasungs	Guardian-deities
*Maya/Ningchee**	Care and(or) love and(or) affection
*Pa/Pas**	People of-
Parivartan	Change
*Paus**	Sorcerer(s)
*Raithani/Nyinko**	Indigenous
Sun-ko-pokhari	Lake made of gold
Thulo-thala	Elders, leaders, elites
Khim/Yok-yil**	Place of residence
*Khas-basinda/Myi-nyepu**	Original inhabitants

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[1] Those with asterix (*) are local Bhutia terms especially used in Lachung and Lachen and those without are general Nepali terms.

List of figures

List of tables

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Summary

All over the world, rivers have been dammed for fulfilling human economic development through amongst others irrigation, power generation, flood control, domestic and industrial water supply, navigation, and other human uses. While often framed as projects that bring societal prosperity and wealth, dam construction is highly contested around the world. This thesis aims to better understand the contestations and controversies that have arisen around the development of hydropower dams in the Indian Eastern Himalaya region. It aims to do so by focusing especially on the role that identity, place and politics play in these contestations. It takes as case study the state of Sikkim. This state is India's second smallest state, covering an area of 7,096 km^2 with a population of 619,000, measuring approximately 113 kilometers from North to South and 64 kilometers from East to West. This state in the Eastern Himalaya region of India is recognized as a highly biodiverse region of global importance, and is the home of several indigenous groups. These indigenous (tribal) highland mountain communities are the Lepchas and Bhutia-Lachungpas and Lachenpas which have made of this region a highly "restricted" and(or) "protected" border region.

Hydropower development is not a new phenomenon in Sikkim. The region has witnessed large dam investigation, planning, and implementation across all its major headwater rivers and their tributaries for over five decades. Since 2003, a twenty-nine proposed hydropower dams project brought about new waves of protests and resistance in the state. However, the nature and magnitude of these conflicts appear to vary significantly across space. Between the lure of big promises of economic development that includes employment opportunities and good compensations packages among other things, and the visible socio-environmental impacts dams have already brought in the region, conflicts over dams have polarized communities. This gives reason to critically analyze what makes for these very different responses to dam development. This thesis is therefore about local hydropower conflicts arising from contestations and(or) cooperation to large dam development. The thesis revolves around the following main research question: *How has hydropower development over the last three decades in the Eastern Himalaya Sikkim regions reshaped notions of place, space, identity and related forms of power among and within different social groups and their territories?*

The main research question is operationalized into the following sub-questions:

1. How do people-place connections come into being and are experienced differentially; and how are these relations embedded in place history and evolve differently across situations and scenarios in the wake of hydropower development?
2. How do different communities connected to distinct places (re)produce and politicize identities to contest hydropower development; and how are such place-based identities strategically mobilized?
3. How do intra-ethnic mobilizations and counter-mobilizations shape hydropower contestations; and what implications does this have in terms of the power relations between the governed and the governing?

To answer these questions, the thesis focuses on a multi sited ethnographic research conducted on three locations across North Sikkim in Chungthang GPU, Lachung and Lachen, and Dzongu. In these three locations large dam projects were either commissioned or in construction or cancelled making them interesting cases to compare in order to answer the main research question.

Chapter 1 consists of a brief overview on large dam controversies in India as well as in Sikkim to set the background for this thesis and identifying of the research problem – the conundrum of multiple responses, or in other words, the spatial contradiction that hydropower invokes in such a small geography. This chapter also briefly introduces some of the theoretical concepts and theories that the thesis engages with, although they have been respectively elaborated in greater detail in other chapters. And lastly, it describes the study area and provides the rationale for the selection of the case study sites. The next three chapters, which have all been published, answer the three research sub-questions as follows.

In Chapter 2, I answer the first question. By analyzing why and how the 1200 MW Teesta Stage III Hydro Electric Project (HEP) was successfully implemented without contestation in Chungthang Gram Panchayat Unit (GPU) located in the North District of Sikkim. That no protests emerged is remarkable because it is the largest river valley cascade dam project in Sikkim, and because Chungthang GPU falls in the North District of Sikkim – a demarcated restricted area for safeguarding the territorial interest of the indigenous Lepchas and Bhutias residing within it. Contrary to what happened in the neighboring regions of Lachung, Lachen and Dzongu upstream and downstream of the Chungthang GPU in North Sikkim where fierce anti-dam contestations took place, here the dams were constructed without strong protests. As I explain this happened because of Chungthang GPU's ethnically fragmented social context and its atypical multi-ethnic heterogenous demography. This has taken shape, I argue, as an outcome of the economic and political history of the ruptured frontier regions of North Sikkim. I explain the resultant

constitution of a heterogenous population comprising the indigenous Lepchas and Bhutias and the remaining 'Others', separated into distinct social categories of 'local/non-local' and 'public/non-public'. Although not official, but ambiguously formal as-well-as informal, these social categorizations are based on indigeneity, political history of the place, and recognized citizenship. Such categorizations not only establish the inhabitants' current and ancestral 'link to land' but also reinforce ethnic boundaries and divides within the GPU. This disproportionately endows and privileges some with stronger agency, identity and *haqs* (rights) than the rest, and thereby gives rise to variegated experiences of people-place connection. I show how people-place relations and connections come into being, how these are experienced, and how these evolve differently across situations and geographies. I show how in this complex interplay of indigeneity, place-history and divisive social practices, the development of Sense of Belonging (SoB) is enabled or hindered. Who can and cannot voice opinions, make claims and take decisions relating to Chungthang GPU (the place) and its residents (the people) is deeply rooted in the area's cultural politics and its local expression in the form of power relations. I show how the everyday life worlds of the Lepchas in Chungthang GPU are intertwined with their cultural practices and related civic duties and responsibilities. The latter re-create their 'place-attachment' and 'place-identity' whilst their ancestral land endowments bestow them with exclusive political and economic privileges for making decisions on local natural resources use and development. The Bhutias and the 'others' have a 'functional reliance' on the place and a certain 'place-familiarity', but 'place-belonging' is constrained and limited. This shows how and why people-place relations are not only deeply embedded in Chungthang GPU's history, culture and legislation but they also accentuate divides. In other words, I explain how people-place connections and relations are shaped and recreated through established power positions and privileges or the lack thereof. This results in differentially experienced people-place connections that elicit diverse responses to hydropower development, ranging from fierce contestation, to indifference, to enthusiastic acceptance. The Lepchas have not resisted dam construction as this powerful group has gained disproportionately from these developments through land compensations and project-related benefits as housing, jobs and other economic opportunities. Even for those that did not get these benefits it allowed them to maintain unchallenged their privileged position in decision-making (by virtue of their identity as 'public' and 'local'). Therefore, I argue, local social coalescence cannot be taken for granted as these rest upon more complex relations, which evolve in both socio-cultural as well as politico-economic contexts.

In Chapter 3, I answer the second question which I analyze through the lenses of the cultural politics of identity, territory and self-governance. I analyze how, in their home regions of Lachung and Lachen, the indigenous Bhutia communities (the Lachungpas and

Lachenpas) successfully challenged all proposed hydropower projects and have managed to sustain an anti-dam opposition. I describe the remarkably effective strategies of collective action against hydropower development and show the crucial role that local place-based identity has in shaping and influencing the collective strategies through which these groups have been able to halt hydropower development. The Dzumsa, a prevailing traditional system of self-governance among the Lachungpas and Lachenpas, is a center piece of their collective resistance against large dams. However, I also show that the Dzumsa is neither an egalitarian nor a democratic institution. Collective action is mobilized by the individuals that politicize the notions of territorial collective identity. When communities are fractured into polarized groups, these institutions become highly politicized as these coerce divided communities into a collective front or unity, which is nonetheless 'agonistic'. This implies that through the Dzumsas an overall spirit of cooperation is created to fight back against dam development, despite existing conflicts and disputes in and among these communities. As I show, Dzumsas function as complex networks that are able to mobilize some of the main determinants for collective action These do so by using, amongst others, traditional systems and practices of shamanism (*Chya*). I explain how crucial elements in these local/translocal powerplays are the politization of identity, a strong and sturdily established institution for decision-making, and place-based territoriality. These three elements are constantly mobilized to defend against internal and external threats. Principles of 'vernacular statecraft', that is, mechanisms of governance used for governing the communities, unite them in imperfect unions to oppose dam development. These same mechanisms that keep communities united against the threats of dam construction pose high social, political and emotional risks to those that do not align with the normative principles of the collective.

Theoretically, I show that identities are not always rooted in land, territory, culture or even indigeneity. Instead, identities are strategic, fluid, political actions that serve to defend a particular group from 'outsiders/others' and(or) to protect specific claims and interests. From this perspective, the united anti-dam stands by the Lachungpas and Lachenpas is much more than just the voicing of socio-economic and environmental concerns relating to large dams. Their resistance is also and more importantly about (re)claiming territory, (re)asserting collective identity, reiterating collective action, and valuing as well as using their own knowledge and modes of knowing and being.

In Chapter 4, I answer the third sub-question. I do so through an analysis of the conflicts and struggles between the Government of India, the State Government of Sikkim, power companies and Sikkim's autochthonous tribe, the Lepchas as they coalesce around the ongoing dam conflicts in Dzongu. I particularly zoom in on the period from 2011 to 2017. In this period abrupt shifts in positions of local Lepchas re-configured and escalated

contestations around dam construction. After being elected, Lepcha politicians that had condemned and 'victimized' anti-dam protests in the past, became the most vocal anti-dam advocates, aggressively attacking the latest hydropower initiatives and openly supporting the local anti-dam activists and organizations. At the same time many staunch anti-dam activists and dam opponents turned into fierce pro-dam supporters. They joined forces with the other pro-dam supporters and hydropower-developing companies. New alliances were created, and the old ones broke down, giving rise to a complex web of hydro-politics. Informed by the power cube framework developed by John Gaventa, I show how locally, opposition to- or support of hydropower development is deeply intertwined with locally grounded multi-scalar patronage relationships. I show how local elections bring out dam conflict and the operation of power into the open, leading to abrupt and unexpected switches in positions in relation to hydropower development. These switches should be seen not only as 'strategic electoral tactics' but also and importantly as contentious political struggles that (re)configure power in the region. To achieve this, powerful political actors continuously seek to stabilize power relations among the governing and the governed. As such they create and sustain a specific order and hierarchy of political patronage that stretches way beyond simple pro- and anti-dam actors and coalitions as it is deeply embedded in electoral politics, dependencies and related power plays.

In the concluding chapter I reflect on the above results by answering my main research question, my own research positioning and journey, and the theoretical implications of my results. The latter bring to the fore the following main points. First, the socio-political and historical context of Sikkim profoundly influences and colors the differential responses to external development interventions. Second, places are strategic and exclusionary social constructions. 'Place' deeply matters but not for everyone in the same way, constituting highly diverse fields of power. Third, identities of people and of places are not fixed: they are fluid, emerging and malleable, and therefore differential with respect to triggering collective action. Fourth, in Sikkim, 'dams' are definitely not a 'Lepcha thing' as they are made to be. Fifth, rooted sense of place and sense of belonging do not automatically translate into the defense of place in tribal indigenous communities. Sixth, dam development is not some technically driven neutral intervention but a power laden, carefully planned political 'win-lose process'. And finally, that, not only the design, building and implementation of large dams by development interventions but also the corresponding, often paradoxical responses are actively shaped by contradictory, powerful forces.

Chapter 1. Introduction: Entanglements of hydropower development with place and identity notions through evolving power relations in Sikkim

1.1 Large dams, hydropower development and its controversies in India

Around the world rivers have been dammed for the development of irrigation, hydropower, flood control, domestic and industrial water supply, navigation, and other anthropogenic uses. While often framed as development projects that are to bring prosperity and wealth to society, dam construction is highly contested. In this thesis I set out to better understand the contestations and controversies that have arisen around the development of hydropower dams in the Indian Eastern Himalaya region, home to some of the most important river systems in the world. As such, its Ganga–Brahmaputra–Meghna basin, covering around 174 million hectares, provides important water resources for around 700 million people (Rasul, 2014). The high dependency of an exceptionally large population base on the Eastern Himalayas for their resource needs, in particular water, is putting enormous pressure on the mountain systems that are already facing increased vulnerability due to various drivers of global change (Sharma et al., 2009). Global warming and the resulting climate change threaten the entire Himalayan system and the Eastern Himalayan region in particular (Nogues-Bravo et al., 2007; Sharma et al., 2009).

Hydro development, particularly for electricity generation, is not a new phenomenon in the region. The first hydroelectric project in all of Asia (i.e. the 4X200 kilowatts Sidrapong Hydropower Project) was developed in Darjeeling in 1897, only ten years after the first large hydropower station in the world was built in Britian (Roy, 1993; Saxena and Kumar, 2010). The first hydro project in Sikkim, the state on which I focus this research, was commissioned in 1927 (Raul, 2007). However, the contemporary context in which hydropower development occurs is entirely new. In India, the push for energy development complemented the economic liberalization that took place in the early 1990s, when along with other sectors, the power sector was opened to foreign and domestic private investments. The liberalization of the power sector was enabled through Acts like the Electricity Act (2003), the National Water Policy (2005), the National Electricity Policy (2005), the National Rehabilitation and Resettlement Policy (2007) as well as a later announced Hydropower Development Policy (in 1998 and 2008). The latter stated: "A greater private investment

through IPPs (Independent Power Producers) and joint ventures is to be encouraged in the coming years and the required atmosphere, incentives and reliefs will be provided to stimulate and maintain a trend in this direction" (GoI, 1998:5).

These policies set off an aggressive "hydro-rush" in the mountainous Himalayan regions of the country, particularly in the Northeast region, where the geographical rugged terrain, high slopes and abundant river systems contributed to making this region the hub of India's hydropower development (Dharmadhikary, 2008; Menon et al., 2003). The arguments to capitalize on the hydropower potential stated that as of 2023, only 4% of the hydropower capacity of the Indian Eastern Himalayan regions (comprising of eight North Eastern states) has been developed and in operation (GoI, 2023); with 9% under construction and 87% yet to be developed (GoI, 2023). Thus, large dam development in the North Eastern region would incrementally boost India's estimated hydro-potential (Dharmadhikary, 2008).

Despite of the fact that, worldwide and in India, large dam development had become increasingly controversial in the late 1990s and early 2000s, this recent national thrust for energy development was uniquely complemented by a global emphasis on climate change, and the search for green economy-environment win-win strategies (Rasch and Köhne, 2013; Ahlers et al., 2015; Corbera et al., 2019). The World Bank identified hydropower as a clean, reliable and affordable energy source which would play a unique dual role in climate change adaptation and mitigation (World Bank, 2009). In a complete turn-around of events, large dams went from being perceived as environmentally unsustainable and socially unethical (WCD, 2000) to being clean, reliable and affordable (Cole et al., 2014), and as the only "moral alternative to fossil fuel-based electricity" (Fletcher, 2010: 5). By 2013, hydropower projects globally made up about 26 per cent of Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) funded initiatives (Haya and Parekh, 2011; Cames et al., 2016). This instrument provided not so much an economic, but rather a political incentive, legitimizing hydropower as 'clean' and serving to bring together a powerful consortium of actors, private investors of hydropower development, national and local governments and the international development community (see also Newell et al., 2011; Yumnam, 2012; Hernando-Arrese and Rasch, 2022). The projection of hydropower dams as being also synonymous with development and economic progress (WCD, 2000) cements India's fervor for promoting, reviving and supporting large dams, including suppressing of the opposing voices. That is, the North Eastern region of India were thus considered 'India's future powerhouse' (Vagholikar and Das, 2010) despite numerous anti-dam resistances in these regions (Joy et al., 2005). Considered remote, backward, neglected and underdeveloped, the government of India announced 168 large hydroelectric projects in 2003 (Vagholikar and Das, 2010) triggering a hydro boom that was kick started by none other than the tiny state of Sikkim, followed by Arunachal Pradesh (Thakur, 2020).

Hydropower is often described as a "simple process" of electricity generation that takes advantage of the kinetic energy freed by the rushing (free flowing) water falling from a height that drives the turbines and converts it into mechanical and electric energy (Erge and Milewski, 2002:1225). This "simple process" is what projects hydropower as "relatively efficient, reliable, versatile" and economic source of electricity (Erge and Milewski, 2002:1225). However, in reality the process is not as simple and incurs several constraints especially in the Himalayan region effected by geological surprises and difficult geographical terrains including issues concerning surface and subsurface tunneling, land acquisition and rehabilitation, etc. (GoI, 1998, 2008). Hydropower dams have been globally classified according to size, and to a lesser extent classified according to purpose, construction design and material, potential safety hazard, and technology (Herschy, 2012; ICOLD, 2015). As a result, hydropower dams vary considerably in their size, purpose, and socio-economic importance and impacts.[2] In India, depending on their design and site, the hydropower dams provide electricity for base or for peak demand or both (GoI, 1998, 2008). The base load is produced by reservoir-type projects, which store sufficient energy to cover several seasons of consumption and periods of dry weather. The run-of-river projects (RoR) utilize the flow of water within the natural range of the river, therefore no or little reservoir impoundment takes place. Run-of-river can use all the river flow or only a fraction of it. Most of the run-of-river plants are therefore conceived to provide the same power output all year long for the same demand, using only a fraction of the total river flow. As compared to other modes of electricity generation, the inherent advantage of hydropower is its capacity to generate electricity practically instantly, from the moment the order or demand has been placed to start production (Navasimhan and Singh, 1994). Given this, hydroelectricity is, from a technical point of view, very complementary to other sources of primary generation, supplying electricity on demand. There is no combustion, no steam cycle, no radiation protection. Once built, hydropower is considered to have low operating costs, inflation free and a long life, particularly for run-of-river projects and particular reservoir projects where sedimentation is no concern (WCD, 2000, GoI, 1998).

In sum, this explains why the Government of India has been on a fast track to build large and mega RoR hydropower projects in the mountainous North Eastern region (Pandit and Grumbine, 2012). In the state of Sikkim, the Government had proposed to build a

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[2]   In the Eastern Himalayan region of India, hydropower dams are often classified according to type (reservoir-type projects with significant storage capacity; run-of-river projects with little or no storage capacity; pumped-storage projects, river diversion projects; and small, mini and micro projects); their maximum height; their installed capacity (up to 25 MW are small projects, from 25 MW to 500 MW are large projects, and over 500 MW are mega projects); and their reservoir capacity. The National Register of Large Dams (GoI, 2019) has additional classification criterions for dams like ICOLDs (e.g., "large" as one having a dam wall above 15 meters).

staggering number of twenty-nine dams in Sikkim's network of rivers and tributaries (Dharmadhikari, 2008) – the Teesta and Rangeet. Risks and negative impacts are generally strategically ignored by official plan and policies – 'manufactured ignorance' (Huber et al., 2017; Boelens et al., 2019; Huber, 2019). But despite these official discourses, as I explore in this thesis, these developments are highly contested in the region and have led to several local resistances, power plays and conflicts among different actors (Arora, 2006, 2007a, 2008; Wangchuk, 2007; Little, 2008, 2009, 2010a, 2010b; McDuie-Ra, 2011; Huber, 2012, Lepcha, 2012; Gergan 2014, Pradhan, 2014; Huber and Joshi, 2015). They challenge the dam projects, which have major impacts on river hydrology, primarily through changes in the timing, magnitude, and frequency of low and high flows (Magilligan and Nislow, 2005). Their construction also has great impacts on the landscape, the people that live in these affected landscapes and their activities, livelihoods and socio-economic relations (Roth et al., 2014). These changes lead to wide-spread destruction of the fragile environment, biodiversity loss and the affectation of people and their culture and traditions (Shrestha, 2005). Therefore, many places across the Eastern Himalayan region have seen new conflicts and solidarities being formed as a response to hydro-development in the region. One of the 'hot-spots' of both dam construction projects and opposition movements, is the state of Sikkim as analyzed below.

1.2 Hydropower and dam development controversies in Sikkim

Sikkim, India's second smallest state, covering an area of 7,096 km^2 with a population of 619,000, measuring approximately 113 kilometers from North to South and 64 kilometers from East to West, is recognized as a highly biodiverse region of global importance (GoS, 2013:2). The Himalayan State of Sikkim is landlocked by Bhutan in the west, Tibet in the north, Nepal in its east and India in the South (before the 1975 merger) (see Figure 1.1). A sovereign Himalayan Kingdom under the rule of the Namgyal Dynasty since 1642, it became one of the states of the Republic of India upon merger in 1975 to become India's 22nd state. The state of Sikkim has been administratively divided into four[3] districts – North Sikkim, South Sikkim, East Sikkim and West Sikkim – using the major and minor tributaries of the Teesta river as district separating criterion (GoI, 2006a, 2006b; GoS, 2013). The North District of Sikkim, referred to as North Sikkim is the largest district with an area of 4,226 km^2 constituting about 60% of the entire state – largely inhabited by the tribal Lepchas

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[3] There are six districts in Sikkim since 20th of December 2021. As per The Sikkim (Re-Organization of Districts) Act, 2021 (Act No. 15 of 2021), implemented in 2021, the North, South, East and West Districts were renamed as Mangan, Namchi, Gangtok and Gyalsing Districts respectively. And, two additional districts – Soreng and Pakyong were carved out of West and East Districts.
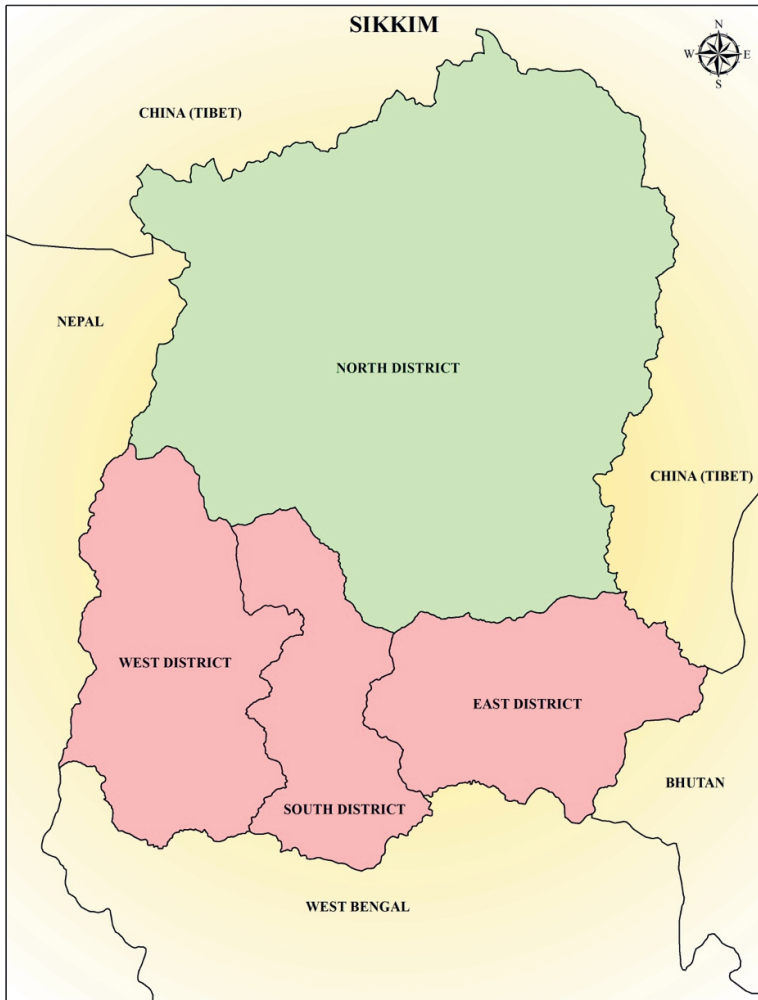
Figure 1.1: Map[4] of the four districts of Sikkim sharing border with China, Nepal, Bhutan and West Bengal (in India).
Source: Adapted from GoS website. Map not to scale.

and Bhutias of Sikkim (GoI, 2006a). The West, East and South districts make about 16%, 13% and 11% of the geographical area of the state respectively; inhabited by heterogenous mixed population of dominant Nepalis and minority Bhutias and Lepchas (GoI, 2006a, 2006b). The state capital is located at Gangtok in East Sikkim.

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[4]   All maps in this thesis are not to scale. This is because North Sikkim in India is a part of the sensitive Indo-China border region. It is a punishable offence in India to create accurate maps of border regions, particularly by non-government entities for national security reasons.

Most part of Sikkim are mountainous with altitudes varying between 300 meters above sea level to over 8500 meters at the Kanchanjanga peak. It is essentially a state with no flat or levelled piece of land (Bose, 1928; GoS, 2013), which makes land to be a key economic resource in Sikkim. While the overall work force depends on agriculture and allied activities, only 16% of the geographical area available is apt for cultivation (GoS, 2013). In addition, the state remains covered with numerous major glaciers and glacial lakes, especially in the North District of Sikkim, making this region "quite susceptible to disastrous hazards due to glacial lake outburst floods (so called GLOFs)" (GoI, 2006a:38). These glaciers and glacial lakes in the Sikkim Himalaya act as the state's natural storehouse of fresh water, naturally endowing Sikkim with two perennial Rivers – Teesta and Rangeet and their massive network of tributaries and distributaries which provides tremendous opportunities and potential for the water-based economic development of the state (GoI, 2006a). As such, Sikkim is blessed with ample hydel (hydroelectric energy) resources with an estimated hydro power potential pegged around 8,000 MW. Today, in Sikkim, hydropower accounts for 98.80 per cent of total electricity generated. This energy is generated by twelve hydropower stations currently in operation.

But large dams have been the subject of serious controversies and contradictions in Sikkim and, since 2019, they are part of growing local protest and state-wide debate. It is common to see how those protesting large dams are victimized by the supporters of hydropower development, in particular by the state government of Sikkim (GoS) (Huber, 2012; Gergan, 2014, Little, 2009). While the twenty-nine proposed hydropower projects brought about new waves of protests and resistance in Sikkim, the nature and magnitude of these conflicts appear to vary significantly across space (see Huber, 2012, Huber and Joshi, 2015). This gives reason to critically analyze what makes for these very different responses to dam development in different locations or sites. A number of grey literature documents, non-academic papers, articles, thesis reports, etc. articulate how people in Sikkim have viewed and experienced these projects differently (e.g. Huber, 2012; Gergan, 2014; Lepcha, 2014; Pradhan, 2014; Rai, 2017; Pradhan, 2018; Lepcha, 2020; Lepcha, 2021) but detailed scrutiny was still amiss. While on the surface, one may argue and agree how promises of socio-economic benefits such as development, employment, prosperity, free electricity, good compensations and rehabilitations projected by the power companies wooed local communities into supporting hydropower development (Banerjee and Sood, 2011), and how over time disillusion and regret have emanated from unfulfilled promises (Clement, 2014), there was much more to this at the grassroot level.

Sikkim's case is interesting and appealing. Many anti-dam protests were spearheaded by minority tribal and indigenous Lepchas and Bhutias and their associated organizations in Sikkim, grounded in spiritual and cultural concerns relating to what they expressed as

the need to protect their sacred lands, identity and place. They also protested against the influx of outsider workers to these protected sites (Yumnam, 2012; Little, 2009). Ironically, most of the proposed hydropower projects fall in Bhutia-Lepcha inhabited territories where many large hydropower projects have already been commissioned and in operation, and others are under construction or awaiting clearances. This is of particular interest because as per the old customary laws of Sikkim, whilst Sikkim was still a sovereign Kingdom, Bhutia-Lepcha lands are protected by prohibiting its sale or transfer to non Bhutia-Lepchas. In fact, the Dzongu area was made a "reserve" carved out of the King of Sikkim's personal estate (GoS, 2013) to safeguard the Lepcha's culture, and prevent their economic exploitation that could result from coming in contact with the outside world (Foning, 1987). It is in these already protected and restricted territories that mega, large and small and now micro hydropower projects are being planned and implemented.

Importantly, claims for rehabilitation, compensation, participation, and the loss of livelihoods, were not the main issues for mobilizing local protests. And the varied responses towards the hydropower development range from a persistently strong opposition to a perceived willingness to negotiate with the state. This reflects the "pursuit of contradictory courses of actions by members of marginal groups" against such mega development interventions (Fletcher, 2008:43). As I investigate, these different types, forms and nature of issues and protests, and the resulting range of conflicts and/or co-operation, are related to different forms of place-based identities, forms of organization, local networks, dependencies, power relations and related cultural politics in specific hydrosocial territories. These complex micro-political relationships and disputes form the core content of my thesis.

I seek to move beyond the documented socio-environmental and economic impacts of hydropower development and focus on a nuanced social understanding of these contradictory courses of actions of the tribal communities in defense of their place. Hydropower development in Sikkim triggers these many ways in which pro- and anti-dam mobilizations and counter mobilizations have shaped. As I will scrutinize through the Sikkim hydropower dam contestations and non-contestations, what we call resistance involves its own exercise of power.

1.3 Objectives

Within the context sketched out above, the focus of my thesis is to closely analyze how place, place-identity, cultural politics and local power dynamics in relation to hydropower development are reshaping local territories. This is done by investigating "the politics of place and the place of politics in hydropower development" in Sikkim.

The historical inter-state and multi-ethnic struggles and territorial reconfiguration processes have profoundly colored and (re)shaped the movement, flow, and identity of the people in the Sikkim. Given this background, the first objective of this research is *to acquire a critical understanding of the historical and current socio-political context of the Sikkim region, as a background to assessing local responses to hydropower development in direct relation with identity formation processes in Sikkim.*

Unlike other regions in India where dam development has multiple other uses such as irrigation and flood control measures, the main purpose of hydropower development in Sikkim is the generation of electricity for export to other regions in India and through it, revenue generation. The hydropower developments are made out to be a panacea for all socio-economic and development related problems in the region, thus promoted as a "win-win" development intervention by both the central and state governments, as well as the power companies that would benefit everyone. However, in many cases, benefits to the affected people have been interpreted as just providing some monetary compensation. This takes place in a context of actively mobilized cultural politics and strategies of belonging, from both the sides of the intervening agencies and the multiple dam-affected communities. This gives rise to questions of who really benefits, how, and who does not. Therefore, the second objective of my research is *to analyze how place and place-based identities intersect, get politicized and strategically used to mobilize consent or contestations to dam development.*

There have been many precedents of mobilizing identity in the region, often through the use of religious, ethnic or cultural arguments to contest dam development or for gaining political representation. Interestingly the most successful mobilization of protests against hydropower development in specific areas in Sikkim have used these same channels. For instance, the Lepcha tribal group protests were centered on the protection of their spiritual land of Dzongu, using ethnicity, culture and identity as an advocacy tool. Still, dam building projects in many cases have continued. Given this, the third objective of this research is *to understand if and how the different forms of power enable or impede changing hydropower development dynamics in the region.*

1.4 Research questions

The main research question that guides this thesis is:

How has hydropower development over the last three decades in the Eastern Himalaya Sikkim regions reshaped notions of place, space, identity and related forms of power among and within different social groups and their territories?

The main research question is operationalized into the following three sub-research questions, which are each addressed in the consecutive next chapters:

1. How do people-place connections come into being and are experienced differentially; and how are these relations embedded in place history and evolve differently across situations and scenarios in the wake of hydropower development?
2. How do different communities connected to distinct places (re)produce and politicize identities to contest hydropower development; and how are such place-based identities strategically mobilized?
3. How do intra-ethnic mobilizations and counter-mobilizations shape hydropower contestations; and what implications does this have in terms of the power relations between the governed and the governing?

1.5 Conceptual framework

In this section I introduce the main concepts and theories that the research engages with. This includes a discussion of my understanding of place and space, and of peoples' identities as dynamically related to their histories and territories/territorialities. These notions – in addition to several lateral theoretical elaborations - will be further explored and deepened in the three article-based chapters and connect to power and cultural politics surrounding hydropower development in Sikkim.

1.5.1 *Place and space*

Place is a complex, multilayered and multifaceted concept (Carter et. al., 2007), and as such scholars and researchers belonging to different disciplines (human geography, anthropology, sociology, forestry, etc.) have understood and defined place in diverse ways (Guthey et al., 2014). As a concept, place has been and continues to be part of many discourses (Vanclay, 2008), but the initial credit for theorizing place goes to geographers like Tuan (1974, 1977; 1980) and Relph (1976) in the 1970s (Guthey et al., 2014) and to Agnew (1987) in the 1980s.

In simple geographical terms, place is not merely a 'physical stage for life's drama' (Godkin, 1980:73) or a 'backdrop' (Werlen, 1993), but a profound center of meaning and felt values that is constructed by the experiences of people (Tuan, 1974; Williams and Stewart, 1998; Creswell, 2004, 2009). It is a 'located' setting for human and nonhuman interactions where the "reproduction and transformation of social relations take place" (Agnew, 1987:27). Places are the "fundamental means by which people make sense of the world and through which they act" (Sack, 1992:1; Cheng et al., 2003). Houart et al. (2024) add thereby that the same goes for nonhumans making social place.

How people act in a place depends on how they construct their values and meanings of a place, therefore different construction of place(s) lead to different actions or behavior (Escobar, 2001; Guthey et al., 2014), and consequently different interpretations, narrations, perceptions, feelings, understandings, and imaginations of a place (Soja, 1996). In this sense, place(s) are considered to be a 'social construct' as its meanings (which could be "symbolic, emotional, cultural, political and biological" (Buttimer, 1980:167) vary among different people (Harvey, 1996). Increasingly these are shaped by complex socio-economic and political processes (Williams and Stewart, 1998). Thus, the concept of place is 'plural' in nature (Vanclay, 2008).

Places by themselves do not have any obvious meanings, and that it is the people (and other than humans) who construct and infuse meanings to place (Hay, 1988). it is impossible to conceive anything without first being in a place – one must be in a place (Sack, 1992; 1993; Malpas, 1999). As Merrifield (1993:525) points out that the "social practice is place bound, political organizations demand place organizations, life is place dependent" – therefore place is more than just lived everyday life (Manosalvas et al., 2023). Places are thus, the origin and the contexts within which social relations occur (Altman and Low, 1992). Place is what makes 'being' and the process of 'becoming' possible (Casey, 2001; Larsen and Johnson, 2012; Manosalvas et al., 2023).

Given that in any place one encounters meanings, materiality (i.e. the physicality, objects and things (Gieryn, 2000)), and practices (Creswell, 2009); a place can be understood as a meaningful site that consists of three different dimensions - a location (something that answers the question of 'where'), a locale (everyday activities and the institutional settings of a place) and a sense of place (personal and emotional relations that people have with place) (Agnew, 1987, Creswell, 2009). Place is defined as the geographical context in which social structures are activated to shape socio-materiality (Agnew, 2011; Manosalvas et al., 2023). Taking Agnew's theorization of place in his seminal work 'Place and Politics' and his subsequent works on the same, this research uses his work as a one of the preliminary frameworks in exploring the concepts of place.

Generally, one cannot understand the concept of place without understanding the concept of space as both place and space are "conceptually inseparable" (Larsen and Johnson (2012:636). Given this, there have been many academic debates, conflicts and critiques to the concept of place and space (Agnew, 2011) as to which one is more dominant, more significant and primary. "What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with values" (Tuan, 1977:6) and with meanings (Escobar, 2001; Vanclay, 2008). When these values and meanings are extracted out of a place, it leads to the creation of space (Harvey, 1996). Space(s) by themselves cannot constitute place(s) and requires humans, nonhumans, social practices, objects, events and representations (Gieryn,

2000; Harrison and Tartar, 2008; Houart et al., 2024). Hereby, Merrifield points out that "the physical and the social landscapes emerge through processes that are simultaneously operative at varying spatial and temporal scales" (Merrifield, 1993:520). Tilley (1994:15) therefore says that geographical experience begins in places, reaches out to others through spaces, and creates landscapes or regions for human existence.

Harrison and Dourish (1996:67) add to this that defined space is the 'opportunity' while place as the 'reality'. In tune with this, Merrifield (1993:525) further posits that "what is conceived in thought expresses a specific representation of space, but this is actualized materially only in place, which is therefore the starting point of theoretical and political analysis" (see also Huijbens, 2021a, 2021b; Reyes-Escate et al., 2022). As I will investigate and manifest in my study, it is only in place that cultural politics and hydropower contradictions come to play.

1.5.2 *Sense of place and its power*

Similar to the concept of place and space, the concept of 'sense of place' (SOP) is complex, has been understood differently in different disciplines (Graham et al., 2009) and is scholarly disputed (see Qian et al., 2011). Therefore, there are many definitions. In the simplest of terms, sense of place is a way of expressing a relationship/a connection/a bond between people and a place (William and Stewart, 1998) primarily through different levels of place experience (Hay, 1998). It refers to the meanings, feelings and emotions that a place evokes (Creswell, 2009). Sense of place is the personal connections people or groups of people have with where they live, work and play (Vanclay, 2008). For Agnew (1987), sense of place refers to the attachment that people have with place – both subjective as well as emotional. For the convenience of this research, sense of place has been deconstructed into four different constructs/dimensions – place meaning, place attachment, place identity and place dependence (Qian et al., 2011, Jorgensen and Stedman, 2006).

i. *Place attachment* is understood as the strong emotional and sentimental bond that people develop with places (Altman and Low, 1992), which is generally built over time (Giuliani and Feldman, 1993) or through long periods of residence (Hay, 1988). Some consider it as a manifestation of people's experience and interactions with the physical environment (Proshansky et al., 1983; Guthey et al., 2014). People or groups of people can become attached to particular (same) places for different reasons (Williams and Stewart, 1998). These attachments can be positive (*topophilia* in Tuan's (1974) words) as well as negative. People generally develop their attachment to a particular place "through their daily lives, real and imagined, experienced and read" (Guthey et al., 2014:257) which can be formed at various geographic and spatial scales (Graham et al., 2009).

ii. *Place meaning* refers to the ascribed symbolic meanings and values between people and place (Davenport and Anderson, 2005). Meanings can be very personal and connected to individuals and/or can be shared and socialized (Cresswell, 2009). Because meanings can be shared, the meanings that people ascribe to places vary and are never fixed and as such they are constantly being (re)produced through other representations (Creswell, 2009). Meanings are unique and cannot be readily transferred from one place to another (Cheng et. al., 2003). It is the ascribed meanings that people have of particular places, that lays foundation for place attachment experienced by people in the first place (Wynveen et al., 2012). Because meanings invoke personal emotions and are formed from diverse experiences and values, a SOP may be both shared and contested at a single locality (Arefi, 1999). This produces territories of meanings (Relph, 2000). In addition, the meanings that people ascribe to places are also embedded in the historical and cultural context of the place; this makes the people's place-meaning meaningful, sustained by diverse imaginaries and memories through which they remember places (Gieryn, 2000).

iii. *Place based identity* refers to the degree to which place is included in perceptions of people's individual or collective identity (Proshansky, 1978). Places not only allow people to make sense of the world but further allows them to make sense about themselves in terms of how they look at the world and how they look at themselves (Davenport and Anderson, 2005). All aspects of identity to a greater extent have place-related implications (Twigger-Ross and Uzzel, 1991; Escobar, 2001). The individual as well as the group identity of the people are directly reflected, developed and maintained as the basis of how people understand, interpret, value and act in a particular place (Cheng et al., 2003; Davenport and Anderson, 2005). Although individual or group identities are socially constructed, they are informed by places (Proshansky, 1978) through the articulation of a 'sense of belonging' (Buttimer, 1980; Davenport and Anderson, 2005; Qian et al., 2011). However, the different understanding and interpretations that people may have of their places, may at time lead to contestation over the authenticity of a presumed 'single, imagined identity' (Carter et al., 2007).

iv. *Place dependence*, also referred to as a 'functional attachment,' is the functional connection between people and a particular place, it is degree to which a place allows people to carry out certain activities that enables them to meet their day to day needs (Schreyer et al., 1981). It also refers to people's functional reliance on the amenities and resources that place provides to the people (Qian et al., 2011). The more a person connects or identifies with a place, the more likely, not always, that person is to develop a dependence on that place for meeting his/her spiritual, social or ecological wellbeing (Haywood, 2013; Manosalvas et al., 2023).

The inclusion of both the objective and the subjective aspects of the bond between people (and nonhumans) and place is what makes the concept of sense of place very appealing and have analytical power. People have been conceptualizing, understanding and using place in many ways that reveal the complicated interplay between place, meaning and power (Creswell, 2004). Gieryn (2000:475) claims that places have "power sui generis" in the sense that "the capacity to dominate and control people or things come through the geographic location, built form, and symbolic meanings of a place." Places are considered to be "agentic player in the game" as they affect social life through social relations and social processes (Werlen, 1993; Huijbens, 2021a).

As Creswell (1996) argues, place is revealed in the taken for granted geographies of inclusion and exclusion. Places further sustain and reinforce differences and hierarchy by extending or denying life chances or opportunities or spaces to individuals or groups located in productive or detrimental spots (Gieryn, 2000). As such they become these sites of power struggle, contestations (Cighi, 2008), protests as well as sites for collective struggle, especially when the fundamental values and meanings that people associate with particular places are threatened (Buttimer, 1980). In our case, riverine interventions, such as hydropower development and dam-building, deeply alter riverine places -socially, materially, symbolically- affecting all four dimensions of SOP simultaneously: place meaning, attachment, identity and dependence. Battlefields over river place-making, including their (il)legitimate and (non)materialized epistemologies and ontologies, often are intense (Boelens et al., 2023). Research in environmental psychology have demonstrated that places affect and/or alter people's beliefs, values, knowledge and behavior or actions even if they are not consciously aware of place-based effects (Proshansky and Fabian, 1987; Brandenburg and Caroll, 1995; Cheng et. al., 2003). Williams and Stewart (1998) further add that policies and actions vary from place to place, and therefore to understand the politics of an issue, one must know the politics of the place first.

1.6 Study area in North Sikkim

The selection of research sites for case studies as shown in Figure 1.2, made as early as 2015, were on the basis of intriguing spatial contradictions that North Sikkim manifested in so small a geography. Dam controversies, conflicts and consent, social mobilizations, as well as academic interest and disinterest that particular sites across Sikkim invoked or suppressed are particular expressions of this. Additionally, selection of sites was also influenced by the fact that the range of social-environmental impacts that can result from hydroelectric dams is remarkably diverse; with some impacts occurring during planning, some during the construction phase and others during the operation of dams and reservoirs (see Ledec and Quintero, 2003).

As I have mentioned, North Sikkim, as the only "restricted" district of Sikkim with demarcated protected "reserve" areas prominently inhabited by the indigenous highlander communities comprising the Lepchas and Bhutias-Lachungpas and Lachenpas of the region, lies at the crux of these factors. It is the only border district of Sikkim where most of the "old" Teesta Valley Projects (Stage I, II, III, IV and V) were planned as well as where most number of additional "new" dams were announced. Some of the old and new dams have been commissioned, some cancelled and some waiting clearance. The focus of my research is on large dams under construction, in planning and those cancelled, rather than the well-known dam Teesta Stage V, because several research studies had already been conducted on this commissioned dam.

Given this, I resorted to "follow the dam" logic and selected Chungthang GPU in North Sikkim, located around 1630 meters above sea level (masl) as my first research site in 2015 where Sikkim's largest 1200 MW Teesta Stage III HEP was under construction. Scant research on dams in North Sikkim mostly focused on Dzongu (my third research site), hence, Chungthang necessitated both academic focus and visibility. This research witnessed the commissioning of this dam two years later, in 2017, and its brief operation phase before the colossal dam break and complete washing away of the dam in 2023. Today there are only remnants of Teesta Stage III dam and talks about building another dam has again begun in Chungthang. Chungthang is also where the two glacially fed headwater rivers, Lachen Chu and Lachung Chu, merge at the confluence to form the mighty Teesta. Chungthang is a restricted area where government permits are required to entry and stay due to its close proximity to Indo-Sino border, however, it does not fall under "protected" areas unlike other areas of North Sikkim. Detailed description of Chungthang is given is Chapter 2 of this thesis.

The second research site was selected about 20 and 30 kilometers upstream respectively of Chungthang in two highland mountain areas of Lachung (altitude 2600 masl) and Lachen (altitude 2700 masl), where several old and new dams proposed in the region were successfully resisted and cancelled. Of the old Teesta Valley Project, the proposed 320 MW Teesta Stage I and 330 MW Teesta Stage II were cancelled in Lachen including the new ones such as the 210 MW Lachen HEP and 75 MW Talem Chu. In Lachung, it was the 99 MW Lachung Chu HEP that was cancelled. These two regions are inhabited by two distinct tribal highlander communities – Lachung-pas and Lachen-pas. They are governed by their customary law system of Dzumsa unlike any other part of Sikkim. Like Chungthang, Lachung and Lachen fall under restricted areas requiring permits to enter and stay. The tribal Bhutia Lachung-pas and Lachen-pas have, to this day, maintained their no-dam status quo. However, lately, small and micro dams have proliferated in the region. Further, while there were a few mentions of anti-dam protest in Lachung and Lachen (see

Huber, 2012; Clement, 2014), expanded research on dams in the respective sites were absent, which necessitated this study. Detailed description of Lachung and Lachen is found in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

The third and last research site, located approximately 30 to 40 kilometers downstream of Chungthang is the protected Lepcha "reserve area" of Dzongu (altitude 1050 masl) inhabited by the tribal Lepchas of Dzongu. Lepchas from immediate neighboring areas or outside of North Sikkim (including the rest of Sikkim) require permits like other non-Lepchas to enter, stay and work in Dzongu. Dzongu is a demarcated protected area under the Royal Proclamation 1957 and Notification No. 3060, put in place before Sikkim was merged with India in 1975. Of all the areas of North Sikkim, Dzongu, the protected reserve area for the Lepchas, had the highest number of dams proposed, under construction and commissioned (i.e. more than 8 dams, both new and old dams, fell in and around Dzongu).
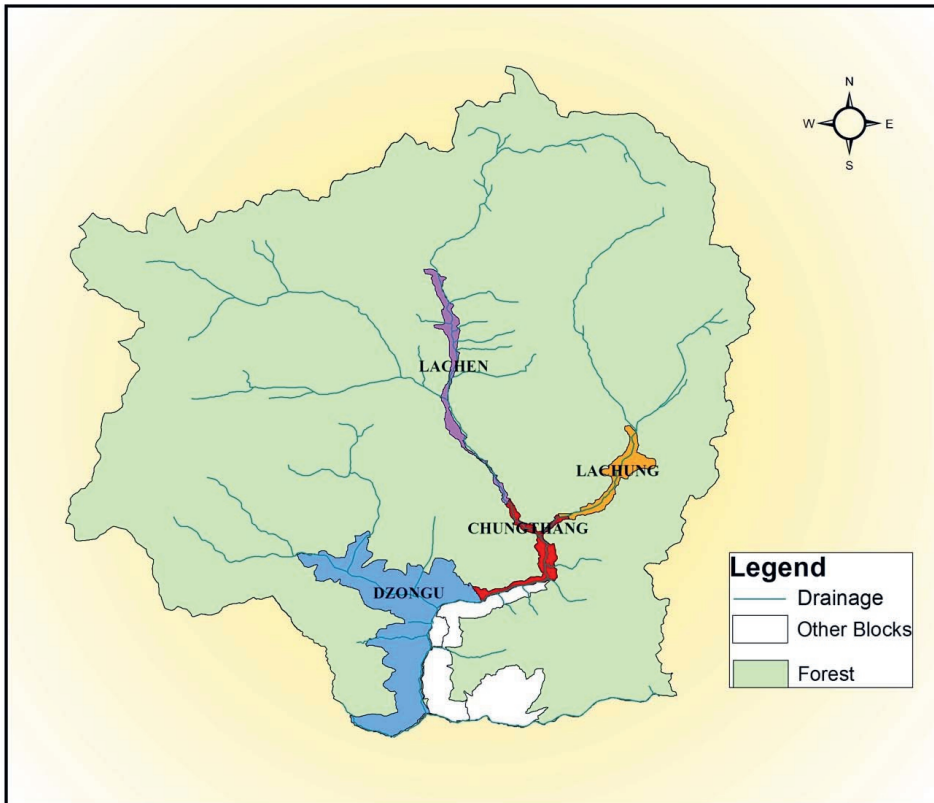
Figure 1.2: Map of the study area showing the district of North Sikkim and the three research sites – Chungthang, Lachen and Lachung, and Dzongu.
Source: Own elaboration, adapted from GoS website. Map not to scale.

While two major dams (i.e. the 510 MW Teesta Stage V commissioned in 2008 and the 1200 MW Teesta Stage III) fell along the borders of Dzongu, the 520 MW Teesta Stage IV (part of the old Teesta Valley Project) and 300 MW Panan (part of the 2003 announcement) planned at the center of Dzongu were the dams under study. Both the dams are waiting clearances even though an initial part of dam construction (such as building of intake roads, land acquisition, and so on) have been already initiated. This enables a good analysis of pre-dam construction impact issues.

1.7 Positionality and methodology

I was born and brought up in Darjeeling and my family currently lives there and also in Sikkim. I have grown up listening to folktales, which included tales about Sikkim's Teesta and Rangeet rivers. This study is thus not only a theoretical study, but also a very personal journey for me. Hence, the interpretation of my findings may be influenced by my personal experiences. In certain ways I therefore was what Zaman (2008) called, and cautioned for, 'native among the natives'. I will further reflect on this at the end of my research journey. This acknowledgement of my background was necessary for me to conduct a critical and reflexive ethnographic study (Crowley-Henry, 2009). Making the distinction between conventional and critical ethnography clear, Thomas (1993:4) states that conventional ethnographers study culture for the purpose of describing it; critical ethnographers do so to change it. I have chosen for a critical ethnography approach, as one of the main goals of my research is not just to develop a well-defined framework and deeper knowledge of the power dynamics that underlie hydropower development in the region, but also to provide core understandings of the corresponding marginalization processes that affect my home region and require transformative action. These understandings may support actions for progressive social change and will often require the existing hydropower development norms and practices to change in favor of the marginalized groups, the project affected local communities.

I consider that, in order to understand the people-place relationship and myriads of connections, we ourselves, researchers, need to experience place and the change processes at hand, which therefore calls for an interpretivist approach – an approach that centers around the nuances of people-place connections. This includes the social and political context that define what place meanings are significant, and how those meanings are created, protected, transformed, and destroyed. This approach will enable me to document the subject nature of Sikkim's real-world phenomena, unearth possible unanticipated findings, and embrace the context of the study on my homeplace.

The contested history of the Darjeeling Sikkim region and its strategic geographical location has given rise to a very complex, dynamic and highly evolved sense of place

or belonging, and marginalization amongst various social groups living in these hills. What my study of Sikkim's territory and its transformations make clear is that this sense of place/belonging (and sometimes also the lack of it) gets reflected in the way various social groups differentially perceive their connection to land, their 'identity,' and the power dynamics emerging from such perceptions. Hydropower development, then, deeply and fundamentally triggers the evolution of their sense of place, the ways they relate to outsiders, intervenors, but also to insiders, in highly diverse and impactful ways. Therefore, examining how different social groups perceive their connections to the land, to their territories, and to each other, is necessary to understand these issues in depth. This also, inescapably, involves research that scrutinizes my own insider/outsider position and the ways my vision, approach, interactions and attachments have been evolving over the research period. I will return to this positionality and positioning issue in the final chapter.

The research that I have conducted in Sikkim is qualitative in nature. It seeks to accomplish a process of exploring and understanding the meaning of Sikkim's complex social and human problems holistically. The chapters describe how I have closely interacted with a large diversity of actors, institutes, places and hydropower-based transformation processes, while working and living in the local settings where also the families and stakeholders work and live. This has enabled me to develop a deeper understanding of the everyday strategies, behaviors, rationales, actions and practices of the different collectives, families and persons. This way I have also tried to place more importance on the local actors' perceptions and experiences, and the meanings they held of a particular event or issue, than on the meaning as it might be deduced from established scholarship and theoretical bodies.

The main methods that I have deployed for this research are semi-structured interviews, participant observations, focus group discussions and direct observations. I decided for qualitative interviews because what needed to be found out cannot be answered simply from closed or structured interviews; rather, through ethnography, the controversies at stake could be explored, explained and elaborated. Semi-structured interviews for data collection have allowed me to get behind the perceptions and opinions on the complex issues of cultural politics and dam (non) contestation. These were scheduled in advance and made use of sufficiently open-ended questions, allowing me to keep the flow of interview going.

One of the most important tools for highlighting group dynamics in my research were focus group discussions. They have helped in bringing out not just the group perspective on the issue being discussed, but also to elucidate the existing socio-cultural and political relationships shared among the group. One of the main advantages of focus group discussion is also that it assists in understanding the significance of data generated by participants. Such communication has helped me to identify group norms, cultural values, common and shared knowledge, while it also inhibited individual voices (cf. Kitzinger, 1995: 300).

Next, my observations in the field were used to assist my quantitative and qualitative findings in the areas of study. Participant observations thereby allowed me to draw insights from different communities' and households' values, dynamics, internal relationships, structures and conflicts; rather than just from government and Sikkim people's normative statements of what is (cf. Rennie and Singh, 1996).

1.8 Structure of the thesis

This thesis is organized into 5 chapters. The first chapter forms the introduction to this thesis that gives an overview of the research background, context, research problem, research objectives and questions, theoretical concepts and framework, positionality and the research sites. Each of these has been in described and discussed in depth in the respective chapters that follow. The succeeding three chapters form the core of the thesis, each answering one of the three research questions outlined in the Chapter 1. These have been published in three co-authored articles, which now have been transformed into Chapters 2, 3, and 4. In these chapters I have maintained the "we"-form, while I explain in the authorship statement how I have worked on these articles as first author.

Chapter 2 is based on the first research site, Chungthang GPU. It illustrates how the largest dam of Sikkim, the 1200 MW Teesta Stage III was constructed over a stretch of eleven long years with little to no resistance at the heart of Bhutia-Lepcha landscape. This chapter explores the theoretical concept of place and its various dimensions, including notions of sense of place, indigeneity and sense of belonging, to understand the overwhelming consent given to hydropower development by the "local public" of Chungthang GPU. Who are "local public" of Chungthang and how did the local public welcome Teesta Stage III is what is explained in this chapter. Chungthang reveals a peculiar case of the strong acquiescence of many of its residents (such as the Bhutia-Lachungpas and Lachenpas residents of Chungthang, the Nepalis, Tibetans and Biharis). The chapter scrutinizes the emerging and constructed categories or identities, that privilege some over the other, which further shapes and affects people's responses and participation to large dam development.

Building up on Sikkim's interconnections among place and indigeneity, in Chapter 3, I explore further the concepts of place-based identities, territorialities and collective actions in the research sites of Lachung and Lachen. Here, several dams were resisted and cancelled. Chapter 3 illustrates how in the wake of powerful pro-dam forces that push for dam development (undertaking aggressive mobilization for dam support and controlling and co-opting people who resisted and questioned such development), the distant highlander Bhutia Lachung-pas and Lachen-pas resorted to "vernacular statecraft" and the exercise of "agonistic unity" to challenge hydropower development in their respective

areas. I investigate how cultural identities and identity politics shape and influence people's responses and participation to dams. This is one of the few cases of successful resistance to large dam development in Sikkim, where dams have been cancelled due to public protest only to be re-built few kilometers upstream or downstream.

In Chapter 4, I focus on Dzongu – the epicenter of anti-dam resistance in Sikkim, and illustrate how and why hydropower development there reignited a reinvigorated mass conflict and contestations, visible in the changed dam positions of both the opponents and proponents of such development. Here, I have engaged to deploy theoretical concepts of power dimensions to understand and explain how these shape, influence and affect people's response and participation to dams. The chapter discusses in depth how power produces distinct Dzongu centric hydro-electoral politics that, for decades, have gripped Dzongu Lepchas' responses to dams.

Chapter 5 provides the discussion and conclusion to this research. It begins with a short summary of the main findings of each of the three preceding chapters, and reflects on theory and methodology to answer the main research question. It also includes a section on re-positionality of my research as a part of my attempt to reflect on the research methodologies and research journey. The chapter ends with a conclusion.

Chapter 2. Hydropower development and the meaning of place: Multi-ethnic hydropower struggles in Sikkim, India[5]

2.1 Introduction

The Eastern Himalayan State of Sikkim, in India, is said to have a hydropower peak potential of 8,000 megawatts (MW) (GoS, 2015a). This implies a key contribution to the 50,000 MW Indian Hydroelectric Initiative, launched in 2003 (Ramanathan and Abeygunawardena, 2007). A total of twenty nine large dams were proposed across Sikkim's network of rivers and tributaries, mostly located in the North District in 2003 (Dharmadhikary, 2008). Five large dams have been commissioned and over 10 are in different phases (CEA, 2016, 2017). This "hydro-rush" by India's Central Government (GoI) and the Sikkim State Government (GoS) has prompted diverse responses. The North District (see the map in Figure 1.1 and Figure 1.2), inhabited largely by indigenous[6] Lepcha and Bhutia communities, is the centre of dam-related conflicts in the region. Research accounts of the opposition to large hydropower dams in Sikkim speak about contestations around geo-ethnicity; the objection to development-induced degradation and disregard of sacred and spiritual Bhutia-Lepcha ("BL") landscapes/place (Arora, 2007a; Little, 2008, 2009; McDuie-Ra, 2011). In fact, in Sikkim, contestations against dams are considered to be "a Lepcha thing" (Little, 2010b:121).

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

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[6]   The interpretation of the term 'indigenous' is myriad and contextual, depending also on who uses the concept and under what conditions. In India, the term commonly refers to the Tribal or the Adivasi, i.e. original dwellers (Rycroft, 2014). In this paper, we follow the 1994 definition framed during the United Nation Workshops on Indigenous and Tribal People's Struggle for Right to Self-determination and Self-government (see Das, 2001). The terms indigenous and Adivasis are used interchangeably in this paper.

Taking note of the flaws in invariable people-place connection claims, we discuss how in the face of pronounced contestations against hydropower development across North Sikkim, the largest project in the state, the 1200 MW mega[7] Teesta Stage III Hydro Electric Project (henceforth Teesta Stage III), went ahead in Chungthang Gram Panchayat Unit (GPU) without any resistance from "local" communities. The socio-cultural concerns initially raised by a few local students and young professionals there fell on deaf ears during public hearings around the project, particularly when the eminent village elders welcomed it. The project, starting in 2007, lies in the heart of the BL landscape in Chungthang GPU in North Sikkim (see the map in Figure 2.1). The ethnic BL communities here did not contest the Teesta Stage III project, even though, just a few kilometers upstream from the dam location, the Bhutias of Lachung and Lachen, successfully stopped hydropower projects (Wangchuk, 2007; Lepcha, 2012), just as the Lepchas opposed and got many projects cancelled in Dzongu – a few kilometers downstream of the Teesta Stage III dam site (Arora, 2008). The question of interest to us was to understand what "goes on in Chungthang" that is different to other localities in Sikkim.

Our paper's focus is not in understanding resistance to large dams. Rather, it is in understanding how people-place connections come into being, are experienced differentially; if and how these relations are embedded in place-history, and how they might evolve differently across situations and scenarios. From our findings, we note a definite "sense of place" (SoP) among indigenous Bhutias and Lepchas within Chungthang GPU. These groups 'experience particular locations with a measure of groundedness; a sense of boundary; connection [of place] to everyday life and identity traversed by power' (Escobar, 2001: 140). Here, SoP refers to collective 'meanings, beliefs, symbols, values and feelings that individuals and groups associate with a particular locality' (William and Stewart, 1998:9), related to the "need to belong" (Baumeister and Leary, 1995: 497). It has been noted, that, a SoP goes well beyond immediate physical places to notions of space including social and historical contexts and situations (Tuan, 1974; Hummon, 1992).

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

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[7]   Projects over 500 MW are usually considered 'mega' projects in India.

In the sections below, we explain Sikkim's socio-political history to understand ethnicity, identity, claims, contestations and connections around place; particularly in relation to the conflicts that hydropower intervention has provoked in the region. A description of the concepts of place, SoP and Sense of Belonging (SoB) is followed by a methodology section, which also describes the case study area, Chungthang GPU and the hydropower project in question: Teesta Stage III. Finally, we discuss nuanced meanings of place and belonging among the diverse resident community in Chungthang GPU, explaining how a pronounced SoP and SoB, for some, contrasts strongly with the "placelessness" of others; and how indigeneity may not always translate to struggles around resources. We conclude by emphasizing the need to ask, 'Who speaks for place? Who defends it? [How are] power and hegemony [embedded in] place-based practices?' (Escobar, 2001: 142).

2.2 Background

Covering an area of around 7,096 km^2, tthe state of Sikkim is landlocked by China (Tibet) to the north and north-east, Nepal to the west, and Bhutan to the east. To the south, it shares an inter-state border with the Himalayan district of Darjeeling in the state of West Bengal, India (Figure 2.1). The State is divided into four districts – North, South, East and West. The region is richly endowed with tributaries of the river Teesta, coursing through altitudes of 8,600 to 300 meters. It is no surprise then that officially the waters flowing from North District glaciers in the Teesta and its tributaries were identified as a key economic resource (GoI, 2006a).

Hereafter we present a brief outline of Sikkim's political history as a background to the state's hydropower developments and cultural-ethnic and political relationships.

2.2.1 Sikkim's political history
Sikkim's documented history as a Kingdom reports that Phunsok Namgyal, the first King, established a *Namgyal* Dynasty in 1642 (Datta-Roy, 1984). However, the beginnings of governance in Sikkim can be traced back to the 13th century with the signing of a "blood brotherhood treaty" between the Tibetan prince *Khye-Bumsa* and the Lepcha Chief *Thekong-thek* at Kabi in North Sikkim (Sinha, 2005). A 16th century Tibetan sobriquet, "*Lho-Mon-Tsong-Tsum*[8]" refers to the historic coexistence of three ethnic groups in Sikkim: Lepchas, Bhutias and Limboos (Namgyal and Yeshay, 1908; Risely, 1928). Throughout the 17th and 18th century, the Kingdom of Sikkim witnessed multiple territorial conflicts

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[8] The word 'Lho' means "south" referring to early Bhutia settlers from southern Tibet. The term 'Mon' means "foothills" indicating the Lepchas, who inhabited the Eastern Himalayas' lower slopes; while 'Tsong' refers to the Limbus, another indigenous tribe of Sikkim (GoI, 2006b; Bhutia and Mishra, 2014).

with neighboring Kingdoms (Nepal, Bhutan, and Tibet) and with the British colonial government (Datta-Roy, 1984; GoI, 2011). These conflicts resulted in shifting administrative boundaries as well as ethnic hostilities. Following repeated attacks from across the Nepal border, in the late 18th century, Sikkim sought the British government's help to protect and demarcate its territories – becoming a British protectorate in 1890 (Namgyal and Yeshey, 1908; GoS, 2008).
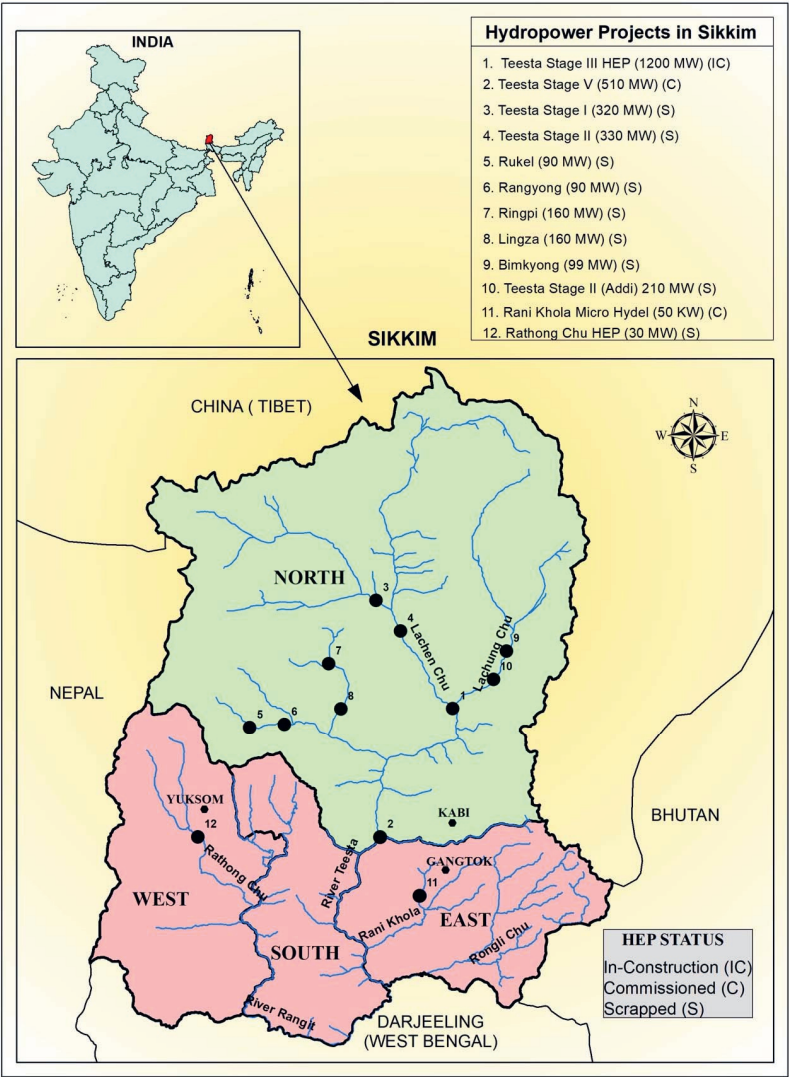
Figure 2.1: Map of hydropower projects[9] in North Sikkim.
Source: Own elaboration, adapted from GoS and International Waters websites. Map not to scale.

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[9]   Only those pertinent for the paper have been located, out of many more projects across Sikkim.

The period under the British resulted in new administrative structures, revenue systems, forest reservation rules and agricultural and infrastructural developments (Kraemer, 1998, GoI, 2008). Along with providing protection, the colonial government capitalized on Sikkim's geographic location – enabling trade between India and Tibet through the shortest route through Sikkim (Gorer, 1938; Bhasin, 1989; Kheral, 2002). This necessitated road development that required a massive workforce, which was met by encouraging in-migration of laborers from neighboring Nepal. This influx significantly altered the Kingdom's demographic composition (Schaefer 1995; Krämer Krämer 1998, GoI, 2008). While the British encouraged labour migration from outside of Sikkim, they restricted the sale and/or transfer of Bhutia-Lepcha lands to these laborers (i.e. non-BLs) without permission from the King's office, through the approval of a Revenue Order in 1917 – Revenue Order No.1[10] (RO1).

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

These ethno-political fractures are said to have resulted in the termination of the *Namgyal* Dynasty and the Kingdom's political merger with India as its 22nd State, in 1975 (GoS, 2008), apparently encouraged and supported by the GoI (Datta, 2004; Rai, 2013). However ethnic fractures and contestations have not ended and are evident across socio-political spaces and processes (Sen, 1994; Thapa, 2002; Northeast Today, 2017).

Sikkim's merger with India resulted in renewed development activities in the frontier regions. Reinforcing Sikkim's northern and eastern borders with Tibet (now China) was a national-security priority, which required overcoming the difficult geographical terrains with infrastructural access (roads, bridges and army cantonments) to facilitate a strong Indian Army presence in the region. The 1950 Indo-Sikkimese Treaty further enabled GoI "the right to station troops anywhere in Sikkim" (GoI, 1950). These developments led to a

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[10]   Issued by John C. White, Political Officer of Sikkim in 1897.

second wave of labour influx from Nepal as well as "mainland" India into the Indo-China frontier regions of the newly created State of Sikkim (Datta-Ray, 1984; Bhasin, 1989). A GoI led exploration of the water-abundant Himalayas' hydropower potential was one the outcomes of the opening-up of this otherwise geographically "restricted[11]" area. It is worth mentioning here, that while territorial regulations like RO1 strictly remained in place, these restrictions have not applied to the [Indian] State, particularly the Indian Army, including power companies.

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

2.2.2 Sikkim's hydropower development vis-à-vis ethnic contestations and solidarities

The liberalization of the energy sector in India in the 1990s set the stage for 'a veritable "hydro-rush" in the Northeast' (Huber and Joshi, 2015: 16). In 2003, Sikkim became a key part of GoI's mega-hydropower initiative (GoS, 2015a). However, ethnic-based contestations of large dams in Sikkim preceded the 2003 "hydro-rush". In the 1990s, a small group of Lepchas of Dzongu in North Sikkim under the banner of the "Sikkim Tribal Salvation Council" led the regions first-ever anti-hydropower protest against the proposed cascade[12] hydropower development (Pradhan, 2014). These protests in a protected area in the distant North, far away from Gangtok (capital of Sikkim) received little to no media attention. This is why many (Menon, 2003; Balikci, 2008) considered a later 1994 protest against the 30 MW Rathong Chu Hydro Electric Project (RCHEP) in the "sacred heartland" of Yuksom, West Sikkim (predominantly inhabited by Bhutias) as Sikkim's first anti-hydropower movement (see map in Figure 2.1). Bringing together various ethnic groups (Huber, 2012), Buddhist monks from both Lepcha and Bhutia communities led the 1994 movement (Lepcha, 2012), which was supported by various civil-society organizations (Schaefer, 1995; Balikci, 2008). After almost five years of struggle, the GoS was obliged to scrap the RCHEP in 1997, on the grounds that it threatened the sacred land and waterscape

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[11] See Foreigners (Restricted Areas) Order, 1963.
[12] Teesta Stage I, II, III, IV, V and VI along Sikkim's Teesta River.

in Yuksom, where the highly-revered Buddhist Bum-Chu festival is celebrated annually (Menon, 2003).

Baviskar (1995, 2005) writes that in the case of India's most controversial dam project, Sardar Sarovar, the indigenous Adivasis were among the thousands affected and displaced. However, the 'cultural cachet' of the Adivasi (indigenous) 'link to land' (Baviskar, 2005; 5109) was not the key argument in a civil society-led resistance against this project. Mobilized and led by networked translocal groups – including activists, trade and labor unions, non-governmental organizations and others, the concerns here related primarily to forced displacement, rehabilitation and inadequate compensation (Routledge, 2003; Narula, 2008). In Sikkim, hydropower contestations were contrastingly grounded in place and driven by "sacred" values and meanings attached to land and water. Here, the indigenous BL community, although demographically a minority, are not politically marginal[13] and thus, contestations against dam projects have been initiated, led[14], and mobilized by them, and in most cases have led to cancellation of dams, despite State efforts to penalize protestors[15].

The hydro-rush in Sikkim is reported to have escalated already existing and powerful anti-dam protests by the Bhutias and the Lepchas (Arora, 2007a, 2008; Little, 2009, 2010a, 2010b, Lepcha, 2012). In 2004, when the GoS announced six large dams across Dzongu in North Sikkim, the protection of this place, considered sacred by the indigenous Lepchas, became their rallying point for anti-dam protests (Huber, 2012; Pradhan, 2014). The Affected Citizen of Teesta (ACT) led protests that included indefinite hunger strikes and public rallies in Dzongu, in Gangtok and as far away as in New Delhi. The movement was widely covered by local media, and supported by the Lepchas residing outside Dzongu as well as the Bhutias of North Sikkim (Wangchuk, 2007; Arora, 2008; Little, 2010a, 2010b). This led to four[16] of the six large hydropower projects planned in Dzongu in 2008 and more than 8 projects being cancelled across Sikkim (Little, 2010b; CEA, 2016, 2017). Similarly, all proposed large dam projects in North Sikkim in Lachen and Lachung, were cancelled, following protests by the Bhutias there. However, in the midst of these contestations, Teesta Stage III – the largest dam project in Sikkim was implemented in the heart of this

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[13]   The political history of Sikkim means that BL communities will continue to be key actors in state politics and governance. Their prominent political positions are further safeguarded by Article 371 F of the Indian Constitution, the Representation of the People Ordinance (post-merger) as well as the Representation of Sikkim Subject Act, 1974 (pre-merger).

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

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

[16]   Rukel (90 MW), Ringpi (160 MW), Lingza (160 MW) and Rangyong (90 MW).

BL landscape, and other "mega" hydropower projects (e.g. 510 MW Teesta Stage V, 1200 MW Teesta Stage III) were also approved in North Sikkim.

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

In Sikkim, it has been observed that the areas where hydropower projects are accepted are inhabited by Sikkim's major non-indigenous ethnic group, the Nepalese/Nepalis[17], living here with or without the "BLs" (Menon and Vagholikar, 2004; GoI, 2006b). There is also evidence that the Nepali community in Sikkim have not shown solidarity with BL protests against hydropower development (Wangchuk, 2007; Arora, Little, 2009, 2010a; McDuie-Ra, 2011; Gergan, 2014). This is perhaps why many researchers talk about contestations against hydropower projects in Sikkim as being linked to indigenous identity and culture. In analyzing people-place connections we question such generalizations and argue that political histories of both people and place distinctly shape on-the-ground realities. Our findings in Sikkim, show a complex interplay of indigeneity and political history in the making of place-based claims, and that such decisions are not always neatly predictable. Shared histories, religious, cultural and spiritual connections do indeed bring Sikkim's indigenous groups together in multiple ways, but this does not always coalesce and equate to protest against translocal developments. Such seeming anomalies are explained through unraveling the concepts of place and SoP.

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[17]   In Sikkim, the words Nepalese and Nepalis are used interchangeably.

2.3 Sense of place

2.3.1 Place and sense of place

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

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

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

2.3.2 The dimensions of sense of place and the fostering of the sense of belonging

Place-attachment

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

Place-identity

'All aspects of identity to a greater extent have place-related implications' (Ross and Uzzel, 1991:206) as they are informed by place(s) (Proshansky, 1978). Place(s) develops, reinforces, and strengthens people's identities (Hummon, 1992). This 'degree of place(s)' inclusion in individual or collective identity perception' is referred to as place/place-based identity (Proshansky, 1978) – developed and articulated through a sense of belonging (Buttimer, 1980; Davenport and Anderson, 2005: 628, Qian et al., 2011). Belonging, being part of a social group and its environment or territory, is the experience of valued involvement in a social-system, instilling feelings of being 'accepted, valued and needed' (Anant, 1966; Hagerty et al., 1996:173). Relph (1976) uses the terms 'insiders' and 'outsiders' to understand place-identities and asserted that the more deeply individuals feel 'inside a place' the stronger will be their identity with the place (Seamon and Sowers, 2008:45). In our findings discussed below, we note that place often assigns a negative, exclusionary identity on some – by not being able to belong (for various reasons), "place" becomes a haunting reminder of one's compromised, limited identity.

Place-dependence

Place-dependence refers to people's functional reliance on services and resources that place provides (Qian et al., 2011). When daily needs, livelihood options, religious/spiritual necessities or socio-cultural responsibilities are met in any one place – the need to explore alternative place(s) are minimized, allowing for a certain degree of place-dependence (Schreyer et al., 1981). This gradually translates into a fundamental "human need to belong"

to the place(s) and its community (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). In our findings in Section 5, we argue – this is not necessarily the case for all local groups. Regardless of the length of stay and the material benefits "place" provides, certain other prevalent conditions act to differentiate relational experiences of place, dependence and belonging.

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

2.4 The study area – Chungthang Gram Panchayat Unit

Chungthang Gram Panchayat Unit[18] (GPU), located around 1630 m.a.s.l, is one of the twenty-three GPU's that make up North Sikkim. It comprises of five ward/villages – Bop, Chungthang, Pegong, Chorten and Theng (see Map 2 below) and is sandwiched between two regions: Dzongu, a "protected" area inhabited *only* by native[19] Lepchas; and the "restricted" border regions of Lachen and Lachung, home to the native Bhutias – that remains heavily guarded and protected by the GoS and the GoI respectively. The GoI presence along (international) border regions of Sikkim under Foreigners (Protected Areas) Order 1958 and Foreigners (Restricted Areas) Order 1963 before Sikkim's merger with India in 1975 paved the way for the opening up of the terrains of North Sikkim to India; but closing of the centuries old trade ties with Tibet.

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[18] A GPU is the lowest level administrative body for self-governance comprising of many wards/villages.

[19] In this context, this means only those from Dzongu; excluding other Lepchas and Bhutias born across North Sikkim including other parts of Sikkim or outside it.
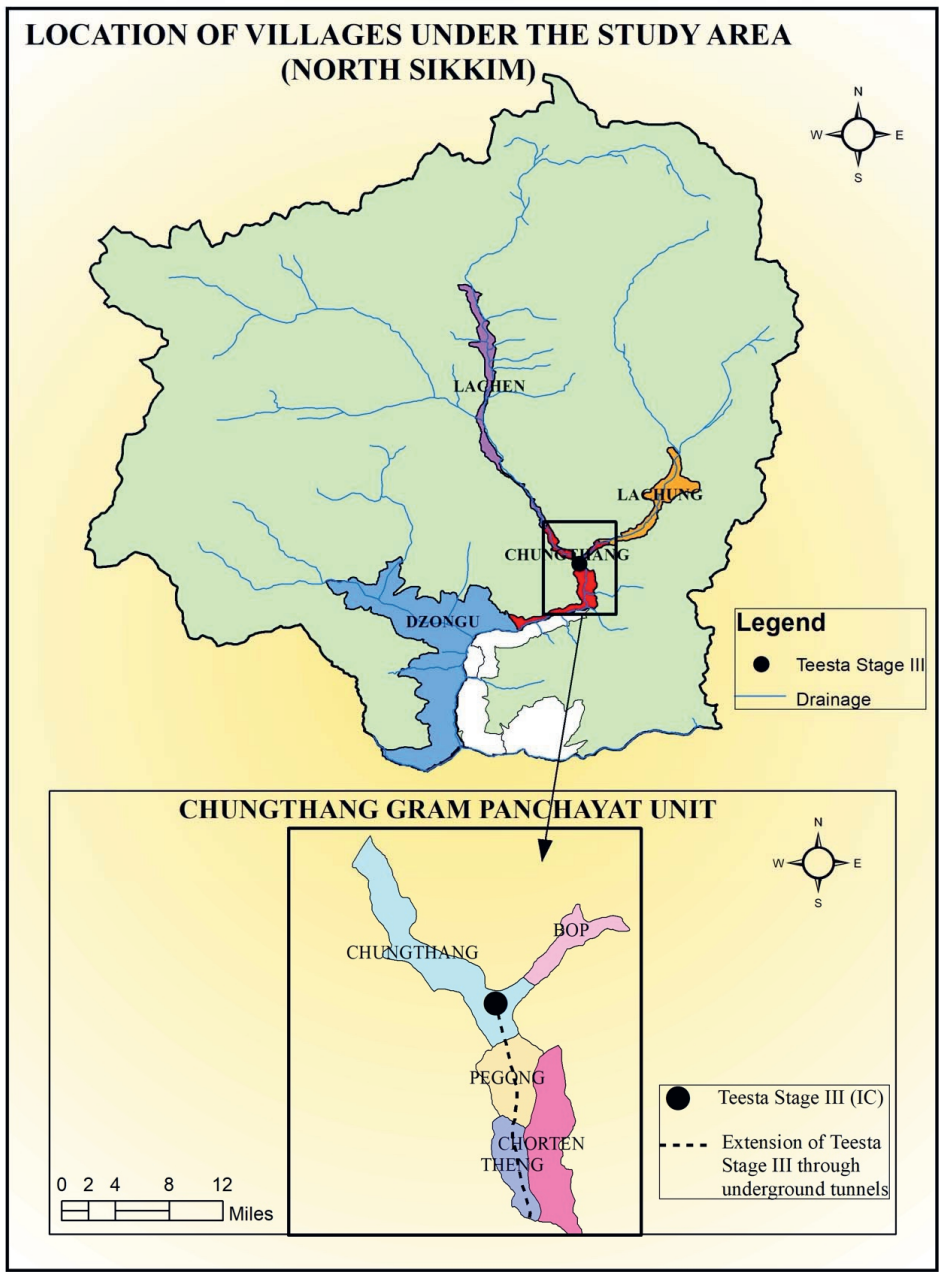
Figure 2.2: Map of the study area shown by the highlighted five wards falling under Chungthang GPU.
Source: Own elaboration, adapted from GoS websites. Map not to scale.

Chungthang, like Dzongu, Lachen and Lachung, is also classified as a "restricted" area, where all travelers, except the "locals" require Government inner-line-permits to enter (GoI, 2006b). Post-merger with India, Chungthang became the epicenter of defense-related

development interventions in this politically strategic Indo-China border region – in the process, witnessing a burgeoning influx of migrant workers from the rest of India and Nepal. Therefore, unlike the surrounding areas of Lachen, Lachung and Dzongu, Chungthang GPU is strangely like the capital, Gangtok – with a heterogeneous population consisting of "local" Lepchas and Bhutias; and "non-local-others" (i.e. non-BL's such as Nepalese, Biharis, Tibetans, etc.). The start of hydropower development in 2004 further promoted the influx of migrant laborers.

However, Chungthang GPU is, like most villages in North Sikkim – deeply rooted in Bhutia-Lepcha historical, mythical folklores and considered sacred. It is believed that in the early 8th-century, Padmasambhava[20], the patron saint of Sikkim, fought and subjugated a local Lepcha Chieftain at Chungthang, leaving marks of his footprints embedded on a rock where he sat. This rock, "*Lhedo*[21]" is a sacred historical pilgrimage site for the Bhutias and Lepchas. Chungthang is considered a "miraculous" abode of Padmasambhava – here paddy which normally does not grow at high altitudes, is believed to have started growing after Guru Padmasambhava threw some leftover rice from his meal there (Arora, 2006). To this day, paddy is cultivated in Chungthang and, during the harvest period, distributed amongst the locals.

It is in this sacred landscape that 1200 MW Teesta Stage III – Sikkim's largest, mega hydropower project was successfully implemented since 2007. The execution of the project on the ground went smoothly for over nine years, uncontested by the local residents or neighboring residents from Lachen, Lachung and Dzongu, including from the rest of Sikkim. However nationally, Teesta Stage III was surrounded by controversy, particularly in the national media and among Non-Government-Organisations (NGOs) working on socio-environmental issues. Controversy revolved around legal cases filed against GoS and the project developer for project allotment violations (see Dinakaran, 2010), procedural irregularities, violation of socio-cultural norms, obtaining clearances without transparency, cost overruns (Yumnam, 2012; Dutta, 2013; Mazoomdaar, 2013) and a "shoddy" environmental impact assessment (EIA) (Kalpavriksh, 2007). A "top-priority" project, promoted by the GoS and a private developer through discourses of uplifting North Sikkim with the revenues from the sale of power to energy-deficient regions in faraway Northern and Western India (WAPCOS, 2006:4), Teesta Stage III was finally commissioned early 2017. The five wards/villages of Chungthang GPU lie in close proximity to the 60-meter-high dam. The powerhouse and underground tunnel that stretches for 13 kilometers come under the "protected" Lepcha area of Dzongu – the epicenter of Lepcha-initiated anti-hydropower resistance.

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[20]   A Buddhist Tantric Master/Guru.
[21]   Also referred to as *Nhedo*.

2.4.1 Understanding sense of place and belonging

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

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

In conducting the research, we refrained from *a priori* assumptions about the "locals" (see Baviskar, 2005; Escobar, 2001); taking care to not color our conversations with popular framings of a conflict between locals and [hydropower] development. Even when we did not raise attention to the topic of hydropower development, given its contentious political nature, the 'large dam' (now completed), conspicuous by its physical presence was the

elephant in the room in the conversations that took place. People in general are fearful and skeptical of the powers that be promoting such developments i.e. the State Government and are often reluctant, even suspicious of discussing dams and dam related issues. We therefore narrowed down to specifically discussing hydropower development only after months of "deep hanging out", when the community had begun to trust the researcher (first author). This allowed insight to a less-known fact, that a few Lepcha residents of Chungthang had expressed serious concerns on the possible negative impacts of the dam. In the sections below, we discuss how ethnic solidarities, and socio-political divides shaped the ways in which a decision was made around this "development". The Lepchas of Chungthang GPU decided unilaterally to give a go-ahead to the project. Understanding people-place relationships here, required analyzing 'manifest' as well as 'latent' content and interpreting patterns, trends and deviations in what was observed, expressed and experienced (see Gioia et al., 2013).

2.5 Unraveling social categorization, a sense of place and belonging in Chungthang GPU

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

Sikkimese people by-and-large refer to themselves as "locals" while all the non-Sikkimese are considered as "non-locals". Formally, "locals" are (or descendants of) the "Sikkim Subjects", i.e. persons who had domicile in the Sikkimese Kingdom before the Sikkim Regulation Act of 1961. Currently, the formal identity categorization Sikkim Subject has been replaced by a "Certificate of Identification" with similar clauses[22]. Apart from

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[22] In simple terms, the Sikkim Subject had domicile in Sikkim territory before the 1961 Sikkim Regulation Acts by: 1. birth in the territory; 2. residing in Sikkim for at least 15 years prior to the 1961 SRA; and 3. as wife / minor of 1 and 2. This made Bhutia Lepchas of Sikkimese origin automatically Sikkim Subjects, including Nepalese meeting the above conditions. Cf. the Sikkim Subject Regulation Act (1961).

their official pre-merger identity documents, locals also include those who have immovable property within Sikkim. In Chungthang, this would include the Lepchas, Bhutias and a few Nepalese who are all domiciled Sikkim Subjects before 1975. Nonetheless for reasons that explain the complexities of indigeneity, only the Lepchas and Bhutias (and not the few Sikkimese Nepali households[23]) identify themselves as locals in Chungthang. The "others" comprising a sizeable[24] population of migrant settlers such as the Tibetan refugees; Nepalese from Nepal; Bhutias and Nepalese from neighboring Darjeeling, and other communities from India's plains – are all considered as "non-locals".

Among the "locals" of Chungthang, there is yet another layer of division by indigeneity[25] – "public" and "non-public". We discuss these complex divisions/categorizations below, by drawing attention to "sense of place" and "belonging" and how these link to the resident community's diverse response to the Teesta Stage III project.

2.5.1 Lepchas – "local" and "public"

Native Lepchas whose forefathers were born in Chungthang GPU, who owned and held property (land, house) are considered both "local" as well as "public". By virtue of their ancestral dwelling, Lepchas here are socially and legally categorized as the "public". All the 130 Lepcha households are taxpayers, referred to as a *khyepo* i.e. one who pays "*khajana*" (land tax[26]) to the land-revenue department. Socio-cultural norms[27] require all public Lepchas to initiate and participate in socio-religious events in the GPU, while these activities are optional for others. These norms and practices are perpetuated by community institutions[28], local governments and(or) power and authority yielding local actors.

For example, it is compulsory for every public Lepcha household to contribute in cash or kind, and participate in religious and spiritual ceremonies held periodically at the village monastery or in the forests. Folklores and legends associated with the region back the assertion of claims of land and indigeneity by the Lepchas, which is verified in the official "*parchas*" (land documentation) and history of land-tax payments. A 56-year-old Lepcha woman said, '*We can feel the wind, water and soil in our bodies. Everything is known to us here, including the people. This is our ancestral land. Our great grandfathers and*

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23 This is mainly because the few Nepali households are not native to the region and acquired land to settle in the region during the reign of the Chyogyal. Therefore, despite having the relevant documents, they are not equal in legal status with the indigenous Lepchas and the Bhutia.

24 Exact, or even rough, estimates of the number of "other" households could not be obtained.

25 In North Sikkim, it refers to the original dwellers with ancestral history in a particular geographic area.

26 Locally referred to as "*khajana*" – Royalty for the land, paid to the King during the monarchy and continuing to this day.

27 Similar in Lachung and Lachung, where the public Bhutias have to mandatorily take part in the socio-religious affairs of their respective villages.

28 Such as the monastery with its monks, the grassroots level government body such as Panchayat and its associated elected members, etc.

grandmothers lived, worked here. This very land will sustain our future generations. Today whether we make use of our land or not is secondary we want our lands intact-to-us. This is our source of identity.' (Field-research, 2016).

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

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Expressions of voice – enthusiasm as well as concerns

Lepcha respondents perceived hydropower development with a mix of enthusiasm as well as with serious concerns. It was evident that the elders[29] among the Lepchas believed the promises made by politicians and the hydropower developers – of 'development[30]' as translating to 'free-electricity', 'employment-opportunities', 'business-expansion' 'monetary compensations', and 'undertaking-of-social-services'. They believed that the returns from acquired land would benefit the public Lepchas; land acquired for temporary-infrastructure such as labor quarters, management buildings and storehouses, would eventually be dismantled and returned upon completion of the project. Additional claims made by the developers of 'minimal negative impacts' to 'no negative socio-environmental impacts' – as reported by the Lepchas added to their initial enthusiasm (WAPCOS, 2006; Field-research, 2016). Lepchas from Chorten and Bop that are not Project Affected Villages (in Chungthang GPU) and do not benefit directly, also perceived hydropower development as an 'economic opportunity' (ibid). There was high hope and expectation that 'something-good' would emerge from hydropower development among large sections of the Lepcha community in Chungthang GPU. An elderly man said, '*Our Chief Minister had told us the more electricity we can generate, the more revenue we can earn by selling power to power-deficit states. We cannot just rely on cardamoms. We need alternatives. We need alternatives.*' (Field-research, 2016).

However, not all the Lepchas perceived hydropower development as important and necessary. There were concerns among some around the destruction of "their" environment

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29 In plain Nepali language, elderly men and women are referred to as thulo-thala. However, village heads, political leaders or representatives andthose in other powerful positions, or even rich individuals are also referred to as thulo -thala.
30 Of villages, roads, community halls, monastic schools, playgrounds, etc.

and "their" sacred places; and that this would bring upon them the wrath of "their" local deities, as would the influx of migrant workers who, it was thought, would disturb revered, local sacred sites (Field-research, 2016). A middle-aged woman remarked, '*When the Shipgyer road was constructed, the Officer-in-Charge was killed. So were two Lepchas in a freak accident. It was actually our deities showing their anger and displeasure. Outsiders feel the wrath but because we are the real inhabitants, our Gods affect us more than them.*' (Field-research, 2016).

There were also concerns that migrant laborers or "outsiders" in general were tampering with the social fabric of "their" place in other ways. Such concerns, almost mounting to fear, arose from their past experiences in cases of theft, non-payment of food-bills and rent by migrant workers, fights and brawls with the locals/public but most important of all – fear for the safety and security of local women, be it a Lepcha or a Bhutia (Field-research, 2016). A middle-aged Lepcha man argued, '*Our girls marry them [migrant workers] and leave home. One season they elope; next season, poverty stricken, they return working as laborers on our very roads. Some are duped. Some return with children. What do they [migrant workers] have to lose. They are men. The influx of outsiders is not good for our society, not good for our young girls and women.*' (Field-research, 2016).

Thus, "public" Lepchas display a definite "sense of place" and of "belonging". They articulate how they are insiders, how they belong to the place in as much as the place belongs to them; and how this allows them to make and take decisions relating to the place. A prominent anti-dam Lepcha activist lamented, '*My father, a 70-year-old then, attended the Gram Sabha meeting before the public hearing. He was a village head for many years, the first Member of Legislative Assembly and also a Minister from this region. An honest man with the reputation of returning to the Government the unspent money from allocated annual funds. People respect him. At the meeting, he openly challenged those raising dam related concerns and literally scolded them in full public. He believed the project would benefit us. His action that day against the concerned youths was interpreted as his pro-project stance. Directly or indirectly, he ended up influencing people's perception in favor of the project.*' (Field-research, 2016).

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

2.5.2 *Bhutias – "local" but not "public"*

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

Among the Bhutias there is a sense of attachment to and dependence on Chungthang GPU, expressed by similar use of Bhutia words to describe their place of residence – *ningchee*, *khim* and *yok-yil* – but nonetheless, they remain emotionally connected to their native places of Lachung and Lachen. It is to Lachen and Lachung, rather than Chungthang, that the Bhutias articulate their SoB, and assert their notions of place-based identity. An elderly Bhutia man said, '*We have a saying in Lachen – "meh-geh-nuh-yii-then, phya-geh-nuh-dah-then [as you grow older, you will start feeling and caring more for the place where you belong]. Our real belonging is in Lachen. It is our ancestral place. I reside in Chungthang, but Lachen is my home.*' (Field-research, 2016).

Concerned but not engaging in action

Despite long years of residency, the Bhutias of Chungthang GPU are not the "public" and have no significant landholdings. While they express varying degrees of attachment and dependence to Chungthang, they remain detached and show little SoB to their current place of residence. Lachen and Lachung are the places to which they belong, feel rooted, build and nurture bonds. Some Bhutias expressed grave concerns relating to environmental degradation in the case of the Teesta Stage III project, yet they argued that it was not their place to voice such concerns. Even the younger generation of Bhutias, born and raised in Chungthang GPU chose not to antagonize their own 'brotherly Lepcha neighbors'. The same Bhutias of Chungthang GPU have vehemently opposed and managed to halt numerous proposed hydropower projects in Lachung and Lachen. A Bhutia woman says, '*Place-land are greater than our parents. If one doesn't have them, where does one go? Having a tangible*

connection to land is important. My land is not here, so I do not have any rights here. My right to give opinions or participate in any activities lies in my native place in Lachen. I kept quiet here but not in Lachen, where we did not allow the company to even set its foot there. It's not that I don't care for Chungthang, I do but I cannot do anything as this is not my place.' (Field-research, 2016).

2.5.3 Others – the "non-locals"

There are many "others" in Chungthang GPU - mostly elderly residents, who have lived here for decades and the younger ones born and raised here. This however does not make these migrant residents "locals" nor "public". This included the four Sikkimese Nepali households[31]. Apart from the Tibetans who migrated to these regions as refugees, the rest migrated in search of livelihood opportunities. Excluding the Bhutias, GoS Revenue Order No. 1 of 1917 forbids the "others" from buying land or property from Bhutias and Lepchas. The majority of non-locals/non-public "others" work mainly as road construction laborers with the General Reserve Engineering Force (GREF). The Tibetans do business[32] and/or serve in the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP), while a few are engaged in various public services and private businesses. The migrant settlers have a "conscious" association to Chungthang GPU given their dependence on it for their day-to-day sustenance and livelihoods. A Nepali migrant says, '*If we walk then, it's just roads, if we stop then, those very roads become our soil. I came to Sikkim from Nepal when I was 13-years-old and started working as a road laborer with GREF. When a stretch was complete, we pulled down our temporary huts and moved elsewhere in the region. After marriage I settled in Chungthang and started working as laborer in building houses. Currently, I live with a Lepcha family. This may not be my birthplace, but it is my work place.'* (Field-research, 2016).

Yet, most migrants, like the Bhutias speak of their emotional connections to their own ancestral place(s) from where they migrated. The ties to their homes far away, are preserved, often through yearly or regular visits. Despite decades of residency in Chungthang, the words "home", "family", "property", "land", "belonging", "security" as well as "identity" are expressions reserved to describe their connection to their ancestral place(s). It is perplexing for them to want to become attached to Chungthang, to belong and to be rooted and yet to know that this will never quite be their place. An 80-year-old migrant says, '*I have been in this place for almost three decades and I know how things work here. People like us, are*

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

[32]   Business for 'others' implies running small roadside grocery, vegetables, fruits businesses and shops to sell vegetables, including to restaurants. However, unlike the Bhutias, business for the 'others' does not include sale of alcohol as outsiders are not allowed to do so.

nobody – never a part of any important meeting. Only those from here, the "public" attend such meetings. We are neither called nor do we go. When there was initial enthusiasm for the project here, I was neither happy, nor sad.' (Field-research, 2016).

It is about earning a living

For these non-local/non-public residents, hydropower development invokes some enthusiasm, but mostly indifference. The older generations express their lack of voice in matters relating to the region. Similar to the Bhutias, who do not want to antagonize the public (Lepchas), the "others" do not want to antagonize the Lepchas including the local Bhutias on whom they rely for livelihoods. Young or old, what matters most to them is employment. A young Nepali migrant says, '*Despite being born and raised here, I am not a local because my parents are from West Bengal. I don't have the domicile documents so I am not eligible for government jobs here or anywhere else in Sikkim. I am neither highly qualified nor are my parents well-off. When talks about how project would create jobs began here, I was very hopeful. If the Lepchas who own the lands are okay with the dam, who are we to complain? We don't interfere in their decisions. I started as a helper for Teesta Stage III. Today I am a lab-technician for quality control there.'* (Field-research, 2016).

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

An aspiration to belong, to feel at home, be rooted in "place" is obvious amongst the migrant "others", however, the region's contentious socio-political history allows and legitimizes a SoB only for a limited few – i.e. the local, public Lepchas. The complexities of such a social categorization severely constrains inclusive participation and involvement among the residents in making decisions about the "place". Anant (1966), Hagerty et al. (1996) and Kianicka et al. (2006) all argue that, "valued involvement" in community events is fundamental to form a sense of belonging. The social divisions in Chungthang GPU were so prominent and pronounced that they failed to invoke and/or strengthen the historical ties of place-based solidarities, even between the Bhutias and the Lepchas. Such divisions explain why Sikkim's largest mega dam was uncontested in over a decade of implementation in the heart of the Bhutia-Lepcha landscape.

In the section below, we link theoretical concepts of place, SoP and SoB to assess what we observed on the ground in Chungthang GPU – diverse responses to hydropower development as an outcome of historically and socio-politically shaped people-place relations. In doing so, we contest linear, one-dimensional views of ethno-centric solidarities.

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In our view, these belie the complexities through which meanings and expressions of "place" and "SoP" are both cemented as well as evolve in diverse socio-cultural and politico-economic contexts.

2.6 Discussions and conclusion

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

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

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

may disempower particular groups among "the local" – those who are marginalized to "assigned" positions and identities" by local norms and power structures (ibid: 15).

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

Chungthang GPU is an atypical demography in North Sikkim. In the (re)creation of ethnic boundaries and divides; the blatant categorization of the resident community as local/non-local and public/non-public, Chungthang GPU mirrors the socio-political dynamics of the deeply fractured state of Sikkim. Regardless, Lepchas, Bhutias and "others" experience living in Chungthang GPU 'with some measure of groundedness (however unstable), sense of boundaries (however permeable), and [some] connection to everyday life, even if [their] identities are traversed by power' (Escobar, 2001: 142). But, these experiences are far from uniform. The everyday life worlds of the Lepchas in Chungthang GPU are intertwined with their cultural, traditional, religious, spiritual beliefs, practices, as well as civic duties and responsibilities. This strengthens their place-attachment and place-identity. Their ancestral link to land and related land endowments bestows them with exclusive political and economic privileges, including sole rights to making decisions on local, natural resources.

The Bhutias and the "others" with no ancestral history of dwelling in Chungthang GPU are conscious of their 'functional reliance" on the place for sustenance and livelihoods. The years of residency evokes in them a certain place-familiarity, but place-belonging is constrained and limited, and different for the Bhutias and for the "others". Translocal development interventions did not spark any solidarity along inter-ethnic lines here; not even among the traditionally united (minority) BL community. Voice and/or articulation in "public" domains of formal and informal governance processes of decision-making is most clearly absent among non-BL outsiders, amongst whom placelessness, exclusion and non-recognition is starkly visible. 'The politics of [place and] belonging renders them,

"people out of place" (Baviskar, 2005:5111). Clearly, people-place relations are deeply embedded in Chungthang GPU's history, culture and legislation, these impact upon the circuits of development and serve to accentuate divides. As the paper has shown, in the case of hydropower development, the Lepchas either gain disproportionately from these developments (through land compensations and project-related benefits as housing, job and economic opportunities) or at the very least, enable their continued, un-challenged decision-making (by virtue of their identity as "public" and "local").

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

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

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

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Chapter 3. Contesting hydropower dams in the Eastern Himalaya: The cultural politics of identity, territory and self-governance institutions in Sikkim, India[33]

3.1 Introduction

Since 2003, over 168 large dams for hydropower development have been proposed in the Eastern Himalayan Region of India (Joy, Mahanta and Das, 2013; Huber, 2019). The push for hydropower development in the north-eastern regions of India (see Figure 3.1) by both Central and State Governments, have made these developments highly conflict prone (Vagholikar and Das, 2010; Joy, Mahanta and Das, 2013; International Rivers, 2016). Several major contentious projects (such as the 520 MW Teesta Stage IV, 500 MW Teesta Stage VI and 300 MW Panam in Sikkim; the 2000 MW Subansari Lower HEP in Assam; the 1500 Tipaimukh Dam in Tripura; the 2880 MW Dibang Multipurpose Project and Tawang I and II in Arunachal Pradesh, etcetera) have been stalled, delayed or are waiting for clearance across Northeast India (Economic Times, 2016; Assam Times, 2017; International Rivers, 2017; Huber and Joshi, 2015), often characterized by prolonged struggles between dam opponents and proponents. Yet, the business of hydropower development continues as usual, with many official attempts to fast-track, facilitate and revive old and new hydropower projects across the north-eastern regions (Vagholikar and Das, 2010; International Rivers, 2016; Economic Times, 2016).

India's most well-known anti-dam movement, the NBA Narmada Bachao Andolan (or Save Narmada Movement) began contesting the controversial 1450 MW Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada River in 1989. Nonetheless, after three decades of resistance, which captured global attention – the Sardar Sarovar Dam was completed in 2006: a stark reminder of the powerful nexus among Government (Central, State, Local), power companies and other pro-dam advocates, who are able to pursue dam development against all odds. However, the success of the NBA movement is less about the outcome and more about the process - creating "space for India's faceless and nameless displaced" to voice and influence attention to "equitable development alongside economic growth" (Narula,

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2016:382). It has brought to the public domain "the hitherto closed and protected discourse on mega development projects … opening new vistas for environmental movements" (Nepal, 2009:25).
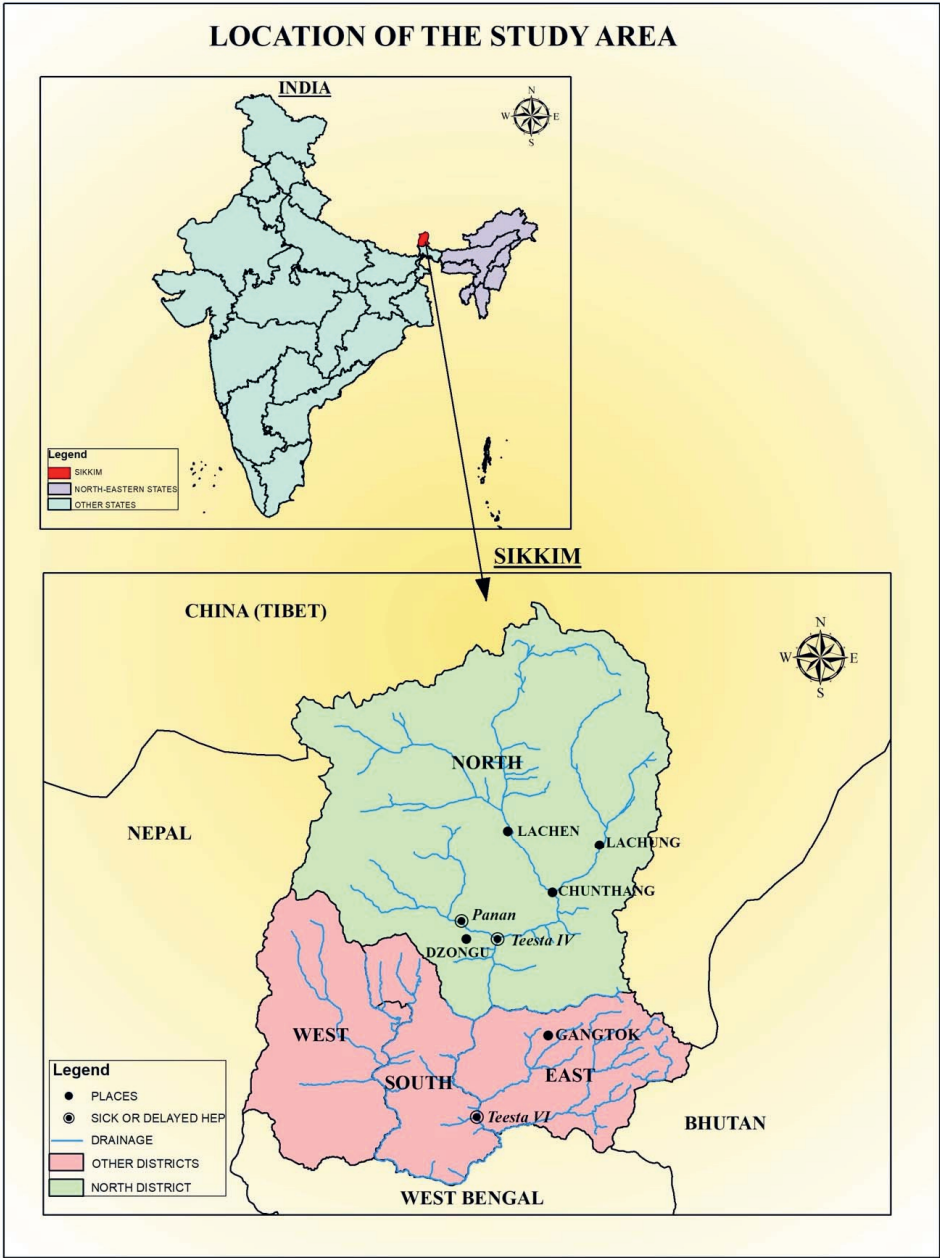
Figure 3.1: Map of the delayed hydropower projects, fast tracked in Sikkim.
Source: Own elaboration, adapted from GoS websites. Map not to scale.

The north-eastern region of India, where hydropower projects are being rolled out currently (International Rivers, 2017; Menon and Vagholikar, 2003; Huber, 2012; Dukpa, Joshi and Boelens, 2018), is predominantly inhabited by diverse tribal communities. Tribal autonomy, traditional political institutions, cultures, socio-economic practices and landscapes are constitutionally protected under special provisions guaranteed by Article 371 of the Indian Constitution. Ironically, large dam development, promoted officially as instrument for "development", often happens against the wishes of many local tribal communities. This explains why unsuccessful contestations against large dams in the tribal north-eastern region are occasionally violent, resulting in some cases in the death of anti-dam protesters (The Third Pole, 2016; The Indian Express, 2016). It is in this alarmingly pessimistic scenario that we draw attention to the intriguing case of how two small tribal communities, the Lachungpas of Lachung and the Lachenpas of Lachen (in North Sikkim) powerfully contested and managed within a short time frame of a few years, to cancel all the five hydropower projects proposed in their area. Regardless of the external advocacy for large dams, these two closely associated tribal communities successfully mobilized; and to this day maintain a unanimous anti-dam position. Ironically, it is the neighboring region of Dzongu, inhabited by tribal Lepchas, that literature and media consider as the epicenter of anti-dam movement in North Sikkim. Even though a few dams have been scrapped in Dzongu this is remarkable since – different from Lachung and Lachen – two mega dam initiatives have been implemented there with little resistance.

As we will discuss below, a place-based identity precedes all other identities in the case of the Lachungpas and Lachenpas. Also, the small minority of Lachungpas (1478 in Lachung) and Lachenpas (1314 in Lachen) are amongst the few tribal groups in India, and the only ones in Sikkim who have a traditional, territorial system of self-governance known as the Dzumsa (or Dzomsa). Outsiders to these areas assume that the Lachungpas and Lachenpas are a "collective entity" united by a common Dzumsa system. It is believed that this is what enabled the community to "kick-out" hydropower companies from their respective regions. In analyzing the nature of collective action among the Lachungpas and Lachenpas and the assumed collective resistance against hydropower development in these regions, our paper unpacks complex ground realities, pointing evidence to how territory, identity and traditional governance come together to forge "agnostic unity" and "vernacular statecraft" (Colloredo-Mansfeld, 2009:16).

Academic studies in various disciplines discuss how identity triggers collective action or vice versa (Klandermans, 2014; Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2013; Klandermans, Van der Toorn and Stekelenburg, 2008; Zomeren, Postmes and Spears, 2008; Scholtens, 2016; Melucci, 1996). Many scholars argue that within a maze of identity(ies) experienced by individuals and/or groups, there is a "specific" identity which is key to

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enabling collective action and/or that place (or territory) and identity (Escobar, 2008; Boelens, Shah and Bruins, 2019) are closely twined in protecting and strengthening cultural values, norms, shared interests and traditional territories [e.g., Sawyer, 2004; Delaney, 2005; Anguelovski and Alier, 2014, see also Huber and Joshi, 2015; Duarte-Abadia and Boelens, 2016; Valladares and Boelens, 2017). In other words, territories and(or) places are key markers of identity (Holsti, 2000; Storey, 2012; Hoogesteger, Boelens and Baud, 2016). We have engaged here with the theoretical framework proposed by Klandermans and colleagues (Klandermans, 2014; Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2013; Klandermans, Van der Toorn and Stekelenburg, 2008; Simon and Klandermans, 2001:5) – how politicized collective identity is "the engine of collective action". They outline three processes through which collective identity politicizes, triggers or mobilizes collective action, which we discuss in Section 3. Here we point out that theoretical analyses of collective action rarely pay attention to how collective actions are *sustained* over time and/or how consensus is *maintained* in any society, which is anyway divided by many fractures - class, age, gender, ethnicity, religion – to name a few. Colloredo–Mansfeld's (Colloredo-Mansfeld, 2009) work on "vernacular statecraft" and the creation of "agonistic unity" is particularly useful in understanding how and why the Lachungpas and Lachenpas collectively and successfully protested against hydropower development in their respective regions.

Our findings reveal that territorially exclusive and ethnically cohesive collectives like the Dzumsa do not automatically or easily coalesce as a response to outsider imposed agendas and interventions. Rather, collective action is mobilized by some individuals who politicize the notions of territorial collective identity inside and/or outside existing institutional systems, in this case, the Dzumsas. When communities are fractured into polarized groups, these vernacular institutions also become highly politicized, as they are often the means to coerce divided communities into a collective front or unity, which is nonetheless "agonistic". Here principles of "vernacular statecraft" can become highly contentious. We discuss how traditional systems and practices of shamanism (*Chya*) coercively bring back dissenters to "agnostic unity". As we explain, the local imposition of collective territoriality and identity notions (deploying, amongst others, fear-driven practices as the *Chya*) make these highland tribal communities in North Sikkim successful in maintaining their unanimous anti-dam position. Such virtues of cohesion, collective identity and action are not without contradictions. Moreover, these practices are also fundamentally at odds with liberal, modern notions of individual civil liberties.

We have concluded that identities are not always rooted to land, territory, culture or even indigeneity, rather they are strategic, fluid, political actions that serve to defend a particular group from "outsiders/others" and(or) to protect specific claims and interests (Cohen, 1985; Huddy, 2001). The united anti-dam stand by the Lachungpas and Lachenpas

is much more than just the voicing of socio-economic and environmental concerns relating to large dams. Their resistance is really about the (re)claiming territory, (re)asserting collective identity, reiterating collective action, and valuing as well as using non-official, non-centralized knowledges and modes of knowing (see Boelens, Shah and Bruins, 2019).

In the subsequent sections, we detail the political history of identity construction in Sikkim, to explain how the exclusive Lachungpa/Lachenpa identity came into being in the first place and sustained via the Dzumsas. A short review of key concepts in Section 3 is followed by the study area and methodology in Section 4. Our findings are described in Section 5. Section 6 givens an overview of discussions and Section 7 presents our conclusions.

3.2 At the background: Identity dynamics in Sikkim

To understand the anti-dam resistance in Lachung and Lachen, it is necessary to comprehend the historical, political, cultural and economic context that determines individual or collective routes to protest. Van Schendel's work on "Zomia" (Schendel, 2002) or Shneiderman's (see Shneiderman, 2010) on the "Himalayan Massif" both describe the Himalayan region as an invisible, transnational area, "... marked by a sparse population, historical isolation... and linguistic and religious diversity" (Michaud, 2010: 38). Before notions of nation-state crafted definite geo-political borders in the so-called Himalayan Zomia or Massif [encompassing Nepal, Bhutan, India (especially the states of Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttaranchal, Sikkim, and Arunachal Pradesh), and China (especially the Tibetan Autonomous Region)] (Shneiderman, 2010), these regions, more than being "boundary, border", were like "a zip-per" stitching together various "densely textured cultural fabrics" (Fisher, 1978:2). The Himalayan State of Sikkim, landlocked by Bhutan in the west, Tibet in the north, Nepal in its east and India in the South (before the 1975 merger) (see Figure 3.1) exhibits typical "zomian" characteristics. This explains why "society here is a constellation of multiple identities" (Sinha, 2005:1), resulting from diverse as well as entangled "geographical, linguistic, racial, national, cultural and religious mixtures, commonalities, fluidity with neighboring" regions (Shneiderman, 2010:290).

3.2.1 *"Sikkimese" – a newly created identity?*

The oral history of Sikkim, based on myths, legends and folklore (GoS, 2013), goes back to the 13th century, when a blood-brotherhood-treaty was signed between the Tibetan prince *Khye-Bumsa* and the Lepcha Chief *Thekong-thek* (Sinha, 2005; GoS, 2013) in North Sikkim. The treaty sealed friendship between the Tibetans (who referred to themselves as the Lhopos) with the Lepchas of Sikkim (who referred to themselves as the Rongs) (Sinha,

2005; GoS, 2008; GoS, 2012. Nonetheless, modern documented history of Sikkim begins with the consecration of the Chogyal (righteous King), a Lhopo descendent in 1642 AD, leading to the establishment of the Namgyal Dynasty with a Lhopo ancestry in Sikkim (1642-1975). Sikkim's ties with Tibet thus go a long way into history and were "sustained through matrimonial, religious and trade activities including administrative support from Tibet" (GoS, 2013:72). Both the Lhopos and Rongs comprised of numerous clans or tribal groups, who identified themselves on the basis of their affiliation to specific territory of origin or places of habitation. In fact, the term Lhopo refers to people of South Tibet, while Rongs meant "mother's (nature's) loved one" (GoS, 2008:77).

It was the Nepalese who initiated the use of singular terms generalizing the diverse clans of Lhopos as "Bhotiya" meaning from "Bhot" (Tibet) and Rongs as "Lapcho" referring to people living in a heap of stone or the stone house (Sinha, 2005) in Sikkim and across other Himalayan regions. Although Sikkim has no similar historical ties with Nepal, Nepali presence in Sikkim predates the arrival of British in Sikkim in the late 1880s as noted in the first population census of Sikkim recorded in 1891 (GoS, 2008). These generic terms gained legitimacy in time. After Sikkim became a protectorate of the British colony of India (1889-1947) with the appointment of the first British Political Officer – John Claude White (GoS, 2013), there was a systematic in-migration of Nepali laborers into Sikkim, facilitated by the British. The terms, Bhotiya and Lapcho [or "Lapcha" in Parbatiya dialect of Nepal, where Lap meant speech and Cha meant unintelligible i.e. unintelligible speaker who could not adopt the Parbatiya language (Sinha, 2005)] transitioned into Bhutias and Lepchas and this is how diverse groups belonging to these two generalized categories are known officially and colloquially in Sikkim. The immigrant Nepalese is also a generic category that subsumes diverse Nepali ethnic groups (such as Limbo, Khambu-rai, Yakhas, Sunuwars, Mangars, Gurungs, Tamangs, Bhujels, Thamis, Bahuns, Chettris, Kamis, Damais, Sarkis, Thakuris, Jogis, Sanyasis, Majhis and Newars in Sikkim) (GoS, 2008). As we discuss below, this framing of identity by ethnicity is certainly not nuanced and does little to help explain deep-rooted and complex identities.

Following the merger of the Kingdom of Sikkim with the Republic of India in 1975, the Bhutias and Lepchas were pronounced as Scheduled Tribes under the Constitution (Sikkim) Schedule Tribes Order – derived from clause (1) Article 342 of the Indian Constitution in 1978 (GoS. 2008, 2013). This recognition entitles these communities, privileges and protections accorded to (all) recognized indigenous tribal groups by the Indian Constitution. This GoI accreditation is also extended to all Bhutia and Lepcha communities living outside of Sikkim in the neighboring state of West Bengal, as well as Tibetan communities across the other Indian Himalayan regions of Laul-Spiti, Kumaon, Garwal referred to as Bhotiya, Bhot or Bhoti (Paul, 2009; Gohain, 2014). In Sikkim, the

prefix "Sikkimese" term was thus added to distinguish local inhabitants from ethnically similar outsider others (see Dukpa, Joshi and Boelens, 2018). This happened also because Sikkim's merger with India led to a massive in-migration of "outsiders" (GoS, 2008, 2013; Dukpa, Joshi and Boelens, 2018). This happened also because Sikkim's merger with India led to a massive in-migration of "outsiders" from all over India (Sinha, 2005; GoS, 2008). The influx of a skilled and educated outsider population evoked a conscious construction and imbibing of the Sikkimese identity, constructing what has become a sharp wedge between the Sikkimese and the non-Sikkimese. As the Sikkimese prefix came to be adopted by the later migrated Nepalis, who became the majority population in Sikkim, the minority Bhutias and Lepchas furthered their innate Sikkimese-ness, constructing more nuanced (and exclusionary) identities such as "local" and "public" implying different identities and privileges politically. Such contentious identity-territoriality frictions define politico-ethnic fragmentations in this small Himalayan State. It is in this context, that place affiliated "Lachungpa" and "Lachenpa" terminologies are relevant, reasserted and reiterated.

3.2.2 *The Lachungpas and Lachenpas of North Sikkim and their Dzumsas*

A general understanding is that Sikkimese-Bhutia groups inhabiting the valley regions of Lachung and Lachen in North Sikkim, located at an altitude of over 2500 masl along the Indo-China border, are referred to as Lachungpas and Lachenpas respectively (GoS, 2013; Bhasin, 1989, 2012) – "pas" meaning "people of" in Tibetan. However, in practice, not all-Bhutia groups of Lachung and Lachen are considered as Lachungpas and Lachenpas despite decades of residence in the region. This includes Tibetans who settled in the Lachen and Lachung regions before the Chinese occupation of Tibet in the early 1950s, Tibetan refugees who settled here post the closure of Sino-Indo border after 1962, long-term resident nomadic herders – the Dokpas and some Sherpas – all with Tibetan ancestries. It makes it difficult to know how the Lachungpas and Lachenpas distinguish themselves from other Tibetan settlers and refugees, Sherpas, Dokpas of Bhutanese origin. There are many similarities between these different highland communities living in the Lachung and Lachen region: a centuries old transhumance practice i.e. migrating seasonally from one ecological zone to another (into higher Himalaya) for agricultural and pastoral activities; trade ties with Tibet (Bhasin, 1989), socio-economic and cultural commonalities that come with geographic proximity. However, an exclusive hallmark that differentiates the Lachungpas and Lachenpas from others in the region as well as across Sikkim is their traditional administrative system of local self-governance called the Dzumsa and membership in it.

Ironically, the Dzumsas have a feudal origin. The institution was set up by the Chogyal monarchy to establish authority and ensure "structural cohesiveness" for collecting land tax in the distant, far-flung regions of Lachung and Lachen (Bhasin, 1998, 2012; Bourdet-

Sabatier, 2004). In time, the Dzumsas also took responsibility for settling local disputes, overseeing fulfilment of cultural and religious obligations, etcetera. When monarchy was abolished in Sikkim in 1975, following Sikkim's merger with India, the Dzumsas of Lachung and Lachen were retained and later, conferred recognition within Sikkim (via Sikkim Panchayat Amendment Acts, 1982/1993/1995) (GoS, 2013). This brought the Dzumsas at par with the Gram Panchayat – the third tier of local village self-governance system under the Panchayati Raj Institution as imposed in the rest of Sikkim (GoS, 2013). Further Amendments (2001) protected the Dzumsa's customary laws, uncodified in nature, making the two Dzumsas uniquely official as well as traditional (GoS, 2008; 2013). These unwritten customary laws bestow enormous power on the Dzumsas -making the Dzumsa rigid and flexible in executing its functioning - in contrast to Gram Panchayats that are strictly based on GoI and GoS guidelines. One of the key features of the Dzumsa is its social structure: all male heads of Lachungpa/Lachenpa households are members of their respective Dzumsa committees and thus influence the dynamics of decision making as well as the execution of the responsibilities and functions of the Dzumsa. This is hailed by many researchers as one most traditional models of democracy (GoS, 2013; Bhasin, 1998, 2012) and participation. In addition, unlike Gram Panchayats that have affiliations to political parties and where decisions are influenced by party-ideologies or agendas, the Dzumsas are deliberately politically neutral. Therefore, while individual affiliation to political parties are allowed, public displays of such affiliations or toing the party line in decision makings are banned in Lachung and Lachen.

Elders in Lachung and Lachen explain that in earlier times, membership of the Dzumsa was open to all households resident in these regions. However, post-merger with India, the geopolitically sensitive border regions of Lachung and Lachen were the site of significant defense and infrastructural development by the GoI. This resulted in a huge influx of outsiders, including Indian Army and Border Relief Organization personnel and various categories of construction workers employed on military projects (see Dukpa, Joshi and Boelens, 2018). This made the Lachungpas and Lachenpas increasingly conscious about protecting and preserving their territory-affiliated identity and their institutions. The nomination of the first ever Minister from Lachung in the Government of Sikkim in the early 1980s and his use of the Lachungpa suffix (and not Bhutia) was a conscious re-affirmation of the place-affiliated identity. Thus, while the generalized terminology Bhutia is used by (especially younger) Lachungpas and Lachenpas in official documentation (the term brings constitutionally assigned Scheduled Tribes protections, entitlements and privileges), the older generation mostly do not use the Bhutia title. They (and lately, the younger generation too) attach the exclusive Lachungpa or Lachenpa as a suffix after the term Bhutia to reassert their "real" identity. Today, apart from the Bhutia-Lachungpas

and Bhutia-Lachenpas, other resident communities are not Dzumsa members, nor are they considered to be Lachungpas or Lachenpas in Lachung and Lachen respectively. This benefits those who were granted Dzumsa membership decades ago by virtue of their residency in the region or through marriage to Lachungpa/Lachenpa. Dzumsa membership is not a privilege for all inhabitants, and expresses unequal rights. As we will discuss in Section 5.1 and 5.2, currently, the Dzumsa is an exclusive, exclusionary institution, but before we explain this, we present a brief literature review on some selected concepts and theoretical frameworks to ground our paper.

3.3 Conceptual notions – The plurality of identity

The notion of identity is complex and ambiguous, understood in myriad ways. Identity is multi-faceted (Storey,2012), a social construction (Castells, 2010), a social process (Paasi, 2003), a social product (Wise, 2000), a collective phenomenon (Storey, 2012), a fundamental condition of social being (Taylor, 1989), etcetera. It is hard to pin down one's identity, being a composite of behaviors and factors, a collection of beliefs about oneself. Weinreich defines identity as a relational construct joining a person's past, present and future self-images, "... the totality of one's self-construal, in which how one construes oneself in the present expresses the continuity between how one construes oneself as one was in the past and how one construes oneself as one aspires to be in the future" (Weinreich, 1986:1). Escobar (2008:203) notes that identity is an "articulation of difference(s)" that are both "dialogic and relational", which is why identity is not fixed, continuing to evolve throughout the lifespan and multiple experiences of any one individual (Erickson,1966). Or as Massey (Massey, 2004:5) says, identities "are not rooted or static, but mutable ongoing (re)productions". At the same time, identities are also not entirely fluid. Weinreich and Saunderson (Weinreich and Saunderson, 2002) note that identities constitute "... a structural representation of the individual's existential experience, in which the relationships between self and other agents are organized in relatively stable structures over time … with the emphasis on the socio-cultural milieu in which self relates to other agents and institutions" (Weinreich, 1986:1).

   Identity exists not only at an individual, but also at relational and collective levels (Sedikides and Brewer, 2001) giving rise to a plurality of individual and collective identities, which can be political, social and cultural. Whether identity is socially constructed (Castells, 2010), discovered, ascribed by others or dominant institutions (Taylor,1989), or acquired by oneself (Huddy, 2001), according to Castells (Castells, 2010:7), identity derives meaning and relevance when "social actors … internalize or acknowledge" these constructs. Thus, at any point in time, "individuals have multiple identities, which may not always work in the same direction" (i.e. may be conflicting) and collectively, any society is often fractured

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(Kalandermans, 2014:2). This explains the complexity of cooperation, solidarities, conflicts and exclusions. While some argue that identity plays an important role in collective action, identity is not the only factor that influences collective action (Opp, 2012). Other factors - such as perceived threats (Cakal, Hewstonne and Heath, 2016), perceived injustices, norms and efficacy (Zomeren, Postmes and Spears, 2008), grievances (Zomeren, Postmes and Spears, 2008; Klandermans, 2014), economic interests, motives and appeals (Klandermans, 2014), social embeddedness (Klandermans, Van der Toorn and Stekelenburg, 2008), emotions (Melucci, 1996; Zomeren, Postmes and Spears, 2008; Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2013), moral and(or) inner obligations (Alberica andMilesi, 2016), leadership structures (Melucci, 1996), etcetera, also influence collective action.

3.3.1 Collective 'politicized' identity and collective action

While individual identities are entirely diverse, it is shared interests and beliefs that converge to enable collective motivational interests. Here, a sense of "sameness… manifest(s as)… solidarity, shared disposition or consciousness, or in collective action" (Brubaker, 2000:7). Collective identity is thus better described as the identity of an individual as a group member (Klandermans, 1984) – serving "psychological functions" that relate to basic needs of the group such as belongingness, distinctiveness, respect, meanings and agency (Baumeister and Leary,1995). However, not all collective identities are salient at the same time; depending on contextual circumstances, collective identities can acquire or lose their relevance, position and status (Klandermans, 1984).

Klandermans (Klandermans, 2014) and many others (Zomeren, Postmes and Spears, 2008; Scholtens, 2016; Melucci, 1996), argue that collective identity (or identity in general) "become(s) the engine of collective action" only when politicized (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2013:5). Klandermans has outlined three processes for the politicization of collective identity: 1. awareness of shared grievances; 2. identification of an external adversary (against which/whom claims and grievances can be levied); and 3. obtaining the support of a legitimate, authoritative third party (Klandermans, 2014; Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2013; Klandermans, Van der Toorn and Stekelenburg, 2008; Simon and Klandermans, 2001). A politicized collective identity often instigates a strong internal, moral obligation to concerned individuals to participate in collective action (Alberici, 2016). As we discuss below, Klandermans analysis makes a close fit in helping unpack the construct of a Lachungpa/Lachenpa identity and the relative politicization of it against the hydropower agenda.

Melucci points out that for any grievance to be explosive, there must be a breaking point or critical threshold where conflictual reaction is triggered (Melucci, 1996). As he notes, "when norms or shared values are threatened by some form of imbalance or crisis,

the response through which an attempt is made to re(establish) social order is centered around a common belief which, while often fictitious, mobilizes collective energies" (Melucci, 1996:14). Further, as Boelens and Claudin argue, in "adverse economic conditions, competing political influences, and the hegemonic powers that surround and penetrate …, it is a challenge to maintain and reproduce a 'community' …" to ensure, "the collective defense of a community's material–economic foundations… creating and reaffirming shared norms, values, rights, and symbols" (Boelens and Claudin, 2015:1071). They state that, while collective institutions are (mostly) rational, the "rules, relations, and behaviors" that mobilize collective action are not necessarily established rationally (Boelens and Claudin, 2015:1070,1071). Strategies driving politicized collective action are often not about rational calculations. Rather they are driven strongly by emotions, feelings and perceptions (Mecucci,1996; Polletta and Jasper, 2009). Boelens and Claudin detail how these strategies may be the "outgrowths of historical and contemporary events, of context-specific trial-and-error, of opportunities and limitations on power, and of neighboring and supralocal institutions that are incorporated" (Boelens and Claudin, 2015:1071). Critically analyzed, these processes debunk the often, "dogmatic myths of romanticized, rationalistic, or economist" narratives of collective action Boelens and Claudin, 2015:1071). This explains why collective action depends deeply on trust, emotion, connect and cooperation among participants, spurred by shared understandings, experiences and identities (Tarrow, 2011).

Going beyond altruistic views, Boelens and Claudin continue to explain how collective action, not just outwardly but also internally, rests on harsh struggle to shape collective rules and orientations – inwardly, these institutions constitute "both an arena of power struggles and conflict negotiation, and a collective entity" Boelens and Claudin, 2015:1071). In the same vein, Colloredo-Mansfeld (in "Fighting like a community…") (Colloredo-Mansfeld, 2009) and Boelens and Zwarteveen (writing on water justice collectives) (Zwarteveen and Boelens, 2014), follow Chantal Mouffe's notions of "agonistic spaces and relationships" (Mouffe, 2007). Colloredo-Mansfeld describes how collective action rests on "agonistic unity" (Colloredo-Mansfeld, 2009), in other words, a unity that exists despite of diverse differences (see also Schlosberg, 2004). An agonistic unity is often mobilized via techniques or "organizational measures or strategies developed by leaders… to administer, persuade and at times coerce residents to move towards a collective purpose" (Colloredo-Mansfeld, 2009:7). Colloredo-Mansfeld termed this mode of arriving at consensus against the odds as vernacular statecraft. Indeed, as our research findings show, a politicized, sustained collective action against hydropower projects in Lachung and Lachen provides evidence of an agonistic unity and vernacular statecraft.

To establish and sustain effective collective action in situations of competing interests or in high risk context where participants might face repercussion for their actions, social

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embeddedness of the conflict in supportive institutions is hugely strategic (Klandermans, Van der Toorn and Stekelenburg, 2008; Scholtens, 2016, Loveman, 1998). These institutions not only provide relevant resources but also make the "benefits of participation and the cost of non-participation as high as possible" (Klandermans, 1984:588). Certainly, institutions do not always politicize collective identity and mobilization (Bavinck, 2016; Scholtens, 2016) – there are multiple ways by which "power works within communities" (Agrawal, 1994:258). Nonetheless, as we discuss below, the Dzumsas provided resources such as information and support, and forced the community by making the benefits of participation and, especially, the costs of non-participation utterly high.

As observed by Boelens and Claudin (Boelens and Claudin, 2015:1071), maintaining and reproducing "community", its material-economic foundations and norms, values, rights and symbols, is closely interlinked with notions of territory and territoriality, which we briefly describe below.

3.3.2 Territory and territoriality

In the research regions, both identity (as Lachungpas and Lachenpas) and its social embeddedness in the traditional institution (Dzumsas) had a strategic connect to place/ territory. This weave between identity, institution and place finds resonance in the views that territories are not just formal nation state, province or other legal-administratively demarcated regions (Agnew, 1994). Rather, territories are geographically demarcated and cultural-politically bound spaces, constructed around and by socio-spatial authority. In a broad sense, territories link social, physical and symbolic entities: they entwine ecological systems, legal-administrative arrangements, technical-physical infrastructures, political discourses, and socio-economic livelihoods. Or as Swyngedouw and Boelens (Swyngedouw and Boelens, 2018: 117) say, "territory is the socio-materially constituted and geographically delineated organization and expression of and for the exercise of political power".

Similarly, Antonsich (Antonsich, 2010:425) argues that territory is "the socio-spatial context where the living together is produced, organized and negotiated". Territories are dynamic, historically shaped, contested and permanently negotiated. As Hommes, Boelens and Maat (2016) state: "They evolve out of social encounters and are the effect of social relations' material inscriptions that define what spaces look like and how, in turn, connected social relations are organized ... The making of territory is an interactive and continuous process that emerges from imaginaries about what a territory in its judicial, political, economic, social, cultural, affective and physical aspects, should look like" (Hommes, Boelens and Maat, 2016:3), (see also Hommes and Boelens, 2017; Hommes and Boelens, 2018; Baletti, 2012). Importantly, therefore, this broad concept of territory includes blatant and subtle everyday struggles, disputes about discourses, and battles around the use and recognition

of divergent knowledge systems. Consequently, battles over local territorial constructs and territorial governance forms deeply constitute and interact with identity and knowledge formation and re-creation. Territory thus has profoundly divergent meanings (Delaney, 2005). Territories come with "limits" and "otherness" and these demarcations are often determined by identity (Moreyra, 2009). Territories thus are markers of identity (and vice-versa) and more often than not, enablers or disablers of processes of social exclusion perpetuating "lack or denial or resources, rights, good and services, and the ability to participate in normal relationships and activities" to some over others (Levitas, 2007:25). Territories are therefore not static, rather, they are continually contested and actively negotiated (Taylor, 1989).

Agnew and Oslender refer to territory as the popular acceptance of classification of space (e.g. ours versus yours), as a way of communication regarding a sense of place, and as a concept to express enforcing control over space (such as by barrier construction, interception, surveillance, policing and judicial review) (Agnew, 2013). As such, territoriality is usually put into practice in a number of different but complementary ways. Often, protecting physical demarcations of territory through "territoriality" serves to protect, preserve and strengthen identity and associated cultural values (Delaney, 2005) by "affect(ing), influence(ing) or control(ing) people, phenomena, and relationships, by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic area" (Sack, 1986:19). In sum, identity, territory and territoriality are deeply entangled and often inseparable (Storey, 2012).

3.4 Study area and methodology

3.4.1 *The study area: Cancelled hydropower projects in Lachung and Lachen*
Lachung (altitude 2600 masl) means "small-mountain" and Lachen (altitude 2700 masl) "big-mountain" in Tibetan (Bhasin, 1989). The two regions are approximately 60 kilometers apart from each other and located in the North District of Sikkim. Based on the information displayed on official display boards in the local health offices in the two areas, Lachung has a population of 1478 Lachungpas (in 420 households) and 370 non-Lachungpas (in 72 households) while Lachen has 1314 Lachenpas (in 216 households) and 126 non-Lachenpas. The total number of non-Lachenpa households was not mentioned on the board. Lachung and Lachen are administratively categorized by the GoI and GoS as a "restricted" area and remain under heavy military surveillance because both these valleys have mountain passes that connect the Sikkim with Tibet (Bhasin, 1989). Travel permits including No-Objection Certificates for research activities are required to enter these areas. However, lately tourism has emerged as a booming local industry in both Lachung and Lachen.

In Lachen, two large hydropower projects, the 320 MW Teesta Stage I and the 330 MW Teesta Stage II, part of the "cascade" dams (i.e., the series of six hydropower dams –

Teesta Stage I, II, III, IV, V and VI that were conceived as early as the 1970s) were cancelled after public protest (see map in Figure 3.2). Additionally, the 210 MW Lachen HEP and the 75 MW Talem Chu planned by multiple Independent Power Producers (IPPs) after
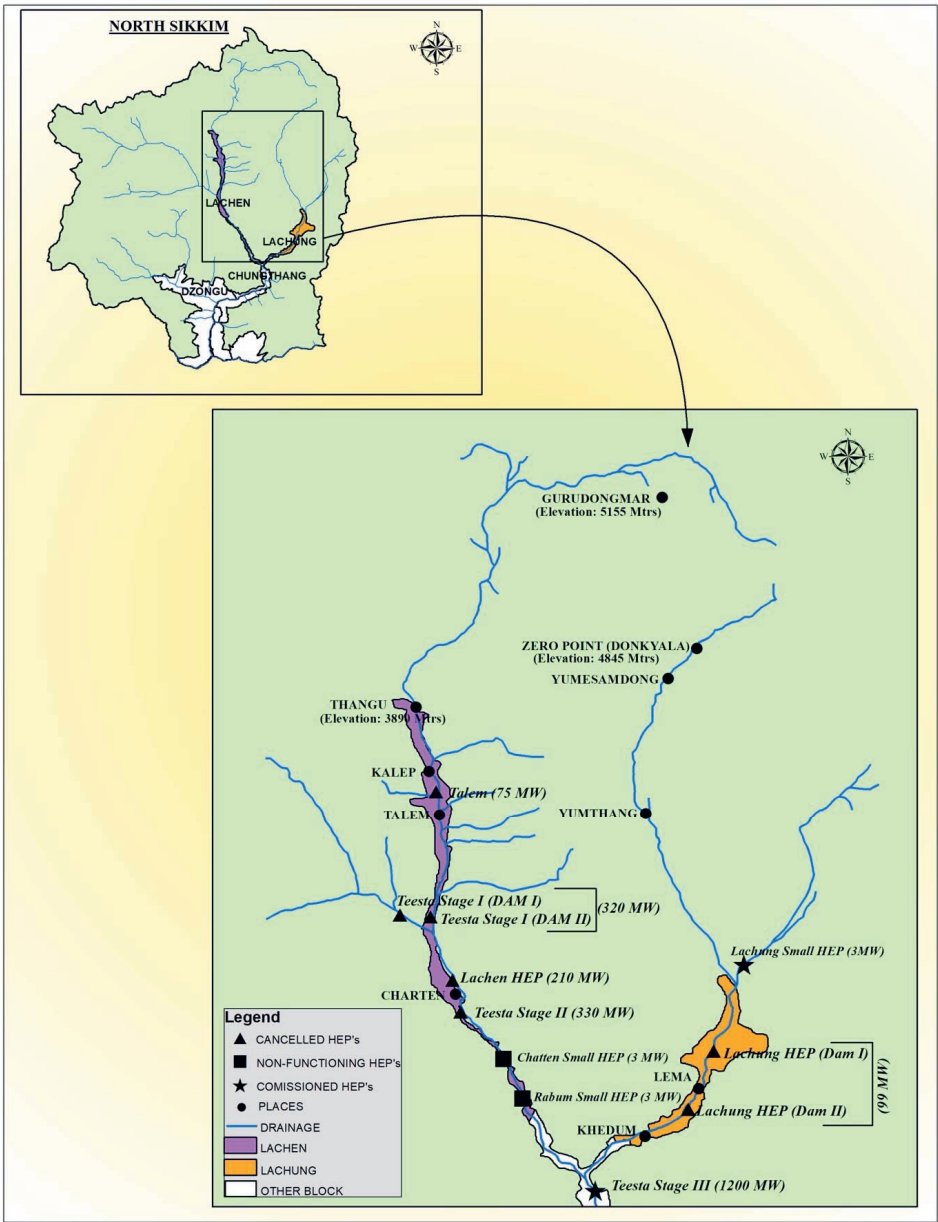
Figure 3.2: Map of the hydropower dams in Lachung and Lachen.
Source: : Own elaboration, adapted from GoS websites. Map not to scale.

the 2003 Hydel-Initiative Announcement by GoI were also cancelled. In Lachung, a 99 MW Lachung HEP, originally planned two dams in different sites was cancelled following local contestations. It is important to note that these valley regions are fully electrified by micro-hydel projects (3 MW Lachung Small HEP and the 3 MW Chatten HEP in Lachen) developed in the late 1980s. Another 3 MW Rabom HEP implemented in Lachen was damaged and declared non-functioning by the 2011 earthquake. Nonetheless, energy is a vital need in these high-altitude cold regions that faces frequent power cuts. It is therefore surprising that the large-scale hydropower development planned here with the promise of free electricity and other developmental gains, was fiercely opposed.

3.4.2 Methodology

This paper draws from ethnographic research (see Hammersley, 1984; Zaman, 2008; O'Reilly, 2005; Tsuda, 1998) with diverse data collection methods, such as observations, semi-structured-interviews, focus group and individual discussions etcetera. The first author researcher had been in the study area since mid-2015, first in the neighboring region of Chungthang (mid 2015–early 2016). The fieldwork in Lachung and Lachen was a continuation of the research in North Sikkim. This set the ground for meeting the Lachungpas and Lachenpas through mutual contacts (from Chungthang). Fieldwork for the current paper was conducted from late September 2016 up to February 2017 in Lachung, and resumed from end May 2017 to early October 2017 in Lachen. In the months spent in each area, familiarization with the place and its people was done through living in Lachung and Lachen. The first author-researcher, being a woman and a non-local in the study area, conducting research, speaking to large numbers of male strangers, initially aroused suspicion and distrust in the study area. However, being a Bhutia herself, having family in Sikkim, with stays for long periods of time with local host families – gave the researcher some degree of familial connection and allowed her to be seen as an *afnai-manchey* (one of us). Attending socio-cultural and religious festivals, taking transects walks alone or with host family members and newly made friends, visiting touristic places enabled to be in the public gaze long enough to be considered a "regular". After some degree of trust and familiarity was gained, data collection was initiated with different groups of the local families residing in Lachung and Lachen: farmers, private business entrepreneurs, government employees, the unemployed, etc. Meetings with Lachungpa and Lachenpa residents, and with Tibetan, Dokpa, Sherpa, Lepcha and Nepali families, took place on an everyday basis, to strengthen confidence. The male head of Lachungpa and Lachenpa households were also members of their respective Dzumsas, who regularly attend Dzumsa meetings. In all 47 individuals were interviewed personally over a period of time (repeated meetings) and multiple discussions were conducted with a much larger number of others.

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Given the blanket opinion of "no dams in Lachung and Lachen", initial interactions here did not begin with questions about dams and dam resistance. Nonetheless, the purpose and nature of the research was made known to those who opposed dams blatantly as well as latently. Two power company officials were interviewed – not from the power company that the Lachungpas and Lachenpas threw out but agents working at other operating hydropower projects nearby, in Chungthang and Mangan.

The next sections present our findings. We begin with a brief description of the structure and characteristics of Dzumsa and relate these with our core findings, following which, we discuss how the announcement to develop hydropower projects in the two areas triggered an agonistic unity and how the Dzumsa enabled the reordering of the collective by ensuring high risks of exclusions to those who challenged the vernacular alliance.

3.5 Hydropower development and the politicization of identity, territory and Dzumsa

3.5.1 Dzumsa: Structure and decision-making

Colloquially, the term, Dzumsa has three literal meanings, "a gathering place"; "an institution in charge of administrating and organizing activities within a given territory" and "the general council of villagers composed of household heads" (Bourdet-Sabatier, 2004:95). Lachungpas and Lachenpas have their own (separate) Dzumsas, and this institution is only accessible to male head of households among the Lachungpas and Lachenpas. Unlike Gram Panchayats, administratively both Dzumsas are composed of (and chaired by) Pipons, who are normally the village-headmen. An inner core Dzumsa committee includes Gyapons (elderly males to assist Pipons), Gyembos (male members who function as messengers), Chuitimpas (male monks to assist Pipons), Tsipos/Chipons (male accountants) and Machays (male cooks). All other male heads of Lachungpas and Lachenpas households are Dzumsa members. Lachungpa and Lachenpa women are only occasionally allowed to attend Dzumsa meetings – in exceptional situations, when the male-head of household is absent or unable to attend (with a valid reason). Also, "others" residing in Lachung and Lachen are not a part of the Dzumsa, even though they are governed by Dzumsa norms and conditionalities. They do not participate in the collective decision-making.

In earlier times, Pipons were selected by the Chogyals and this post continued as a hereditary appointment in the Pipon's family. Post-monarchy, individuals who were identified as reliable were nominated by the Dzumsa members and often succession continued to follow along hereditary lines (Bourdet-Sabatier, 2004; Bhasin, 1989, 2012). After monarchy was abolished post 1975, both Dzumsas began incorporating various other methods for the nomination – elections, a lottery system or simply hand raising. In Lachung, the Pipons are always elected or selected from two places Lema and Khedum,

and the Pipons from these two places officiate as Pipon 1 and II on a rotational basis. In Lachen individual Lachenpas securing the highest and second highest votes becomes Pipon-I and Pipon-II, respectively. Regardless, the two Pipons (I and II) are bestowed with equal power and functions and are responsible to dispense administrative functions and lead socio-cultural activities. Currently, in Lachung, Pipons are elected for a fixed two-year term and are appointed not by election but through a public lottery system. Pipons in Lachen continue to be elected through voting and are elected only for a year but unlike in Lachung, outgoing Pipons can be re-elected and continue for as many years should they garner votes.

Although extremely rare, Pipons can be ousted from their posts by the Dzumsa members any time if they failed to carry out their duties vis-a-vis the wellbeing of the community and the place. The plans to develop hydropower projects led to (such) an unprecedented removal of the Pipon(s) in Lachung, while in Lachen too, the Pipons were threatened with possible removal from the post. This power of the Dzumsa members to elect or nominate and dispose their representatives at any time and for any issue makes the Dzumsa different from Gram Panchayats, where village representatives must be elected and have a fixed five-year term. Additionally, the two Dzumsas are by choice non-political and do not allow individual party affiliation of the Dzumsa members to influence the functions and powers (as is prevalent in the Panchayat institutions in Sikkim). In fact the public displays of political party affiliation by means of flags and political canvasing were banned in both Lachung and Lachen as such acts were perceived as threats to the collective public unity and peace in the region.

Dzumsa meetings in Lachen and Lachung are called by the Pipons through Gyapons and decision making is through unanimous consensus. However, the Pipons also have the exclusive power to take unilateral decisions on both urgent critical as well as mundane issues, which speak to the wellbeing of the place and the people. When Pipons fail or hesitate in making critical decisions, the Chuitimpas or Gyembos are consulted to assist arriving at a decision. Once decisions are made, they are relayed to the Dzumsa members, who often go by what their representatives have agreed. It is interesting to note that Dzumsa members can deliberate on and contest the decisions taken by the Dzumsa representatives. However, in turn, if the Pipon considers these arbitrations to be invalid or unreasonable, the persons making these deliberations can be fined. If the Dzumsa representatives cannot make a decision, then all Dzumsa members collectively deliberate until a majority agrees on the decision.

The Dzumsa plays a critical role in these communities – making decisions on a wide array of everyday issues that can be socio-economic, environmental, cultural, religious, law and order, etcetera. All decisions which the community must abide by. This is why,

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although administratively Dzumsas and its equivalent Gram Panchayats dispense the same functions, the customary and traditional laws of the Dzumsa recognized by the GoS expands the power and function of the Dzumsa beyond that of the Gram Panchayats within their territory. It allows them added power and legitimacy to impose coercive actions on the Lachungpas and Lachenpas but also on the non-Dzumsa members (i.e., the Tibetan, Sherpa, Dokpa or Nepali) like fines, impose new rules and regulations, social exclusions, boycotts, including settling of grave disputes.

Thus, while the Dzumsa is eulogized as egalitarian and democratic by many researchers, it is rather hierarchical, masculine and exclusionary in its structure and operation (Bourdet-Sabatier, 2004; Bhasin, 1989:35). The Dzumsa was not always so closed as it is today. An elderly Lachenpa recalled, "*I had heard that in the old times, Dzumsa had very few members. Of-course then our population was also very low, yet, still Dzumsa meetings were not compulsory and any one (outsiders) could join it. The members registration was so low that one had to seek people to join Dzumsa and constantly request people to undertake collective work*". Sikkim's merger with India in 1975 and the subsequent marking of territory (land settlement surveys in 1978/1979 under GoI) as well as the nature and extent of translocal developments have contributed to the reassertion of a territorial collective identity among the Lachungpas and Lachenpas. In the section below, we look at how hydropower development threatened the agonistic union of this traditional self-governing body and how the Dzumsa members resorted to 'vernacular statecraft' to restore their collective identity and institution.

3.5.2 Hydropower intervention and politicization of collective identity

Ways of living and governance in Lachung and Lachen conform to an uncodified customary and traditional system, which is deeply exclusionary. The State push for hydropower development took place in a context that has historically been politically suspicious and antagonistic. In the words of a male Lachenpa respondent: "*If the 'company' (hydropower project) comes, they will bring with them thousands of outsiders, whose presence will dilute our existence. Our land, culture, tradition, old practices and identity are at stake. We will be outnumbered. We will be forced to relax our existing Dzumsa rules and laws to pave easy way for such developments. This way, our age-old laws, rules and regulations will slowly lose their relevance*".

It was reported that the GoI announcement of the 50,000MW Indian Hydroelectric Initiative in the North District of Sikkim in 2003 (Ramanathan and Abbeygunawardena, 2007) led to an urgent *Yul-Dru-Sum* meeting in Chungthang between the Lepchas of Dzongu, the Lepchas and Bhutias living in Chungthang and the Bhutias living in Lachen and Lachung. In Tibetan "Yul-Dru-Sum" translates to Yul meaning three, Dru meaning

together and Sum meaning places i.e., the people of three places – Lachung and Lachen as one entity, Dzongu and Chungthang. This meeting was also attended by Lepchas from nearby project-affected-areas outside the administrative boundaries of North Sikkim. A momentous unanimous decision was made amongst the two indigenous groups (Lepchas and Bhutias) to not allow any power-companies in the region. A 45-year-old Lachen resident who attended the meeting recalled: "*There were around 50 to 60 people that day. We discussed in detail the pros and cons of hydropower development and concluded that if such companies entered, we would be left with just the Sikkim Subject land documents but with no land. We would have sickles in our hands but no land to farm. We agreed to all say 'no' to the company*". However, just a year later in 2004, the Yul-Dru-Sum pact was violated in Chungthang, where 80% of the Lepchas welcomed the 1200 MW Teesta Stage III HEP development (see Dukpa, Joshi and Boelens, 2018). Another Lachenpa respondent who had attended the meeting felt that this happened, because, "*Unfortunately we did not translate the decision to a written agreement. The Lepchas played a nice game. First, they said no, and then they negotiated for a higher amount of compensation money before saying yes*".

Since 2004, the GoS had started to issue Letters-of-Intent (LoI) to power-companies, mostly Independent Power Producers (IPPs), which gave these organizations the right to access protected and reserved areas to initiate detailed surveys and investigations. The LoI also gives power-companies both the right and responsibility for contacting local communities and obtaining local consensus for planned development interventions. Private corporations are particularly skilled in making promises of development and economic gains; this is precisely what had happened in the case of the Teesta Stage III project planned in Chungthang (see Dukpa, Joshi and Boelens, 2018). As it turns out, like the Lepchas, some Lachungpas too (even if briefly) had faltered on the Yul-Dru-Sum agreement, although the Lachenpas had honored the decision.

Despite the promise to say no to hydropower development and the skepticism among Lachungpas and Lachenpas regarding such developments, an independent private power company was able to rupture the collective decision in Lachung. Talks for a 99 MW HEP hydropower project by Polyplex India Private Limited – an independent power company – went ahead here in 2005/2006 with the support of a few powerful Lachungpas, who held important government positions and lived in the capital Gangtok, as well as by a (then) Pipon of Kedum in Lachung, who gave his consent to a private company to undertake surveys along the riverbanks. According to the Pipon, he was gifted cash to distribute amongst the people of Lachung for allowing Polyplex company to begin the survey for two dams in Lachung: "*I asked my people to accept the money as a gift from God and enjoy it*". All Dzumsa members in Lachung had indeed accepted the money initially. "*The Pipon was a well-respected man and powerful as well, his brother has been in politics for a long time.*

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We believed in him when he said that the survey would be undertaken along the rivers and that land would not be touched. Believing in him, each Lachungpa household head accepted twenty thousand Indian Rupee (equivalent to less than 300 Euro) that he distributed on behalf of the company. But when we saw that they were also assessing our land and mountains, we intervened. People might accuse us of selling out, but trust me, we didn't".

At around this time, young educated Lachungpa youth started to raise concerns about the potential impacts of such development. Initially, these concerns were not considered by the Dzumsa representatives. In fact, the Pipon of Lachung (who had distributed the money) refused to grant the youth an "*emergency*" meeting with Dzumsa members. According to a youth activist, "*We were denied Dzumsa meeting by the Dzumsa representatives. Despite the restrictions placed on us, for the first time in our life, we disobeyed the norm and formal processes associated with the Dzumsa. We announced an emergency meeting publicly on a loudspeaker. Thankfully, people turned up the next day and we could place our concerns in front of everyone*".

This emergency meeting led to a direct confrontation between these youth with the (then) Pipon from Khedum. The Pipon and a few of his aides were accused of a lack of transparency and money embezzlement. While such intervening in the Dzumsa's authority was unprecedented, it nonetheless, eventually led to the majority of the Dzumsa members supporting this accusation as the youth were equipped with critical questions and proofs, which led to the ousting of the Pipon from his post, and later on from Dzumsa itself. This process was supported by the other Pipon from Lema but contested by some Lachungpas who still supported the ousted Pipon – bringing much conflict within the community. The Dzumsa members were split between the Pipon of Khedum who had favored dams and the Pipon of Lema who has supported the youth – creating animosity and distrust between the once amicable inhabitants of Lachung. A Lachungpa laments, "*We were so polarized initially that when one youngster from Lema attended a public meeting in Khedum in disguise to listen to their discussions about hydropower dams, he was unfortunately caught and brutally beaten.*"

According to the second ousted Pipon, a 45-year-old Lachungpa: "*I was the Pipon of Khedum in 2010. The company informed me during my tenure that the sites selected for the project earlier were not correct, and they only wanted to see where the first survey had been done. Just on that premise, Dzumsa members kicked me out of the Pipon post.*" However, a Lachungpa Dzumsa member added that: "*It was forbidden to even talk about the company in Lachung, forget about entertaining their calls or talks. The second ousted Pipon did not consult us, or bring the matter to us, so we kicked him out of the post. We will remove anyone from that position who does gaddhar [betrays] to us and our place.*" Hydropower issues triggered the Lachungpas to mobilize and assert their voice and might; and not always

in the most positive ways. Some days after the first Pipon had been expelled, a violent confrontation took place when the Polyplex Company began drilling tests in the nearby mountains. "*They started to dig through our mountains and take our stones. That was it! It was evening, these people were camping in tents. We burnt their tents, shouted at them and kicked them. Some of them were cooking food. We kicked their pots of rice, hurled them into trucks, drove them outside of Lachung and threatened them to never come back. Eventually, we regretted that we had attacked poor laborers, who were just doing what they were tasked by the company*". These violent protests continued in Lachung, where company vehicles were damaged and local residents (Lachungpas and non-Lachungpas) working for the company were threatened to quit working or be ousted from Lachung.

The first expelled Pipon of Kedum, however was unshaken by the stand against him and became a prominent dam supporter. Being powerful and politically well-connected, his expulsion from Dzumsa was re-negotiated and he was allowed to retain his Dzumsa membership, from where he lobbied harder for the dam projects. In his words, "*I managed to transport people in 45 to 47 vehicles from Lachung to the District Collector's Office at Mangan, where I confronted the anti-hydropower people from Lachung. I answered every charge levied against me, and finally I asked the District Magistrate to 'welcome' the company back to Lachung and continue their work. That the company didn't go back, is not my fault. It simply shows that it was a weak company*".

Although it was in Lachen that the Central Water Commission (CWC) had started the planning for hydropower development, Lachen was the last of the three regions where dams were announced. The time lag between the first dam planning processes in Chungthang and then in Lachung allowed the Lachenpas to observe and understand how coercion in dam development takes place. By the time the power companies went to Lachen to get an agreement on two cascade hydropower projects, the Lachenpas felt they understood the politics of dam development.

The Lachenpas adhered to an absolute "no" right from the very beginning. Unlike in Lachung, where one Pipon and his supporters became local mediators within the Dzumsa for the private company, in Lachen, a powerful collective of Government officials, the power-company, National Hydroelectic Power Corporation (NHPC) as well as Ministers went directly to meet the Dzumsa members of Lachen and seek their approval for multiple hydropower projects in 2005. At this meeting, the Dzumsa members of Lachen remained firm – their verdict was a unanimous "*no*": "*We knew this powerful group of individuals were coming to talk about hydropower development. The Minister accompanying them was a Lachungpa, so we told him directly, take your proposal to your own place, Lachung. The Dzumsa had called a meeting a day before, where we had deliberated and collectively decided to say no. When the group came for the Dzumsa meeting and sat in the Dzumsa hall, we closed*

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all the doors and latched it. This might have intimidated them. The moment our Minister started talking about the company, people shouted . . . We were hostile and managed to scare them off". This development also resulted in significant tensions between the Lachungpas and Lachenpas. The Lachenpas managed to dethrone the Lachungpa Minister. "*We were so angry at our Minister. He being a Lachungpa, brought the group here. A devastation masked as development for us here! We considered him our own and had supported him for a long time. However, after that meeting, we told the Chief Minister of Sikkim that all of us at Lachen would no longer support his party and would join the opposition party if the Lachungpa Minister continued in the cabinet. Soon thereafter another person was given the ticket to represent North Sikkim*". The power companies (NHPC and a few IPPs such as Hima Giri) tried approaching the Dzumsa many times and eventually managed, like in Lachung, to convince one of the Pipons there to speak on their behalf. However, this did not yield any positive outcome.

A deep distrust, even paranoia, for power companies took root among the Lachungpas and Lachenpas. In fact, company representatives were forcibly asked to leave Lachen when he had visited Lachen as merely a tourist. Another Lachungpa recalled: "*Our people have become fearful about the company. I was once urgently called by our elders who told me that some company people had sneaked into Lachung with their instruments and were taking pictures of our rivers. I rushed, to find the intruders surrounded by our village people. As it turned out, these were mere tourists, using a tripod to take pictures near the river*". Below we describe the various strategies adopted by the Lachungpas and Lachenpas to counter not just the power companies but the distrust, disunity and animosity that had crept within and in-between their communities – where the power of the Dzumas becomes imperious and unlike Gram Panchayats, becomes "binding" in determining pro and anti-dam positions among the Lachungpas and Lachenpas.

3.5.3 Agonistic unity: Dzumsa, anti-hydropower resistance and vernacular statecraft

In Lachung, following the brief tryst with the Polyplex company and the internal fractures, an oath was taken by many Dzumsa members at Thomchi Gumpa in 2010, their main monastery, to never allow a hydropower company to enter Lachung. At this oath ceremony, fears of social exclusion and boycott from Dzumsa were announced for any remaining pro-dam supporters. This was followed by a series of new conditions set for Dzumsa members of Lachung: firstly, only those individuals who contested all hydropower projects would be eligible to become Pipons; secondly, all Lachungpas were restricted from talking about or to "company persons", at least within the borders of Lachung. In fact many Lachungpas even collected and submitted their land documents to the anti-dam faction of Dzumsa members to not fall prey into selling their lands to power companies or the pro-dam faction.

In Lachen, despite the unanimous decision of no-dams, Dzumsa members came up with similar new rules for its larger residents: no one was allowed to lobby for any company; no hotel owners were allowed to host hydropower "company" people, even if they came in as tourists; no shops were allowed to sell anything, including water to the company people, no one was allowed to talk or negotiate with company. If anyone was found doing these, they would be boycotted from the society and sanctioned out of the Dzumsa.

However, both in Lachung and Lachen – these restrictions were capped by something far more potent. The local cultural practice of "*Chya*" (referred to as "*Chya-Kyapshe*" in Lachung and "*Ma-Chya*" in Lachen) and colloquially known as "Kalo Puja" in Nepali (translating to black ceremony) was announced as a "last weapon". The *Chya* is a dreaded public ritual usually undertaken in stealth – when the perpetrator is not known or when the intentions of certain individuals go against the wellbeing of the larger community and their place(s). For the Lachungpas and Lachenpas, mountains and glacial lakes surrounding the two valley regions hold great significance as they are considered to be the abode of their *Lhasung(s)* (guardian-deities), revered and feared in these high mountain knowledge systems. *Chya* involves invoking these very local-deities to make a collective curse to punish "unknown" or dangerous perpetrators. This ceremony is performed only after the majority of the Dzumsa members are in consensus. Initiated by *paus* (sorcerers), this collective cursing is performed with great faith and belief that the perpetrators are punished through an ultimate death for their acts against place and people. The *Ma-Chya* of Lachen is believed to also be passed on to the perpetrator's future generations. These rituals are thus deeply feared by all in Lachen and Lachung: "*We believe in Chya and take it very seriously. People have died unexpectedly in Lachung and Lachen after Chya was performed. Healthy people suddenly contact grave diseases and die, and the cycles of misfortune continue for future generations. The Chya only works on the guilty, this is the greatest feat of its relevance*". It is important to note that when a collective decision is made to perform Chya on known or unknown individuals, there is little room to oppose or not engage in this process. This can have repercussions of social exclusion and boycott.

When the power company gained entry in Lachung, *Chya-Khyapse* was reported to have been performed against those who "sold-out" and/or embezzled funds. In Lachen, where no company was allowed, *Ma-Chya* was still performed as a deterrent to all Lachenpas from succumbing to the pressure or lure of money. A Lachenpa elderly explained: "*The Pipon from Lachen who had some hand in getting the Ministers and company people here was on his way to Gangtok, when he turned ill and died a year later. He was right here with us when Ma-Chya was performed. One could argue that he was suffering from a disease, however, no one had expected him to suddenly die. His death is said to be the effect of Ma-Chya. We hear now that the first expelled Pipon of Lachung who welcomed the company is*

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so scared of the Chya performed on him, that he has been performing one religious ceremony after another to negate the effects of the Chya". It is important to add here that recently, *Chya* has been banned in Lachung at the request of the Lachung Rinpoche (learned monk) as the Buddhist practice of compassion does not support destruction and ills wished upon another. However, the practice continues in Lachen.

The knowledge and practice of *Chya* not only deters all hydropower development, it remains a powerful vernacular statecraft against dissent with the Dzumsa. As a Lachungpa youngster states: "*Hydropower companies are powerful and supported by the entire government machinery and bureaucracy. There is constant pressure and lobbying by the advocates of power projects. Money plays an important role in these processes. In the face of these challenges, Chya is our only way of preventing this destruction from development from happening*". So great is this fear, that numerous attempts by power companies to enter the region have failed. As a Lachenpa reported: "*Even after all these events in Lachen, there are continued attempts to woo our Pipons. One of our Pipons was invited to a five-star hotel (Mayfair) in Gangtok and offered India Rupee 9 to 10 crores (equivalent to a little over 1 million in Euro) to work towards public consensus to the dam building agenda. These tactics have not worked*".

In fact, government officials who powerfully lobbied on behalf of the power companies elsewhere in Sikkim and showed no hesitation in coercing local communities to agree to these plans, are cautious in doing the same in Lachung and Lachen. Here they try to resort to logical narratives of gains and benefits from hydropower development and yet, when they fail to convince the Lachungpas and Lachenpas, they say, that hydropower development did not happen here, because most of the areas that will be impacted are forest areas – hence individuals will not receive compensation/s. "*The land for hydropower development is in forest areas, meaning less compensation. That's why they resist these plans and are successful in doing so*". Nonetheless, the power companies and their advocates keep trying to pursue hydropower development.

The consequences of resisting hydropower development have not been easy for the Lachungpas and Lachenpas. This has resulted in official forms of punishment and coercion, mostly done through job transfers of government employees vocal against the hydropower development plans. A young Lachungpa laments, "*I have seen first-hand the politically motivated transfers of our people to faraway places, far away from their families*". *These developments have only served to strengthen resistance.* Giving the example of Tibetans, an old Lachungpa states: "*The Tibetans are just refugees for the rest of the world. If our land goes, what will happen to our identity? This is why we have to protect this place for us to stay rooted and come back here no matter where we might occasionally go*". This process of exercising territoriality continues. In 2015, a traditional "dress code" was made mandatory in both Lachung and Lachen. Married women in Lachen, and women above 15 years in

Lachung have to wear their traditional clothes in their respective regions; while men are required to wear these for all social occasions, especially at funerals.

3.6 Discussion

The findings from this research illustrate how identity constructs and cultural politics play out dynamically in the resistance to hydropower projects by the indigenous Lachungpas and Lachenpas in North-Sikkim. Here, we summarize a couple of key issues for further discussion.

First, resistance to large-scale hydropower development by the Lachung and Lachen communities go far beyond a mere battle against the dreadful material (socio-economic and environmental) impacts that come with mega hydropower development in fragile mountain ecologies. Although these issues were of concern, also because the two communities increasingly rely on a booming tourism industry – where keeping the landscape scenic is vital to people's livelihoods, it was not just concern about possible material losses that led to a collective position of resistance. The Lachungpas and the Lachenpas were deeply concerned about how these new developments would impact upon territoriality – the defense of place (territory), of place-based institutions and the community's unique collective identity as well as their meanings, values and modes of living and knowing. All of these issues are not just central to the ways of being and living for the Lachungpas and the Lachenpas, they are also a powerful means of exercising, asserting and reiterating (collective) identity in the fractured political context of governance in Sikkim. For the Lachungpas and Lachenpas, articulation of their personal and collective identity, of being different, sprouts importantly from their ideas of demarcating territory and constructing (or exercising) territoriality. Territory and territoriality is indeed a key marker of the collective Lachungpa/Lachenpa identity construction. It is their collective identity, interlaced with their historic territorial systems and practices, that has enabled the Lachungpas and Lachenpas to define, project and deploy other kinds of boundaries – moral, cultural, ethnic, economic, political, including their loyalty and solidarities among themselves and against the others. Inwardly and outwardly, territory and identity entwine through the two Dzumsas in their attempt to affect, influence and control people, phenomena, and relationships; thereby demarcating and asserting control over their cultural-political geography. Shared territorial and(or) place-based identity in Lachung and Lachen is the basis around which individual interests are translated into group interests and collective action – which manifests in the projection of a united front against the "others" and "outsiders".

Second, the theoretical analyses discussed in Section 3 explain how an externally imposed agenda of development and the various bearers of these plans and proposals

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became adversaries which helped both trigger as well as politicize collective identity. The centrality of the Dzumsas in this struggle over territoriality, in making the "benefits of participation and the cost of non-participation as high as possible" (Klandermans, 1984: 588) cannot be overstated. The role of the Dzumsas in enforcing an agonistic unity is therefore crucial. At the crux of collective identity and associated territorial projections are the Dzumsas, which act as binding authorities and steering institutions to engage in locally-particular consciousness, morality and collective action. Collective measures such as threats of social boycott, community expulsion, no-display of political flags, etc., would not be implemented had it not been for the Dzumsa. These measures helped execute a conscious responsibility to keep the Lachungpas/Lachenpas together. Nothing is as sacrosanct as the maintaining of unity amongst the respective Lachungpa and Lachenpas Dzumsa members. As much as the Dzumsas draw their power from the members to acquire and maintain unity, the members draw their power, agency and voice from the Dzumsas, giving rise to a symbiotic dependence on each other. This symbiotic relationship sustains the effectiveness of Dzumsa officials vis-à-vis its members and also provides particular checks-and-balance to each other. In Sikkim, if not for the traditional and customary Dzumsas, the Lachungpa/Lachenpa identity would have been lumped into the broader "Bhutia" identity losing its hallmark distinction. The Dzumsa gives legitimacy to the exclusive collective identity of the Lachungpas and Lachenpas.

Third, as we note, these virtues of cohesion, collective identity and action are not without contradictions – they pose high social, political and emotional risks to those within this community, who for various reasons, might choose to not align with the normative principles of the collective. In addition, territories confining the two Dzumsas and their members within its demarcated areas are socially and politically accessible only to the Dzumsa male members and office bearers. This is not a pluralistic, inclusive institution – rather it operates by restricting intervention or interference from others – making and marking identity and territory are the core functions of the Dzumsa. As we noted, there have been changes in the Dzumsa's structure, functions and customary laws – but these have all been in tune with the interest and wellbeing of the two Dzumsas and its members – rooted in a "local-first" philosophy. This makes the Dzumsa partially exclusionary even within the Lachungpa/Lachenpa community – excluding women, youth, other long-term local residents from its decision-making membership. Even though excluded, they must conform to the institution's norms and dictates. In addition, as seen in the case of the hydropower project development plans, the Dzumsas served to expel its leaders (the Pipons), announce and enact boycotts and the dreaded *Chya* ceremony against its own members. This is how, as Colloredo-Mansfield analyzed, vernacular statecraft operates and sustains an agonistic unity, which while imperfect, is hugely effective in countering

powerful translocal impositions. In continuing to be the sole recognized local institution deciding every socio-economic, environmental and religious affair of the Lachungpas and Lachenpas and their wellbeing – far more intense than the Panchayat System prevalent in the rest of Sikkim, the Dzumsas continue to emerge and evolve as the center of the everyday life-worlds. The degree of involvement is also what reveals the exclusionary side of this all-inclusive institution on grounds of gender, indigeneity, ethnicity, and rationality. It reveals the authoritarian side of the Dzumsa, since loyalty towards the collective and protecting unity and wellbeing of the locality has priority over any other issue.

The fourth and final point we make here is on the plurality of identity. In addition to the divides by gender, age and ethnicity that we discussed above, the Lachungpas and Lachenpas while being a tightly-knit community are nonetheless two groups with particular forms of self-identification. Shared understandings of place and territory, shared cultural values, beliefs and identities allow for a remarkable solidarity between the two groups and yet, when the situation demands, this collective trust and emotion can also turn into expressions of being different. The same can be said for internal dynamics of the Lachungpas and Lachenpas themselves and how historically, loyalty and solidarity is evoked through threat, fear and coercion – when the stakes are high. These dynamics of identity are multiple and complex – like nested matryoshka dolls. Resistance against large dams in Lachen and Lachung illustrates this complex politics of identity and place-based territoriality, whereby indigenous identity is both a culturally rooted and a politically strategic construct. This complexity of identity is unfortunately missing in many analyses of collective resistance against hydropower development in the region.

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3.7 Conclusions

In this paper we have discussed how identity constructs, territoriality and cultural politics by the indigenous Lachungpas and Lachenpas inform resistance to hydropower in North-Sikkim. Resistance is deeply related to the defense of territory, collective identity, and local meanings, values and modes of living and knowing. This defense is strategically organized around the traditional system of self-governance, the Dzumsas. These execute a fundamental responsibility to keep the Lachungpas/Lachenpas together. Dzumsas draw their power from the members to build unity, and members draw their agency and voice from the Dzumsas. The Dzumsa gives legitimacy to the collective identity of the Lachungpas and Lachenpas. Dzumsas mark the Lachungpas and Lachenpas in terms of their distinct history, culture, traditions, their bounded, protected geographical areas including their exclusive tribe status.

Despite local (and official) discourses pretending to "conserve" local indigenous identity, neither this collective identity, nor its triangular relationship with territory and Dzumsas, are fixed and static. Lachungpas and Lachenpas identities are rooted in history, local culture and permanence in the territory, but equally shaped by confrontation with "the outside" (which obviously comes to form part of local identity, culture and indigeneity). From merely being associated with place/location like it did initially, the Lachungpa/ Lachenpa identities have today transitioned to encompass and project their territory, distinct culture, ways of living, traditions, traditional institutions including politics at all levels – individual, relational and collective. Therefore, as we have shown, Lachungpas and Lachenpas identities are both "real and rooted" as well as "real and strategic"; often, they are consciously shaped and reshaped, as political actions that serve to defend against/ from "outsiders/others" (e.g., hydropower agents) and to protect specific territorial claims and local interests.

The politically responsive, territorially-exclusive and ethnically-cohesive Dzumsa institutions allow the Lachungpas and Lachenpas to assert enormous political strength. They reshape identity and redefine (ancient) rules and sanctions and whenever necessary (re)create "convenient past", exclusionary relationships or deploy strategic cultural beliefs – evident in a sustained, unanimous "no-hydropower" defense message in the region. Continuously maintained and updated collective identity enables them to engage in fierce, successful collective actions. In times of modernist commensuration through large-scale hydropower development (imposing a common metric to determine "value", "progress", "development", and "efficient hydro-territorial knowledge" (Boelens, Shah and Bruins, 2019; Hoogendam and Boelens, 2019), the Dzumsas strategically respond with incommensurate cultural–political notions of animated mountains and sacred territory, such as manifested in the *Chya* ritual practice. This way, the Lachungpas and Lachenpas effectively engage in the battlefield of culture, knowledge and identity, defending and at the same time reshaping their collective identity and territory.

This cohesion, collective identity and collective action and forced normativity, however, make the Dzumsa both an all-inclusive and disciplinary as well as an exclusionary institution, in terms of gender, indigeneity, ethnicity, and rationality. Loyalty towards the collective and protecting unity and wellbeing of the locality has priority over any other issue. This, combined with deeply cultivated notions of territoriality, also informs the Lachungpas/Lachenpas' strict, unanimous no-hydropower stand. "*Over my dead body*" assertions today by the Lachungpas and Lachenpas, in extremis manifested through the enforcement of *Chya*, perhaps will keep hydropower development at bay. The irony of the Lachen and Lachung case, one that may be witnessed in many other territories that face modernist encroachment, is that powerful local exclusionary institutions seem to be able to

construct forced unity – forms of vernacular statecraft – that effectively counter translocal exclusionary institutions and projects, based on neoliberal agendas of development.

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Chapter 4. Hydropower politics in Northeast India: Dam development contestations, electoral politics and power reconfigurations in Sikkim[34]

4.1 Introduction

Development of large-scale, mega hydraulic dam infrastructure in India has been heavily contested for more than four decades, including mobilisation of powerful domestic and transnational socio-environmental movements against dams (Bhaviskar, 1995; Shah et al., 2020). A few brought intense global attention to dam development in India, such as the "Save The Narmada Movement" against the Narmada Valley Project, which culminated into a world-famous anti-dam movement (Khagram, 2004). Despite powerful critiques and scrutiny, the Indian Government (GoI) has continued to advance hydropower development as inevitable for the greater public and national interest, often executed as "top-down, state-led, growth focused and technocratic" undertakings (Khagram, 2004:33).

The sustained belief in hydropower as a "renewable, non-polluting and environmentally benign source of energy" that is economically feasible (GoI, 1998:1), has side-lined the concerns over environmental and social impacts. In comparison to conventional non-renewable energy sources like coal and renewable sources like wind and solar, the instant ability to generate electricity and control it in minutes, catering to peak demand fluctuations, makes hydropower the most flexible of all energy sources and thus lucrative over the rest. India's steady rise in per-capita electricity consumption, push for higher economic growth concomitant with rapid urbanisation and increasing population puts enormous pressure on the country's unsatiating need and demand for energy. While coal still remains the dominant non-renewable source of energy comprising 86% of fossil fuel share in India and 49.1% (the largest) of the country's total energy-mix (GoI, 2023), in the wake of climate change and India's own energy-transition objectives towards renewables, hydropower is lauded as offering significant potential not only for carbon reduction but also for meeting global sustainable development goals.

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[34] This is a slightly adapted version of the article published as: Dukpa, R.D.; Hoogesteger, J.; Veldwisch, G.J.; Boelens, R. Hydropower Politics in Northeast India: Dam Development Contestations, Electoral Politics and Power Reconfigurations in Sikkim. Water 2024, 16, 1061.

All National Policies, Acts and Schemes thus enacted by the GoI since the 1990s have been guided by such "benign" beliefs and India's growing demand for more energy, paving the way for accelerated hydropower development, increased capacity addition and facilitation of easy entry into India's regions with hydropower potential (GoI, 2008). For instance, the GOI has made the clustered North Eastern States in the Eastern Himalayan region the main hydropower hubs to provide hydroelectricity to other regions across India (Joy and Janakarajan, 2018). These "single-purpose" hydropower projects are meant only for electricity generation to be evacuated out of the generating states into power-deficit states of India, as opposed to multi-purpose dam projects planned elsewhere in India that include flood control, drinking water, irrigation, navigation and agricultural uses within generating states (Hidalgo et al., 2018; Joy et al., 2018; Flaminio and Reynard, 2023). The evacuation of electricity from surplus and distant, remote mountain regions to the power deficit plains of India is made via the national grid wherever and whenever the need or demand from the plains arises as a means of optimal utilisation of water resources of these Himalayan regions. Often, the end users and beneficiaries of the evacuated hydropower are not the power-generating states and its people but heavy industries downstream, urban development amenities, power companies and different sectors of central government such as the railways, airports, ports and so on.

It is then no surprise that the tiny State of Sikkim (See map in Figure 4.1) has been embroiled in prolonged dam conflicts since the late 1990s, where the GoI, the State Government of Sikkim (GoS), power companies and Sikkim's autochthonous tribe, the Lepchas, residing in the protected and restricted 'reserve' area of Dzongu in North District, all had ambivalent and changing roles. Since the early 1990s, many large dams were commissioned in North Sikkim, many were cancelled, and many remain in conflictive limbo. This paper studies one of the ongoing dam conflicts in Dzongu, particularly zooming in on the period from 2011 to 2017 in which abrupt shifts in positions of local Lepchas reconfigured and escalated dam contestations. The locally elected Lepcha politicians became the most vocal anti-dam advocates, aggressively attacking the latest hydropower initiatives and openly supporting the local anti-dam activists and organisations that they had condemned and "victimized" in the past. Conversely, many staunch anti-dam activists and dam opponents turned into fierce pro-dam supporters themselves, joining forces with the other pro-dam supporters and hydropower-developing companies. New alliances were created, and the old ones broken down, giving rise to a complex web of hydro-politics.

These mobilisations and counter-mobilisations between the local Lepchas in Dzongu in North Sikkim have taken a divisive turn, which profoundly brings into question the changing dynamics of hydropower development and hydropower conflict in the area as well as for the state of Sikkim, especially in relation to the power, consensus building,
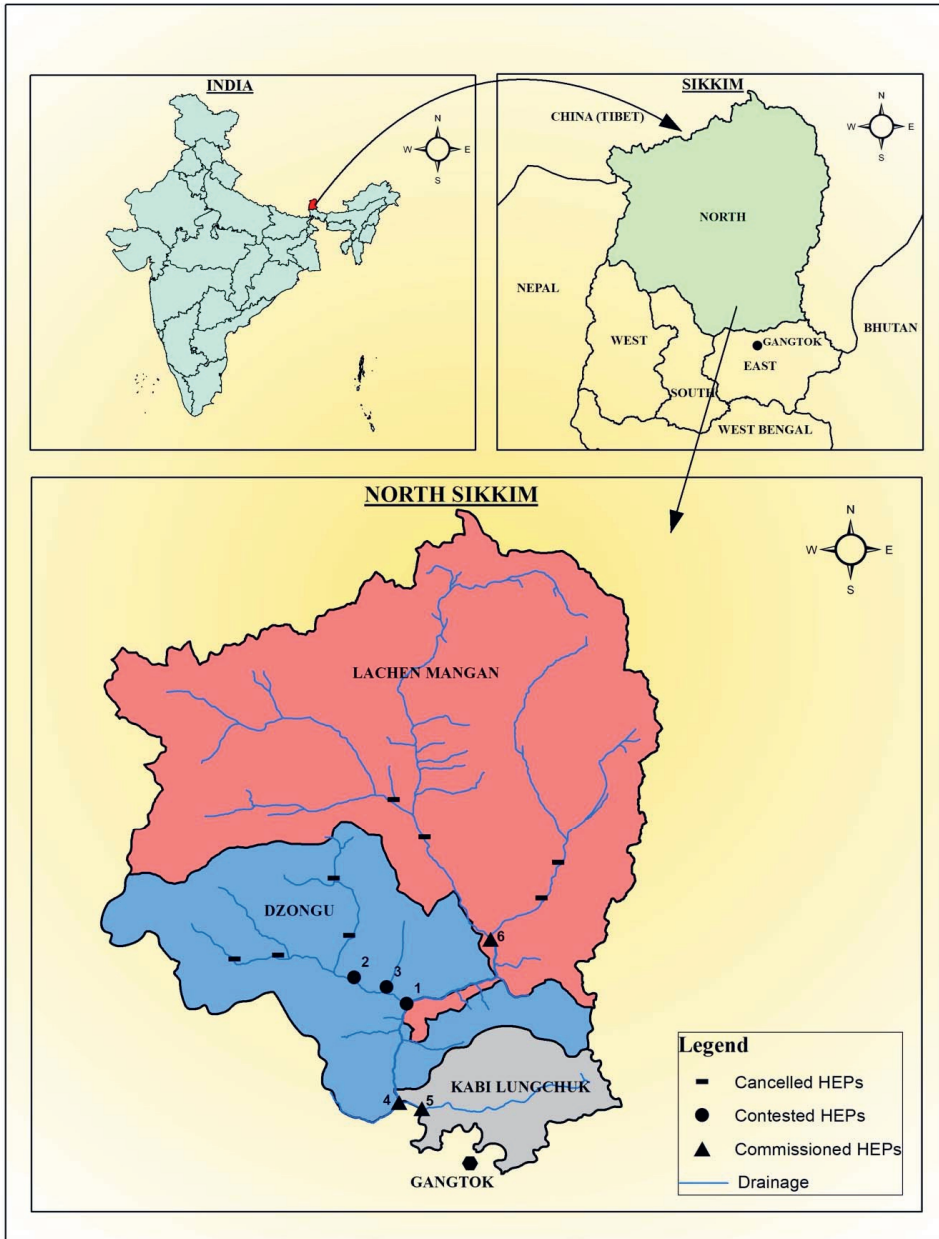
Figure 4.1: Map of Sikkim, its North District and the three constituencies with HEPs at different stages.
Here 1, 2 and 3 indicates contested HEPs within Dzongu – the 520 MW Teesta Stage IV, 300 MW Panan HEP and 25 MW Rahi Chu respectively. Remaining 4, 5 and 6 indicates commissioned HEPS on the borders of Dzongu and outside it – the 510 MW Teesta Stage V, 1200 MW Teesta Stage III and 96 MW Dikchu HEP respectively. Source: Own adaptation, adapted from GoS websites. Map not to scale.

electoral politics, the effectiveness of protest movements and its transformation over time. Why did the local Lepchas in Dzongu flip their positions on hydropower? How did the powerful GoS and the locally elected GoS representatives secure compliance and support at the grassroot level? What does this mean for the power relations between the "governing and the governed"? And finally, what are its implications for the dam movements and mobilisation in the region?

Our research findings in Dzongu reveal that hydropower development, since its implementation in the early 1990s, was and still is deeply intertwined with local elections, making dams and dam contestations-and-conflict key political issues. Khagram (2004), Shah et al. (2020) and Cortesi and Joy (2021) have shown that even though in India dams "are consistently de-linked from any political context" and framed by dominant political engineering as technocentric infrastructural development, in fact, large dam and dam-movements are political issues that have "bled into democratic electoral and party politics" (Khagram, 2004: 46; Cf Kaika, 2006; Nixon, 2010; Hoogesteger and Verzijl, 2015; Menga and Swyngedouw, 2018). Across the world, dam development, riverine mega-hydraulic projects and the related territorial struggles, ontological controversies and epistemological legitimization endeavors always and necessarily trigger power dynamics and alter power relations (Duarte-Abadía et al., 2015; Hommes and Boelens, 2018; Cortesi and Joy, 2021; Flaminio et al., 2022; Blair et al., 2023; Boelens et al., 2023). To examine these, in this article we use the "power cube" framework by Gaventa as an analytical tool to assess the ways in which power works and transformative changes happen (Gaventa, 2006, 2019). Power here is not presented in just oppositional way, such as by positing the powerful versus the powerless and hegemony versus resistance, but as flexible adaptable continuum (Gaventa, 2019).

To scrutinize the subtleties of these dam/power relationships in Sikkim (Dukpa et al., 2018, 2019), and deepen, while going beyond, the contemporary scholarly emphasis on river-based onto-epistemological struggles over mega-hydraulic development (Bijker, 2007; Bakker and Hendriks, 2019; Boelens et al., 2019, 2023; Shah et al., 2019; Flaminio 2021; Hoogesteger et al., 2023), this paper dives into the messy and often unpredictable and contradictory world of water governance (Whaley, 2022), thereby challenging rational planning paradigms (cf. Shah et al., 2018; Hommes et al., 2022, 2023; Duarte-Abadía et al., 2023). To do so, methodologically, this paper is based on the first author's ethnographic research in Sikkim during 2017-2019, and follow-up research visits throughout the years 2020 to 2023, to show how hydropower development is deeply intertwined with local patronage relationships. To scrutinize dams and their contestations in Sikkim as the core politico-electoral issues, fifty-seven semi-structured interviews were held with local politicians, village leaders, small and large landholders, dam engineers, and water

governance scholars. The research also involved multiple group and individual discussions to explore perceptions of complex, diversely experienced instances of electoral politics, anti-/pro-dam manifestations, and patronage relationships. Next, literature and archival research in India, Sikkim and abroad laid the basis for understanding historical dam development in Sikkim. Further, studying mass media (TV and internet) reports and communications revealed additional insights into the backgrounds and discursive framings of electoral politics and grassroots mobilization. Finally, feedback from regional and international conferences provided more analytical insights.

After this introduction, we briefly introduce our conceptual approach to power and how to study it in Section 2, largely building on the power cube framework by John Gaventa. In Section 3, we provide a detailed historical contextualization of hydropower development in Sikkim and hydropower conflict in the study area to reveal the shaping of patterns and routines that underlie these power relationships. Section 4 presents a historic background to the case. Section 5 describes our main findings, where we focus on how local elections bring out dam conflict and contestation in the open, making visible the operation of power. In Section 6, we analyze the abrupt switch in positions on hydropower development and, using the three dimensions of the power cube framework, discuss how such shifts are not only "strategic electoral tactics" but also contentious political struggles to (re)configure power in the region by both dam and anti-dam factions. In the final section, Section 7, we present our conclusions.

4.2 Operationalizing power as a conceptual lens

John Gaventa's "power cube" framework illustrates power concepts and sets of relationships that are constantly changing (2006). Gaventa has drawn from various power scholars, particularly from his mentor, Steven Lukes' "three dimensions" or "faces of power" (1974, 2005, 2014) to conceptualise the "forms" of power but in relation to "spaces" in which they are found and the "levels" that make the power cube [see Figure 4.2]. According to Gaventa (2021:1), "Lukes' three dimensions of power were... only three aspects of a single spectrum of power", presented as one dimension or aspect of power – the "forms" in powercube. This necessitated the focus and elaboration on the other two aspects of power - the "space" in and "levels" through which power operates as well.

The different forms, spaces and levels and its sub-dimensions are considered as separate but interrelated, flexible and adaptable continuum, each with its own mechanisms and uses that are constantly interacting with each other to reinforce the total impact of power (Gaventa, 2019). Each dimension of the powercube "reflects a spectrum of possibilities which interact with one another, opening and closing the entry points for

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influence and change (Gaventa, 2021:8). Gaventa's main argument is that only when the different dimensions of power and its sub-dimensions work across or align vertically and horizontally just like a Rubrik's cube, transformative changes can be brought about by social actors in specific contexts (See Figure 4.2) including in movement-building (Gaventa, 2005).

Each of the powercube's dimensions and its subdimensions are discussed below. The forms of power (i.e. visible, hidden and invisible) refer to "how power manifests itself"; the spaces (i.e. closed, invited and claimed) refer to "the potential arenas for participation and action"; and the levels (i.e. household, local, national and global) refer to "the multiple layers of power in a global world" (Gaventa, 2019:119). The different forms, spaces and levels and its sub-dimensions are considered as a separate but interrelated, flexible and adaptable continuum, each with its own mechanisms and uses that are constantly interacting with each other to reinforce the total impact of power.
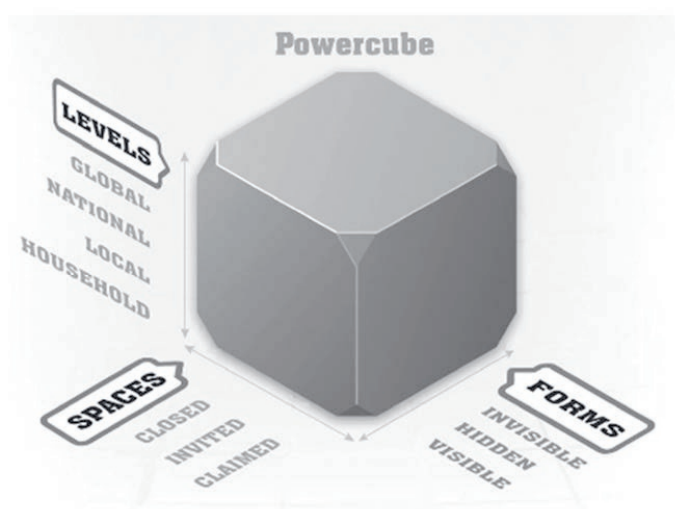
Figure 4.2: Power Cube.
Source: (Gaventa, 2019).

4.2.1 Forms of power

"Visible" power (the "first face") – Based on Weberian approach, power is a "relation among people" where "some people have more power than others" (Dahl, 1957: 201). In Dahl's "intuitive idea of power… A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do" in (political) decision making arenas (ibid, 203). Dahl had asserted that "power necessarily wears some face", visible in instances of conflict and compliance. Power would relate to concrete decisions of political actors/ groups and(or) their participation in the decision-making situations and arenas. Such assertions had assumed that the (political) decision-making arenas were neutral playing

fields (Gaventa, 2006), "penetrable by any dissatisfied groups" (Lukes, 2005:39); and that the political actors are aware of their grievances and with sufficient resources and agency to make their voice heard; that they participate in decision making at their own will (Gaventa, 2019). Non-participation or inaction was not considered a political problem or an issue, rather a decision of those who decided not to participate (Gaventa, 2006) and therefore devoid of any power effect. The visible face of power, easy to investigate through simple observations – "who participates, who gains and losses, and who prevails in decision making" (Polsby, 1963:55), including who secures or invokes the highest probability of responses (Dahl, 1957).

"Hidden" power (the "second face") – Critiquing Dahl's assertions, Bachrach and Baratz (1962, 1963, 1970) had argued that power not only reflected in getting B to do something that B did not want to do, but also in preventing B from doing what B wanted to do. They called this "nondecision-making" that confined the scope of decision making to relatively 'safe' issues". Certain issues are deliberately kept off the (political) decision-making arenas to prevent grievances from developing into full-fledged issues or to prevent the outbreak of conflict or repress and drowse down the existing ones through the securing of willing consent (Lukes, 2005:111). This was done by "manipulating the dominant community values, the accepted rules of the games, the existing myths and political institutions and procedures, systematically and consistently to the benefit of certain persons and groups at the expense of others" – effectively termed the "mobilisation of bias" where "some issues are organised into politics while others are organised out" (Bachrach and Baratz, 1970). Even political actors or groups can be prevented from entering the decision-making arenas and(or) participating in decision-making (Gaventa, 2019). Non decision-making (on some issues) is therefore a form of decision-making (Lukes, 2005), revealing the second face of power – the "hidden" power (Gaventa, 2006). Even the proponents of hidden power tend to assume that if there was no conflict, overt or convert, then there would be "consensus on the prevailing allocation of values" (Lukes, 2005:23) and that non-participation then was merely due to apathy, indifference, or complacency (Bachrach and Baratz, 1970). Gaventa pointed out that the continual exclusion be it that of key issues or political actors or groups from participation results in "a sense of defeat, or a sense of powerlessness, that may affect the consciousness of potential challengers about grievances, strategies, or possibilities for change" (Gaventa, 1980:255). Power relationships then develop into routines of non-challenge.

"Invisible" power (the "third face") – Lukes argued that power not only reflected (and was exercised) in overt and (or) covert decisions and non-decision makings (Lukes, 2005:22), but also through the "influencing, shaping or determining" of people's beliefs, values and opinions (idbi,16) "to prevent such conflicts from arising in the first place"

4

(ibid, 27). For Lukes, this was "... the most effective and insidious use of power" (Lukes: 27) – understood today within the power scholarship as the "radical power" or the third face of power (Gaventa, 2021). The third face entails domination, constraining the political actors or group 'to live as their nature and judgment dictate' (Spinoza in Lukes, 2005: 114), "restricting their capabilities for truly human functioning" (Lukes, 2005:114). Lukes informed us that we cannot rely on observation and taking preferences as "given" but look at possible manipulation of preferences and intentions. According to Luke, "A exercises power over B by getting him to do what he does not want to do… by influencing, shaping or determining his [sic] very wants" (2005: 27). Such power goes against B's interest "by misleading them, thereby distorting their judgment" (Lukes, 2005:13). He argues that what seems on the surface to be willing compliance to authority may actually be the result of subtle manipulation and 'shaping' of beliefs, values and 'interests', which can lead people to support circumstances (or figures) that render them disadvantaged or powerless. For Lukes, the third form of power is manifest when people are prevented from realising their own grievances by having their concerns and desires so deeply influenced that they accept their own domination and even become complicit in it, either by believing that it is natural or by believing that it is in some way beneficial. The third face of power emphasizes the suppression of latent conflicts through a combination of action and inaction.

Discussion on power-with-a-face doesn't end with the third face of power, with many considering Michael Foucault's conception of power as the "fourth" face (Lukes, 2005. See for hydropower's applications, Boelens et al., 2019; Hommes and Boelens, 2018). Foucault's power differs remarkably from the three faces-of-power, in that it rejects the central feature shared by other three faces where "A's and B's are taken as given" (see Digeser, 1992:980). For Foucault, power is not an institution, nor a structure, nor a possession (Foucault, 1975, 1980) but dispersed throughout the society, discursively constituting subjects whose actions may contribute to the operation of power (Gaventa, 2006). Power therefore is everywhere producing reality, knowledge and truths (Foucault, 1975, 2008) but without intentionality, objective interests, or a repressive character (Foucault, 1975, 1991). While a few overlaps can be found between the third and the fourth face, Gaventa's powercube does not incorporate the fourth face, opening up avenues for power theorists and researchers to explore if and how the powercube framework operates (or not) with the fourth face.

4.2.2 Levels of power

The different forms of power operate across multiple levels such as the household, local, national and global from where the individual (political) actors or groups can engage (Gaventa, 2019). Each level is potentially significant as they are dynamic, interrelated and most importantly in continuum, constantly shifting in relation to the other (Gaventa, 2006).

Power relations therefore must be explored both within and across these levels along a continuum (Gaventa, 2021:14). Local actors and actions are shaped by global forces and global actors when these local actors resort to global forums as arenas for action or deploy and insert global discourses. Likewise, global actors and forces connect to local actions, actors and knowledge (Gaventa, 2006:28). This means that the arenas of decision-making goes beyond the household, local and the national to the global. "A failure to work across levels of power can serve to prevent or limit outcomes…" (Gaventa, 2021:14).

4.2.3 Spaces of power

Spaces "are seen as opportunities, moments, and channels" where political actors or groups "can act or anticipate to potentially affect policies, discourses, decisions and relationship which affect their lives and interest" (Gaventa, 2006:26). Beyond neutral entrances for participation, "power manifests itself differently in different spaces" (Gaventa, 2019:118) and shapes what is possible within the different spaces including who may enter to participate in it or not (Gaventa, 2006). Therefore, how and by whom these spaces are created, with what interest and terms of engagements, including trade-offs, become crucial in understanding the effects of different forms of power within it (Gaventa, 2005). These spaces, similar to "levels", exist in "dynamic relationship to each other, constantly opening and closing through struggles for legitimacy and resistance, co-optation and transformation" (Gaventa, 2006:27). Often, power produced and gained in one space, for instance through new skills, capacity, experiences or narratives, may be deployed to enter and effect other spaces (Gaventa, 2019).

1) *Closed space* are those where only a few actors in powerful positions and authority make decisions behind closed door, without any consultation or involvement of others (Gaventa, 2006). Often many decision-making spaces are closed and those operating in it may try to build legitimacy by creating invited spaces (Gaventa, 2006). But closed spaces can also be made to open into invited spaces by "civil society efforts", "people's movements" and "right to information" that attempt to mobilise greater public involvement (Gaventa, 2021:11).

2) *Invited spaces* are those where actors in less or no authority are invited to participate by those in power and are "regularized… institutionalized, ongoing or more transient" (Gaventa, 2006:26). Gaventa warns us though that while such spaces "may give the appearance of greater voice and engagement" of those in less authority or power (Gaventa, 2021:12), there is "need to be aware of whether those speaking [or participating] are really reflecting their own voices, based on critical awareness of their own interest, or whether there are forms of invisible power that shape what people

4

say"; because some "voices can really be echoes of power where people are saying what power holders want to hear or are really speaking for others who are controlling or influencing what they say" (Gaventa, 2021:120).

3) *Claimed/Created space* are those that are claimed by less powerful political actors, challenging the power holders, their knowledge and negotiation frames (Gaventa, 2006), shaping autonomies and arenas for self-initiated forms of deliberation and decision-making. In riverine struggles this happens often through grassroots action, commoning endeavors and translocal coalition forming (Boelens et al. 2023; Duarte-Abadía et al., 2019; Dupuits et al., 2019; Hoogesteger et al., 2023).

4.3 Hydropower development in Sikkim: A centre-state nexus

As the bearer of the highest constitutional power within the federal structure of India, the Government of India (GoI) or the "Centre" is the key power-choreographer, initiating the first ever large-scale systematic and detailed river-basin studies for water resources development across the country, particularly in the Himalayan regions since 1953. Every successive GoI has since then engaged in (re)creating, (re)managing and maneuvering the processes, practices and policies to advance hydropower development as one of the national objectives to secure India's energy needs, including ensuring participation of the State Governments and power companies. Detailed project reports of these studies became the basis for "all" hydropower development plans in India, executed decades later as "National Projects" by the GoI via the Central Public Sector Enterprises up until the ushering in of the new economic reforms in India in 1991–1992 and, after the reforms, by the State Governments too as joint ventures with both Central Public Sector Enterprises and Private Sector Enterprises or Independent Power Producers. The Centre, however, through its Central Public Sector Enterprises, still remains the key decision maker, wielding a monopolistic control over India's large and mega hydropower development.

Hydropower development in Sikkim is therefore not a recent phenomenon, rather the outcome of over four decades of planned surveys and investigations initiated by the Centre (see Dukpa et al., 2018, 2019). It began in the early 1960s whilst Sikkim was still a sovereign Kingdom and continued all through the Kingdom's tumultuous merger with India in 1975. The investigation was concluded in 1987 with the final assessment and identification of numerous feasible mega, large and small hydropower projects (HEPs - Hydro Electric Projects) across Sikkim. The ambitious six staged "cascade" development project – Teesta Stage I, II, III, IV, V, VI HEPs were a part of this assessment. When the GoI commenced the cascade project construction in North Sikkim in the early 1990s, at

the threshold of political prominence was a new local party, the Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) that had won Sikkim's State Legislative Assembly elections with an absolute majority in its very first attempt in 1994 to form the GoS. The SDF party's political expansion is key to understanding Sikkim's hydropower development trajectory and the current flip-flop of the Lepchas in Dzongu. Notably, since SDF's first electoral victory in 1994, both the party and the party-led State Government of Sikkim (GoS) enthusiastically favored dam constructions as directives of the GoI, although not reciprocated in the same way by many people in Sikkim. The SDF party was in power as the GoS for five successive terms (1994-2019), each victory cementing the founding member, Mr. Chamling, as the undisputed Chief Minister of Sikkim for twenty-five straight years and paving ways for more dam-based development for Sikkim, particularly in North District. Many large/mega scale dam projects were commissioned during the SDF rule despite anti-dam sentiments and dam-resistance throughout Sikkim.

Prior to the economic reforms of 1991/92, other than to support GoI or Centre's initiatives and plans, the State governments in India had negligible involvement in the planning and development of their own water resources despite the Indian federal system devolving the responsibility for such development to the State governments. This was for two major reasons. First, the State government, despite being entitled the legislative power to regulate, control and develop its water resources within its territory (GoI, 2022) is subject to laws empowering the Centre to take over the "regulation and development of inter-state river valleys" (ibid:313). As most major rivers in India flow through more than one state, they are not confined to state boundaries; hence large scale river development, its planning and associated clearances have always remained under the control of the Centre (Khagram, 2004). Secondly, the capital-intensive nature of such development made the States entirely dependent upon central aid, perpetuating Centre's dominant involvement in water and hydropower development. States, particularly the small ones like Sikkim, were involved only in the development of mini, micro and small dam projects not exceeding 25 MW, while all dams over 25 MW, considered "large", "national projects" became exclusive Central Public Sector Enterprises undertakings.

However, in the initial years after the economic reforms, hydropower development enthusiasm and response from the private and foreign investors had been poor. The share of hydro had declined since 1963 despite "being recognized as the most economic and preferred source of electricity" (GoI, 1998:2), and the powerful anti-dam resistance and social/environmental movements against numerous GoI's hydropower undertakings throughout the 1970s/80s had created legitimate doubts making dams a risky venture for the private investors. The realization that public sectors (be it State or the Centre) were insufficient to develop the vast untapped hydropower potential of India prompted the

4

GoI to provide additional incentives to encourage greater private sector participation and investment in hydropower development. The GoI then reset the hydropower arena by enacting (and amending) numerous pro-hydropower Acts, policies, and schemes throughout the late 1900's and 2000's, aimed to provide the States and the Independent Power Producers (IPPs) more conducive environment to invest in the Centre's identified feasible hydropower projects (GoI, 1998, 2008). With decentralization of the power sector, the GoI delegated the State Governments to facilitate and fast-track the implementation of hydropower projects (identified by the Centre) as Government Joint Ventures with IPPs as well as the Central Public Sector Enterprises.

Newly formed states like Sikkim with high fiscal dependence on the Centre readily complied with the Centre's directives and the new policy changes. Not only was/is Sikkim dependent on the Centre for all its planned (budget) and unplanned (service salaries) expenditures but as one of the Special Category State (SCS), Sikkim receives additional "central assistance on preferential conditions owing to the strategic location and special requirements" that further increases its dependence on "transfer of resources from the Centre" (Lama, 2001:83). Resisting "national projects" was/is therefore not the norm, with the constant fear of budgetary cuts and developmental delays from the Centre placing the Centre in a skewed "power over" relationship with the States. Given this disproportionate dependence on the Centre, the SDF party led GoS had for long, played by the "rules of the game" supporting Centre's HEP plans while it gradually strengthened its electoral base with every successive SLA election. This explains why the GoI's 50,000 MW Hydel Initiative that announced *additional* twenty nine hydropower projects in Sikkim in 2003 resulted in an enthusiastic engagement and involvement of the GoS led by SDF in the promotion, facilitation and advocacy of hydropower development in Sikkim despite the same government cancelling a 60 MW HEP in West Sikkim in 1997 under public pressure.

At the same time, however, the opening of power sector to private and foreign investments after the economic reforms and its subsequent decentralization inadvertently challenged the Centre's monopoly over mega, large hydropower development projects in India as State government through Joint Ventures could now be major power stakeholders themselves to develop large/mega dams. This resulted in a new kind of power struggle over the control and development of large/mega dams by State Governments. The entry of the Independent Power Producers in Sikkim, post 2003, gradually made the GoS perceive hydropower development as an alternative, quicker route to development outside the purview of the Centre. In a way similar to the post-colonial era discourse with colonized countries gaining independence and where (opposite to contemporary anti-dam imaginaries) mega dams often figured as symbols of decolonization, large dams became a means to regaining back Sikkim's control of its natural resources within its territory.

Thus, emerged a new State-led belief that hydropower development would "… pull Sikkim out of its economic dependence on grants and loans" from GoI and secure Sikkim's self-reliance (Wangchuk, 2007:33). An unprecedented mobilisation for large dams by the GoS soon followed: but this time to further the State government's own newfound ambition for hydropower development expansion in Sikkim rather than as a mere support for CPSEs, crushing any brewing anti-dam sentiments and protests in the process. A series of anti-dam protests had unfolded after the 2003 announcement across Sikkim by different ethnic communities (see Dukpa et al., 2019), but none captured the public's interest like the Lepchas of Dzongu. A staggering eight large dam projects were announced for Dzongu alone – three from the existing "cascade" projects already at different stages of implementations (Teesta Stage V (510 MW), Teesta Stage III (1200 MW) and Teesta Stage IV (520 MW) and five new projects (Panan (300 MW) (See map in Figure 4.1), Rukel (90 MW), Ringpi (160 MW), Lingza (160 MW) and Rangyong (90 MW), as a part of the 2003 announcement.

4.4 The history of anti-dam protests: The Lepcha journey from Dzongu to Gangtok

Historically and culturally, Dzongu (see map in Figure 4.3 below) has a distinct place on the right bank of Teesta, which has been described as the core of the Lepcha tribe's territory, identity and cultural heritage. However, as an administrative constituency, Dzongu also spreads across the left bank of Teesta River. In total four Gram Panchayat Units (GPU, local self-government) on the right bank shown by 1, 2, 3 and 4 (in Figure 4.3) where 1 indicates the Lum Gor Sangtok GPU; 2, the Hee Gyathang GPU; 3, the Lingdong Barfok GPU and 4, the Passingdang Safo GPU (4); and the three GPUs along the left bank indicated by 5, 6 and 7 showing Tingchim Chanday GPU, Mangshila Tibuk GPU and Namok Swayem GPU together make up the political Dzongu constituency. The right bank of Dzongu, inhabited by around 7000 Lepchas, is a "restricted" and "protected" area under the GoS, where there is prohibition on the entry and settlement of non-Lepchas including any Lepchas from outside of Dzongu without government permit, since 1958. This has enabled the right-bank Dzongu Lepchas to carve out a distinct, separate, rooted existence and identity of their own attached to Dzongu – one that is considered different from other similar Lepchas (Wangchuk, 2007) including the left-bank Lepchas. This study focuses on the Teesta Stage IV dam project that affected seven Gram Panchayat Units of the administrative Dzongu constituency, whereby we examine the dual pro- and anti-dam "flip-flop". The project respectively affects two Gram Panchayat Units of the Lachen-Mangan constituency (shown as 9 and 10); and one GPU (shown as 8) in Kabi Lungchuk constituency. Ringhim Nampatam GPU and Singhak GPU is show as 9 and 10; while Ramthang Tanyek GPU is shown as 8 in the map in Figure 4.3.
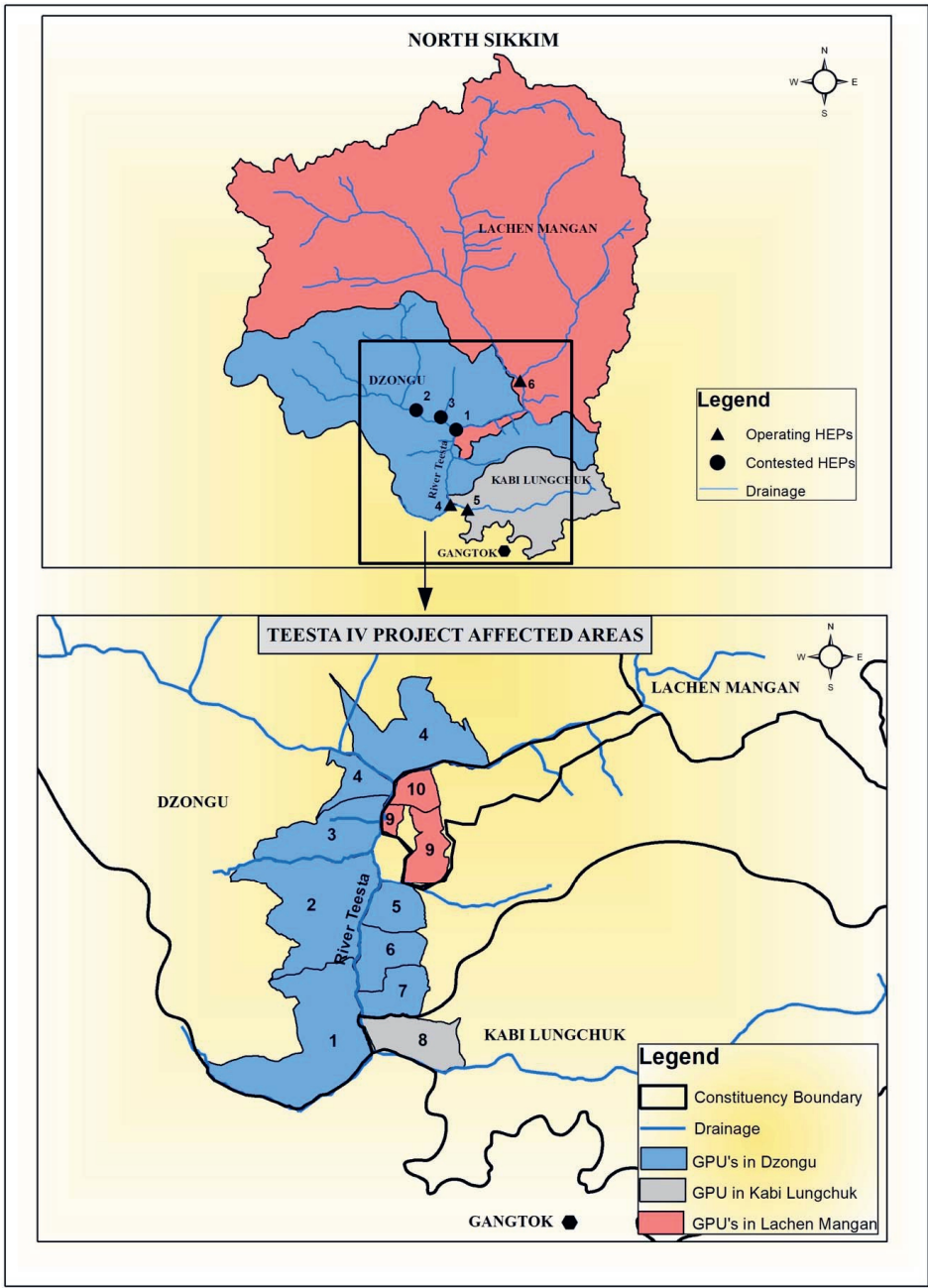
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Figure 4.3: Map of the project affected Gram Panchayat Units on the right and left bank of River Teesta.
Numbers with symbols refer to contested and operating HEPs. Numbers without symbols refer to Gram Panchayat Units (GPUs, local self-government), as explained in detail in the text above. Source: Own elaboration, adapted from GoS websites. Map not to scale.

The arrival of dams in Dzongu was officially announced for the first time in 1992 by the then Governor of Sikkim, Mr. S.K. Bhatnagar at "Namprikdang mela ground"– a landmark site in Dzongu with "immense historical and cultural importance for the Lepcha community" (ASCI, 2018:16). Dzongu was lauded as a "*sun-ko-khani*" [goldmine] for its rich water resources, necessary for dam development. Although a few eminent Lepchas of Dzongu under Sikkim Tribal Salvation Council (STSC), a collective group formed by the Lepcha-Bhutia communities of North Sikkim had initially challenged and condemned such announcement, anti-dam protest by the Lepchas was a far-cry. The Council was engrossed in other demands like the demand for autonomous 6th Schedule status exclusively for North District to safeguard the rights of the tribal Bhutia and Lepchas residents of these regions (fieldwork, 2021). Moreover, the absence of any follow-up after the announcement, drowsed the little interest that dams had generated at the time of announcement. The STSC was dismantled over time.

However, outside of Dzongu, Sikkim had witnessed its first ever anti-dam movement between 1995-1997 initiated by the Lepcha-Bhutia Buddhist monks in the West District of Sikkim against the 30 MW Rathong Chu HEP and thereafter, successfully mobilised by a group of Bhutia activists under the banner, Concerned Citizens of Sikkim (CCS) (Schaefer, 1995; Menon, 2003). The movement had engulfed the state capital, Gangtok where the anti-dam activists had sat for indefinite hunger strike, threatening the newly formed SDF GoS implementing the project. Rathong Chu HEP was eventually scrapped in 1997 under intense public pressure by the SDF party leader, the then Chief Minister of Sikkim, Mr. P.K. Chamling, causing "a major setback" to the power situation of the State (Lama, 2001:81). But Mr. Chamling was hailed as an instant "hero of the masses" (Down To Earth, 1999) and two years after, the SDF party registered its second major victory in the 2009 State Assembly election securing Mr. Chamling's second term as the Chief Minister of Sikkim. In fact, the SDF party won in the very constituencies protesting against Rathong Chu HEP, retaining them until 2019 (ECI, 1999, 2004, 2009, 2014, 2019). Those critical of the cancellation of Rathong Chu HEP had claimed that "Chamling has been very adamant about carrying on with the Rathong-Chu project till his political adversary Bhandari [from SSP] started backing the movement to scrap the project" (Jigme Kazi in Down To Earth, 1999).

Meanwhile, a new "Joint Action Committee" group was formed in mid-1999 by the local inhabitants of Dzongu and its surrounding areas to protest against the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation Ltd. (NHPC) that officially began the construction of the 510 MW Teesta Stage V HEP from 2000. Apparently, the Memorandum of Understanding for the Teesta Stage V HEP had already been signed by the NHPC with the GoS in 2000. The locally prevailing perception that dam constructions were inevitable once the

4

Memorandum of Understanding was signed had demobilized anti-dam protest. Teesta Stage V was commissioned eight years later in 2008 and remains in operation today.

The announcement of twenty nine additional dams for Sikkim in 2003 by the GoI as a part of its 50,000 MW Hydel Initiative for the country triggered a second wave of anti-dam protests in Dzongu, resulting in the formation of a new "Lepcha" civil society organisation, the Affected Citizens of Teesta (ATC), in 2004 to protest against all the dam projects in North Sikkim, especially the 1200 MW Teesta Stage III HEP and the 300 MW Panan HEP geared towards immediate implementation. ACT comprised a small group of educated youth Lepchas of Dzongu, who initially began by researching dam threats and submitting numerous petitions to the GoS appealing to reconsider such developments in Dzongu. However, not only were those petitions disregarded, the GoS rushed on an allocation spree to award dam projects to private and public power developers, signing multiple Joint Venture agreements (MoU) (Dinakaran, 2010). ACT activists were unable to mobilize their anti-dam support in Dzongu against the pro-dam enthusiasm that had gripped 80% of the local Lepchas (Dukpa et al., 2018, 2019). As a result, Teesta Stage III HEP and Panan HEP were approved at public hearing with overwhelming local consent in 2006 and 2007 respectively, severely demoralizing the ACT members.

In the absence of (mass) local anti-dam support in Dzongu; together with Panan HEP's controversial public hearing allegedly marred in accusations of coercion, intimidation and threat to un-willing landowners by the dam proponents for consent, the ACT members were compelled to upscale their protest. As a "last strategy", early June 2007, the ACT members took their protests to the state capital Gangtok from where their protest quickly grew into a much wider, popular social movement like the Rathong Chu movement. In the capital, they resorted to the Gandhian-inspired peaceful, non-confrontational, indefinite hunger-strikes. The first individual hunger strikes had commenced from 20 June 2007 and lasted for 63 days; the second a year later from 10 March 2008 and lasted for 93 days. Relay hunger strikes were held from June 2007 to January 2010; demanding for complete cancellation of all dams from Dzongu. Two more Lepcha organisations had joined ACT's hunger strikes in the capital, garnering more attention and visibility both in and outside of Sikkim. Unlike other, more prominent anti-dam movements of India that were mobilised around key issues of displacement and rehabilitation, ACT's anti-dam movement in Gangtok was overtly focused on geo-ethnic underpinnings (Dukpa et al., 2018). It heavily relied on Lepcha "folklore and mythology" to establish the Lepchas of Dzongu "as protectors of a scared place" (Little 2009, 42), easily appealing to the imageries of the common masses.

The second individual hunger strikes in 2008 lasting for 93 days brought the GoS under severe criticism and condemnation of large scale dam projects from several fronts

– the opposition local political parties of Sikkim (Arora, 2007, 2008), non-political civil society organisations from (in)outside of Sikkim (Wangchuk, 2007), the Sikkimese public and prominent anti-dam activist like Medha Patkar who made a rare appearance in Sikkim that same year (in April 2008) to offer solidarity for Dzongu (Little, 2010a). In retaliation, the GoS had counter accused the anti-dam activists and the new-found solidarity as one that was supposedly 'infiltrated by anti-social elements' mobilised under the vested interest of outside forces and labelled the ACT members as anti-national and anti-development (Little, 2010a, 2010b). Nevertheless, the deteriorating health conditions of activists undertaking individual-fast-unto-death eventually pressured the GoS into cancelling four of the five new dam projects – the relatively much smaller ones in June 2008. The most controversial of the five, the Panan HEP was not one of them (indicated by •2 in Figure 4.1 and Figure 4.3). The anti-dam movement in the capital was quickly disbanded after the cancellation announcement, and most of the protesters had returned to Dzongu, hoping to continue their everyday resistance for Panan HEP. But over time such zeal faded away as Panan HEP was stuck in a quagmire of delays and inactivity. To this day, the Panan project is neither cancelled nor commenced.

Inadvertently, all-through ACT's protest in Gangtok (2007-2008), the NHPC had silently cemented the groundwork for the second of the cascade HEP – the mega 520 MW Teesta Stage IV HEP – without attracting the attention of the protesting activists. The MoU had been discreetly signed in 2006 between the NHPC and the GoS in Gangtok without the knowledge of the Lepchas and the project was slated for construction from 2015 (GoI, 2005). Dzongu witnessed the third wave of protest in 2011 when the NHPC openly began to solicit public consensus for Teesta Stage IV – which gradually snowballed into a mass flip-flop in the dam position of the Lepchas – the focus of our paper.

Below we describe our findings vis-a-vis our theoritical framework to explain the shift in the position of the local Lepchas of Dzongu on large dams and dam development in their region.

4.5 Explaining the "flip-flop": The play of power, party and the public

Through Dzongu's local elections, we unravel the historical construction of power relationships and explain their operation in terms of how power is engendered, exercised and who endures its impacts within the small Lepcha community. We analyze how it shapes local responses to hydropower development in the region through time; "power in a given community can never be understood simply by observation at any given point in time" (Gaventa, 1980:56).

4.5.1 Hydro-electoral politics and obtaining the consent

North Sikkim has three political-administrative constituencies – Lachen-Mangan, Kabi-Lungchok and Dzongu – and elects three members to the State Legislative Assembly. While the Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) party secured its first ever electoral success to SLA in 1994 from Lachen-Mangan and Kabi-Lungchok constituencies, it had failed to secure any win from Dzongu constituency for two successive elections, in 1994 and 1999. However, despite this, the SDF party had still emerged victorious in Dzongu because on both occasions, the winners from opponent parties had switched parties and joined the SDF party – in power since 1994 and on a steep trajectory to gaining more prominence across Sikkim.

The changing of party affiliations before elections and(or) after electoral victories by winning candidates to join the ruling government's party is a common practice in Sikkim. The Dzongu constituency winner of 1985 and 1989 elections from the then ruling party Sikkim Sangram Parishad (SSP), Mr. Sonam Chyoda Lepcha, had impressively secured his third successive win in the 1994 elections discarding the SSP party, low on popularity, only to quickly join the new SDF party that formed the new Government of Sikkim after the declaration of the results that year. Up until 1994, elections in Dzongu were fought on general development issues and the welfare packages that contesting representatives promised the Dzongu Lepchas. Mr. Sonam Chyoda Lepcha had however lost his fourth constituency election as an SDF candidate in 1999 – a defeat that came at the backdrop of hydropower development concerns over Teesta Stage V that was gearing for immediate implementation under the SDF party as opposed to the SSP party that had taken up the anti-dam cause. Imperative here is to note that in the 1999 assembly election (as well as in 1994), the winning party's victory was by a very slim margin (see Table 4.1).

Canvassing hard *against* the cascade hydropower development or Teesta Stage V within Dzongu, another local resident – Mr. Sonam Gyatso Lepcha – had won his first ever constituency or State Legislative Assembly election as the SSP party candidate. With this victory, for the first time, issues concerning hydropower development became an electoral issue in Dzongu. Most local Lepchas recalled how they had voluntarily supported Mr. Sonam Gyatso in the 1999 assembly elections due to his anti-dam position. However, like his predecessors, a few months after becoming the area-MLA on "no-dam" agenda, Mr. Sonam Gyatso too had joined the ruling SDF party along with all of his supporters and overnight became a staunch, vocal advocate for hydropower development in Dzongu up until 2011. And with it began the dynamisation of power relations in Dzongu constituency around hydropower development, and the contentious embedding of dams in electoral politics and political power struggles that shaped dam conflict and cooperation in the region.

Five years later, Mr. Sonam Gyatso gave the SDF party its first major electoral victory in Dzongu in 2004, and thereafter successively in 2009 and 2014 State Legislative Assembly

elections on pro-hydropower development agenda – interestingly by huge vote margins including in 2019 when he did not contest the assembly election himself. Table 4.1 below shows the election result of Dzongu constituency during the SDF rule/regime between 1995 and 2019 as well as the total seats the SDF party has won in every successive election to emerge as the "single largest winning party" in Sikkim after 1999 (GoS, 2013: 108), and a party with no official opposition in State Legislative Assembly until 2014.

Table 4.1: Dzongu constituency election results. Source: Election Commission of India (ECI) website.

SLA election years	Total electors (Dzongu)	Voters/Valid vote polled	Winner party	Runner-up party	Winning margin in % in Dzongu	Total SLA seats won by SDF across Sikkim
1995	4,761	3,956/3,844	INC	SSP	1.2	19/32
1999	5,469	4,725/4,644	SSP	SDF	3.7	24/32
2004	5,903	5,118/5,118	SDF	INC	30.7	31/32
2009	6,623	5,959/5,947	SDF	INC	66.2	32/32
2014	8,167	7,269/7,166	SDF	SKM	30.3	22/32
2019	9,595	8,523/8,483	SDF	SKM	35.3	15/32

After four successive SLA victories in Dzongu (1999–2014), Mr. Sonam Gyatso became the key local figure promoting and advocating for hydropower development – both cascade and new ones – within "his" constituency. For almost a decade, between 1999 and 2011, he exerted enormous influence, especially through elected Panchayat members in mobilising local consensus and approval for hydropower development, suppressing any brewing anti-dam protests and solidarity within Dzongu. Panchayats are institutions of local self-government for rural areas and therefore, core arenas for grassroot mass mobilisation. Sikkim has a two-tier Panchayat system – at the village (Gram Panchayat) and district level (Zilla Panchayat). Justifying the necessity of hydropower development for Sikkim in general (in 2018 when Mr. Sonam Gyatso was interviewed), he had explained how "*Sikkim as a State has to generate some amount of fund by its own*" and how "*hydropower is an important means to generate money and directly benefit the State.*" Mr. Sonam Gyatso's political affiliation to the SDF Government, in power since 1999, his legislative position (and timely elevation to ministerial posts) and most importantly, his local Lepcha roots in Dzongu gave him an undisputed socio-political credibility in his constituency. A locally trusted, revered powerful politician, he easily commanded and maneuvered public actions/inactions of the local Lepchas within his constituency. Throughout this paper, we will see Mr. Sonam Gyatso's direct intervention to either drowse or flair dam issues in Dzongu.

4

However, it was not just the constituency Member of Legislative Assembly of Dzongu; after 2003, the entire remaining Government of Sikkim's State machineries became heavily involved in trust building and lobbying within Dzongu to generate consensus among local Lepchas for dam development. Numerous "*public awareness programmes*" were conducted in Dzongu with a message that dams were a national necessity and not harmful and that "*a good rehabilitation and resettlement package*" would be part of the deal for dam-affected landowners. Government and power companies sponsored field visits to dam sites of other power projects to assure local Lepcha residents who were uncertain about hydropower development and supportive of anti-dam protesters. The visits were effective because soon after, many reported to have given their approval for hydropower development. In these exercises of political maneuvering the main anti-dam activists were, however, not invited. The local government officials emerged as effective pro-dam influencers and enablers in Dzongu. Although not expected to publicly display political-party affiliations while executing their government duties, these district-specific officials "*acting like leaders of the pro-dam group*" rigorously worked towards securing consensus for dams. Some of them led "*door-to-door anti anti-dam-awareness campaign instructing and warning*" especially local government schoolteachers and government clerks "*to either lend their support for dams or to stay neutral*". By virtue of their powerful positions, they successfully silenced all those Lepcha households that had one or more members working for the GoS and who were sympathetic to the anti-dam cause. These bureaucrats further clamped down on the anti-dam protest by repeatedly refusing permits to other Lepchas and non-Lepchas attempting to enter Dzongu to support the anti-dam activists and declining permission to the anti-dam protestors to mobilise for rallies in the region.

These coupled with massive promises of economic development and employment opportunities not just for the project-affected landowners but for "all", by their trusted constituency Member of Legislative Assembly and local bureaucrats, greatly lured the local Lepchas and successfully mobilised the majority of them into giving overwhelming approval for Teesta Stage V, Teesta Stage III and Panan HEP amidst anti-dam protest. However, dam consent and support were also garnered by "threats" and "coercion" in the face of more resistance from the non-willing landowners. In this regard, an old Lepcha landowner explained how those unwilling to part with their lands came under "*intense pressure from the Government through the Panchayats, official and power companies*" where they were threatened that if they did not accept the compensation, they would not receive anything, but their lands would still be acquired by the government for the "*greater public interest*". Many landowners and anti-dam supporters, against their wishes, reported to have been compelled to consent to hydropower development by the state machineries, resulting in the creation of the "culture of silence" on dam development, more so on anti-dam resistance in Dzongu.

4.5.2 *The mechanism of anti-dam repression: Lepcha vs Lepcha*

What facilitated grassroot-level support for pro-dam advocacy and the "culture of silence" on dam issues within Dzongu was the party-driven local governance structure of the villages in Dzongu and in Sikkim: residents are affiliated to political parties and so are their trust, loyalty and support. Elderly Lepcha usually make up a strong party-affiliated network of supporters and cadres of political parties at the grassroot level in Dzongu. Since local distribution of public resources, and local development plans and schemes, are allocated and implemented by the party in power, i.e., the State Government, villages across Sikkim exhibit overtly visible party-based affiliations and allegiance to the political leaders in power – the most immediate ones being the constituency Member of Legislative Assembly and Panchayats. Party loyalty and obeying of party command or directives run deep not only in Dzongu but anywhere else in Sikkim. This was why any anti-dam reasonings and campaigns by ACT members particularly after 2007 were directly met with absolute distrust and apathy in Dzongu because their protest was automatically perceived as dissent against the ruling SDF Government. According to some of the anti-dam activists, "*lies had been spread about them that their village-to-village travel to raise awareness about dams and its consequences were campaigns to open a new political party in Dzongu.*" Meeting and interaction with ACT members, despite local familiarity, were thus avoided and flatly declined by elderly Lepchas, passionate SDF loyalists "*fearing repercussion from their party*" or worse still, being labelled a "*party-dhrohi [party-betrayer]*".

A former Gram Panchayat member from Dzongu recalled how in 2008, under the instruction of Mr. Sonam Gyatso – "*to not support those fasting in Gangtok*" – the Panchayat heads had unanimously followed the party constituency Member of Legislative Assembly's order and refused any support to ACT members fasting in the capital. The heads even forbade their ward members from supporting the anti-dam cause, citing that such acts went against party ethos and orders. That same year, again under the instruction of Mr. Sonam Gyatso, anti-dam Lepchas from Dzongu and their supporters were stopped at the Phidang Bridge, one of the entry points to Dzongu, by the local Lepchas belonging to the SDF party. Recounting the infamous clash, a young Lepcha of Dzongu who had participated in the clash regretfully lamented that "*more aggressive than the state police*" who also prevented the anti-dam supporters from entering Dzongu, it was the (pro-dam) Lepchas "*like us, in massive numbers throwing stones at the peaceful protestors, insulting them, and asking them to go back*".

The hostilities were not limited to ACT members alone but to anyone even inquiring about dams in Dzongu. A non-resident Lepcha youth from nearby Chungthang GPU outside Dzongu recalled how he and his friends "*nearly got hit by angry elderly Lepchas*" when they visited Dzongu to ask about dams. The deeply rooted territorial insider–

4

outsider, local–nonlocal notion already in existence in these parts of Sikkim (see Dukpa et. al, 2018) only exacerbated such hostilities, disadvantaging the anti-dam mobilisation. The othering of "all" non-Lepchas, including even the Lepchas of nearby constituencies by "Dzongu Lepchas" isolated Dzongu and turned any issue concerning Dzongu strictly as "*their internal matters*". This not only eroded "interest" in affairs of Dzongu but dissuaded those sympathetic towards anti-dam activists from the nearby constituencies from supporting them. A new kind of labelling of anti-dam supporters as "non-resident Lepchas" or "outsiders" interfering with the "*developmental activities*" of Sikkim "*with political overtones*" gained prominence in Sikkim and Dzongu after 2007 – the year ACT members took their protest to Gangtok.

After the Gangtok protest and amidst the escalating local hostilities, some parts of Dzongu had again erupted in anti-dam protest in 2011 when the NHPC announced its public hearing date for environmental clearance for Teesta Stage IV HEP in July 2011. However, in a surprising turn of events, a day before the public hearing, "all the Panchayat members and landowners" initially supportive of hydropower development boycotted the hearing en masse under the persuasion and instructions of Mr. Sonam Gyatso, who had by then become the Power Minister of Sikkim (National Green Tribunal, 2017). This abrupt local boycott, "*as a power game, targeted the NHPC, and not Teesta Stage IV HEP (the hydropower issue in itself)*", perplexing the NHPC officials, for it had raised suspicion on the GoS's position on dams. What followed was a brief "*election-like-village-to-village-canvassing*" by the NHPC officials and Mr. Sonam Gyatso: NHPC canvassing for local support for Teesta Stage IV while Mr. Sonam canvassing for support against the NHPC. Despite Mr. Sonam Gyatso's aggressive canvassing, the NHPC had succeeded in conducting the public hearing for Teesta Stage IV in its second attempt a year later in March 2012. Unlike in the past, where dams were approved by over 80% public consensus in Dzongu, Teesta Stage IV was approved by a little over 50% of the local voters, mostly from the six project-affected GPUs falling on the left bank of Teesta (see Figure 4.1).

The NHPC's slim success had instantly instigated another round of anti-dam protests on the right bank of Dzongu, fueled also by Mr. Sonam Gyatso's intervention. With panchayat elections slated that same year, in order to contain the simmering protest from spreading outside of Dzongu, the GoS strategically announced that the "*right*" to raise "*public-issue on dams and dam-development*" would rest solely with the elected political representatives of Dzongu. The pushing of dam development issues into the Panchayat domain before the election was an attempt to make ACT and other similar organisations "*irrelevant*" in Dzongu as also to test the changing dam scenario. Much like Sikkim's State Legislative Assembly elections, Panchayat elections too are contested on a political party basis since 1997. The pro-dam stance had been implicit among all the SDF party candidates

despite Mr. Sonam Gyatso's brief boycott stint. All SDF candidates were well-known dam supporters, and a majority of them emerged victorious at both Gram Panchayat as well as Zilla Panchayat within Dzongu in 2012. The few independent winners joined the SDF party soon after their win.

The Panchayat victories at both the Gram and Zilla levels in Dzongu politically established the elected SDF candidate's undisputed "*right*" over Dzongu's affairs, strengthening the SDF party's hold in Dzongu, and with it, its continued support for Teesta Stage IV. This "capturing" of all democratic political spaces of articulation at the grassroot level, rather than quelling anti-dam activists, inadvertently compelled the apolitical ACT members to make their own political electoral debut in the 2014 State Legislative Assembly elections.

4.5.3 *The flip: An electoral strategy and struggle for power*

In 2013, a new political state party – the Sikkim Krantikari Morcha (SKM) – was formed in Sikkim, which contested the State Legislative Assembly in 2014. After two decades of SDF rule, the new party's "rallying cry of *Parivartan* (change)" (Gergan, 2014) found instant resonance with the Sikkimese public, especially those aggrieved under the SDF-led GoS. Many anti-dam activists from Dzongu had swiftly joined the new party, including many politically neutral or silent local GoS employees and SDF party cadres. One of the ACT's prominent founder members, Mr. Dawa Lepcha, known for his 63 and 98 days of individual hunger strike in Gangtok, in fact contested the 2014 State Legislative Assembly election under the SKM party against the long-time incumbent constituency Member of Legislative Assembly and the Power Minister of Sikkim, Mr. Sonam Gyatso from the SDF party. For Mr. Dawa Lepcha, born and raised in Dzongu, "*nothing operates outside of politics in Dzongu so I had to join politics. Our people look up to the government, politicians, bureaucrats, and panchayats. Their powerful positions make them trusting and credible. I thought that if we can reach those powerful positions, the local people will listen to us*".

It was during the 2014 Assembly elections that the mass flip happened in the political positions of the Lepchas of Dzongu. When Mr. Dawa Lepcha, the face of ACT and well respected in Dzongu despite his anti-dam activism, contested as an SKM candidate with an anti-dam agenda; Mr. Sonam Gyatso had publicly denounced his decades-long pro-dam position and took an anti-dam stand himself too. Mobilising the "*public grievances*" around the commissioned Teesta Stage V HEP and not the impending Teesta Stage IV, the constituency Member of Legislative Assembly's election campaign was built on "attacking" the NHPC for not fulfilling its promises with Teesta Stage V [74]. While he did question the "*techno-feasibility*" issues associated with Teesta Stage IV, it was his vitriolic condemnation of the power company (and not hydropower development projects per se)

4

that echoed amongst his grassroot party cadres. Mr. Dawa Lepcha, on the other hand, had campaigned against *all h*ydropower development plans and projects in Dzongu, particularly Teesta Stage IV HEP, promising "*to stop them all*" if he got elected. However, "*fearful anticipation of loss of all economic opportunities from dams*" if Mr. Dawa Lepcha came to power discouraged many Lepchas still aspiring for dam development in Dzongu from supporting him. Mr. Dawa Lepcha lost the election and Mr. Sonam Gyatso yet again became the constituency Member of Legislative Assembly of Dzongu constituency for the fourth successive term. The SDF party retained its majority at the State Legislative Assembly to form the fifth consecutive GoS but lost many assembly seats to a new SKM party that emerged, however, briefly as the official opposition party winning ten State Legislative Assembly seats, threatening the SDF regime.

After winning the 2014 Assembly election, Mr. Sonam Gyatso was elevated as the Deputy Speaker of State Legislative Assembly, from where he continued his attacks on the NHPC within his constituency with renewed public confidence and power. He successfully repositioned himself as "*honoring what the public wants*" and responded to the "*negative impacts of dams*", which he realized "*damaged and depleted resources in Dzongu*". This new position on the NHPC was quickly adopted by local district officials and the grassroot-level SDF party cadres but only within Dzongu constituency falling on the right bank of Teesta River. On the left-bank Dzongu constituency, including Lachen-Mangan and Kabi Lungchuk constituencies (see map in Figure 4.3), where a heterogenous mix of Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalese had given their approval for Teesta Stage IV, the same district officials and bureaucrats continued to support the development of Teesta Stage IV. This dual stand by the GoS representatives on the right- and left-bank Dzongu constituency made many SDF party loyalists critical of the State Government (including Mr. Sonam Gyatso) since the other SDF party constituency Member of Legislative Assembly of Lachen and Kabi Lungchuk constituency remained staunch supporters of Teesta Stage IV in their respective constituencies.

Despite growing confusion and distrust amongst the party supporters, Mr. Sonam Gyatso continued his anti-dam crusade against the NHPC on the right-bank Dzongu constituency and by 2016 had successfully gained the support of many former, prominent anti-dam activists from ACT and other anti-dam organisation members from Dzongu. With the threat of the SKM party's political expansion still looming over the SDF party in Dzongu (and across Sikkim), in a master stroke, the SDF party made the "*anti-hydropower stance*" a key criterion for the selection of SDF party candidates for the Panchayat elections due in 2017. And as such, the SDF party offered Panchayat election "*tickets*" or nominations to key ACT members and their supporters that they had just wooed into the SDF party and to those newly flipped SDF party cadres who were committed to canvas on a purely anti-

dam agenda. This was almost like an attempt to placate the suspicious party cadres and to prevent the outflow of old and the newly converted anti-dam activists and their supporters from joining the SKM party. This strategy was effective because the SDF party won the 2017 Panchayat election in Dzongu constituency with majority and retained its grassroots-level party support within Dzongu. As usual, the few who had won as independent candidates without any party affiliation joined the SDF party soon after the election, strengthening the SDF party in Dzongu.

With all the elected grassroots-level Panchayat members belonging to the SDF party, anti-dam mobilisation further intensified in Dzongu, but this time, not only against the NHPC but directly against Teesta Stage IV and against hydropower dams as such. The new anti-dam activist Panchayats on board instantly withdrew the approval from the main three (of the four) project-affected Gram Panchayat Units on right bank Dzongu – Lum Gor Sangtok, Lingdon Barfok and Passingdang Safo (shown as 1, 2 and 4 in Figure 4.3) – that had earlier given Forest Clearance Approval for Teesta Stage IV. The Panchayats of these three Gram Panchayat Units then joined hands with the remaining Hee Gyathang GPU (shown as 3 in Figure 4.3) to collectively decline approval for Forest Clearance in 2017.

This, however, excludes the "majority" of landowners still supporting the development of Teesta Stage IV HEP, which we discuss in the next section. They were joining the pro-dam other six project-affected Gram Panchayat Units (See Figure 4.3) of the left bank – three from left-bank Dzongu constituency, two from Lachen-Mangan constituency and one in Kabi Lungchuk constituency (shown as 5, 6 and 7 in the map in Figure 4.3) – that have approved the Forest Clearance.

4.5.4 The pro-dam supporters and a split community

Still, not all flipped on the right bank of Dzongu to join the anti-dam faction spearheaded by Mr. Sonam Gyatso. Many direct project-affected landowners, who had already flipped earlier under Mr. Sonam Gyatso's assurances when pro-dam support was mobilised in Dzongu, refrained from the new flip. A palpable frustration had set in these landowners, as succinctly described by an old Lepcha landowner, also an SDF loyalist and a passionate anti-dam supporter during the initial ACT protests: "*If I change today like these politicians, then there will be no value for my stand, and tomorrow neither the NHPC nor the GoS will take me seriously. I have given my land. If the project comes, well and good. If it doesn't, I couldn't care less. But I will not change my mind now*" (Fieldwork, 2020). Other landowners, who had also earlier consented to giving away their lands for Teesta Stage IV and had been restricted access or cultivating on it by the NHPC, were reluctant to flip without any compensation for years of disuse that had rendered their lands unproductive. They believed that the politicians were simply "*playing with public emotions for votes and power*" and if the

4

constituency Member of Legislative Assembly or GoS were genuinely concerned about the socio-environmental impacts of dams, then "*MoU signed between GoS and NHPC foremost should have been cancelled*". Additionally, many Lepcha youth in need of employment, who had earlier passionately supported the ACT activists, also joined the pro-dam landowners. The belief that hydropower development was still the fastest means, "*a-once-in-a-life time*" opportunity to better their economic conditions and living standards, resolved their pro-dam stance in Dzongu. And so, Lepchas supporting dam development all arose in defense of the NHPC – their perceived benefactor and patron of socio-economic opportunities.

These pro-dam youth Lepchas, however, became instant targets of the newly flipped anti-dam activists/supporters. Since they did not fall under the category of formally identified direct project-affected landowners nor direct project-affected families (according to the 2008 Hydro Policy), they were vulnerable to "*no land, no say*" attacks of the anti-dam factions. The pro-dam landowners, on the other hand, were accused of being in minority, "*greedy*" and "*sell outs*" as more Lepchas on the right-bank constituency joined the Member of Legislative Assembly of Dzongu. However, undeterred, the (right-bank) pro-dam Lepchas resisted joining the anti-dam protest despite being SDF cadres themselves. This was because they found a key ally in the strong pro-dam supporters from the left-bank constituencies.

On the left bank, the SDF party's other constituency Member of Legislative Assembly of Lachen-Mangan and Kabi-Lungchuk had mobilized an uncompromising pro-dam stand, supported unanimously by their constituency residents. Not only had "*all*" the identified landowners given their approval for Teesta Stage IV "multiple times" willingly but lamented at how they had "*patiently waited and still waiting for over two decades for the commencement of Teesta Stage IV*" (Fieldwork, 2020). In fact, they had repeatedly pressured the NHPC and the GoS for speedy implementation of Teesta Stage IV. The "*dream of building [big] homes*", "*sending children to private schools and institutions in Gangtok and other states across India*", "*buying [bigger] vehicles*" and "*moving to places nearer Gangtok*" from the monetary compensation they hoped to receive from the NHPC kept their faith pinned on the SDF GoS and the NHPC – all of which made for their unrelenting dam support on the left bank.

Holding meetings on dam issues by the Government and NHPC official therefore became difficult and contentious because these were boycotted by one faction or the other. By 2019/2020, the hostilities between the two factions were so heightened that not only were the factions unwilling to negotiate or budge from their respective dam stands but its members refused to face each other at any project-related meeting. Even their interactions with the Government officials, including that with the then Chief Minister – Mr. P. K. Chamling – were separately scheduled to avoid direct clash between the factions. Given that a majority of both the pro and anti-dam factions belonged to the SDF party,

each faction had been tactfully reassured by Mr. Chamling, successfully averting any loss or erosion of their confidence on the SDF party or the SDF GoS. In a volte face, the Chief Minister placated the anti-dam faction that the SDF Government would not push for the dam construction without "*proper consultation and genuine consent of the locals*", explaining how all other dam constructions earlier had "*happened unknowingly*" but to the pro-dam faction, reiterated his full support for Teesta Stage IV, claiming: "*I brought the Project here, why would I stop it now. The project has a public demand. It will begin soon.*" In fact, the Chief minister pinned the blame on the "*locals and their internal fights*" for the delay of Teesta Stage IV and "*not the government*". This ambiguous position, rather than cautioning the dam factions, had only boosted hope on both the sides, aggravating the cycle of mobilisation and counter-mobilisation around Teesta Stage IV in the region.

4.6 Discussion: Examining power reconfiguration in hydropower politics

As the foregoing sections show, across Sikkim, the manifestation of all "three differing continuums of power" has become most apparent in the decade-long conflict over hydropower development in Dzongu. In terms of "power levels", the Government of India (or the Centre) has been the (hydro)power choreographer of India that sets as well as controls the country's hydropower arena, while the respective State Governments are their power managers. The Centre's local presence in distant regions like Dzongu, or for that matter, in North Sikkim, is concretely visible in the GoI's officials and fieldworkers undertaking geophysical investigations since the early 1970s, and the NHPC officials after 1989. They deeply embedded these far-flung areas under the Centre's direct influence, connecting national, state and local levels of water governance and conflict. The North District also had visible State presence given the politico-administrative structure of Sikkim that brought its inhabitants directly under the State too, locally and quite literally personified in the GoS officials and the elected representatives. With such Centre and State's presence, power, in terms of the "relation" of the Centre-State representatives with the local residents, operated intrinsically through their everyday work and its associated encounter and engagement with the people of the region. These power relations have resulted in the activation of the different faces/forms of powers at different times, levels and spaces as hydropower development was pushed in the region, giving rise to distinct place-based hydro-electoral politics over large dam development in Dzongu.

4.6.1 The working and complementarities of visible and hidden power
While visible power (e.g., legislative, policy force) and hidden power (e.g., manipulation, sidelining particular factions) were integral part of the dam development agenda and

4

practices, invisible forms of power were as important. Since there was no precedence of large dams nor their development in Sikkim until 1999 and in North Sikkim until 2007, the dominant central narrative that power projects were necessary for "national development" and "public interest" led both the GoS and its local public into believing that the exploitation of Sikkim's abundant water resources was necessary for nation-building, instilling a heightened nationalistic fervor in the newly formed tiny State of Sikkim for dam developments. The Centre-State power relation, channelizing a full "patron-like support" from every successive GoS for hydropower development, flared local imageries. The articulation of "*desh ko heet ma*" (for the sake of the county [India]) and "*desh ko bikash*" (for the country's development) as a common, recurring justifications for HEPs by most elderly Lepchas of Dzongu and elderly GoS politicians even five decades later reflects the Centre's conditioning of beliefs for hydropower development in North Sikkim. This explains why anti-dam protest did not galvanise within Dzongu in the early 1990s. Further, the State-centric narratives about self-reliance, revenue generation from dam development and reducing Sikkim's fiscal independence on GoI, promoted immediately after 2003 by the SDF GoS, easily influenced and shaped local Lepcha's beliefs and interest in large dams, garnering support for such massive development.

In fact, so deeply entrenched were the Centre-State and SDF party's conditioning of Dzongu Lepchas, i.e., the effects of the invisible power, that the very visible socio-environmental impacts and drastically changed landscape from the construction of the first cascade large HEP of North Sikkim, Teesta Stage V, and its associated mounting protests from project-affected-villages, did little to dampen Lepcha enthusiasm for more dams in Dzongu and their ardent support for the ruling SDF Government.

Against this backdrop, the other faces of power have concomitantly been activated, especially in response to any (perceived) threat and(or) challenge to the ruling establishment. For example, the co-optation of the victor candidate at successive SLA and Panchayat elections against candidates opposing dams or the SDF party, the mass conversion of the victor's grassroots-based supporters, promotion to higher bureaucratic and ministerial positions and the aggressive pushing for dam development using state machineries in Dzongu all express the first and second face of power. We see how the thin winning margin widens up disproportionally after 1999, skewing towards the ruling SDF GoS representatives promoting large dams in Dzongu and, oddly enough, remaining as highly skewed even on anti-dam stands taken by the SDF GoS in 2014 and 2017 SLA elections. This, we argue, is because of the grounding of the invisible third face of power at the local grassroots level, operating in and through the very party-affiliated local Lepchas themselves, who profess remaining "loyal" to their chosen political parties. It is the defense of large dam development by the party-affiliated Lepchas of Dzongu that thwarted the

mobilisation of anti-dam concerns and resistance within Dzongu, without any direct confrontation with or antagonization towards the State and the Centre until 2007. Thus, the effect of invisible power made existing local spaces for anti-dam contestation at the grassroots level redundant, cutting down mass support. While this had forced the ACT members to take their anti-dam protest to Gangtok – Sikkim's capital – we argue that this inadvertently set in motion the activation of three dimensions of power by the GoS, the power companies and its supporters to repress the anti-dam protest.

In terms of the power cube framework, we view the Lepcha's journey to Gangtok – their "last strategy – as the ACT members' attempt to create spaces elsewhere outside of Dzongu while also scaling up their protest from the grassroots local level to the regional level for more efficacy and effectiveness. The chronology of events may look as if the ACT members gained victory by successfully enabling the cancellation of four proposed (relatively much smaller dams) in 2008, but it becomes clear how the real target of the GoS was to control all socio-political spaces of participation and decision making at all levels at the grassroots: the wards, the villages and the Gram Panchayat Units, which would facilitate the execution of the GoS agendas – be it for dam development or resisting it. This becomes very clear through the GoS's exercise of the first and the second face/form of power, starting with the aggressive open attack on the anti-dam protests with accusation of "anti-national" and "anti-development" (publicly threating and intimidating); next, by being ambiguous on dam position and later by organising the most rigorous/classic "mobilisation of bias" on the very anti-dam plank it fought against for decades – this all to outflank the most credible, trusted anti-dam candidates (who had been the face of anti-dam movement) during the 2014 State Legislative Assembly election. This brings us finally to the flip-flop politics on dam construction in Dzongu – both by the GoS and the Lepchas.

4

4.6.2 Political and electoral flip-flops around hydropower development

The elected SDF party-affiliated Member of Legislative Assembly of Dzongu and Mangan-Lachen constituency, who have respectively resisted and supported Teesta Stage IV across the right and left bank of River Teesta, raise questions on whether hydropower development is an end in itself, for local and regional development, or just a means for the SDF Government's own vote bank politics and survival. The SKM party's first victory in Kabi-Lungchok constituency in 2014, and its inroad to the remaining two constituencies – Dzongu and Lachen-Mangan – riding on the sentiments and grievances of anti-hydropower development, compounded the SDF party's fear of losing local support. This had compelled the GoS – that had blatantly ignored anti-dam appeals in Dzongu and de-mobilised the anti-dam movement in Gangtok – to now galvanize the pro-dam supporters in Dzongu to change their position and join the "save Dzongu" faction to push its new agenda in the spaces

opened after 2003. This explains the "flip-flop" ambiguity of the SDF party, different also on the right and left bank. SDF's dichotomous political position with regards to right- and left-bank Dzongu shaped both these places differently, which also affirms that "spaces are not neutral for participation but are themselves embedded in power relations, constantly being shaped and influenced by them" (Cornwall, 2002).

Such calculated political flip-flop over dams strengthened the intensity of the anti-dam protest in Dzongu because the elected representatives at the Panchayat levels, all SDF party loyalists, came out in the open as anti-dam flag bearers, without fear of anti-party, anti-development and anti-national labels. The anti-dam faction that had been in minority and lacked Lepchas support within Dzongu overnight sprung as majority under the SDF party support. At the same time, the pro-dam faction that had enjoyed party support suddenly were reduced to minority, supported strongly by the newly flipped pro-dam supporters. The SDF Government's "master stroke" within Dzongu constituency conveniently absolved the GoS as hydropower development enthusiast and politically projected a people-centric image for itself. Herein, both the pro- and the anti-dam factions still approached the GoS and its representatives to remedy their grievances, rather than going against the SDF GoS. It is evident that the GoS did not directly engage in confronting the GoI, nor cancel the Memorandum Of Understandings with the NHPC, hence it routed the covert-contestation mobilising anti-dam unrest on the right bank. The Lepchas, still hoping for change, remain sandwiched between the SDF-led GoS (fighting for more "power" over its resources and electoral votes) and the NHPC (that has already made heavy financial and infrastructural investments in the project-affected villages and is gearing for more HEPs in Sikkim).

The reason why the SDF-led GoS successfully pulled off the flip – de-mobilising the anti-dam movement at its peak in 2008 in Gangtok, far away from Dzongu, and re-mobilising the same back in Dzongu in 2014 – is because of the party-based "patron-client" relationship that exists between the GoS and the people of Sikkim. This is, we argue, what facilitates the operation of the various dimensions of power and thereby builds the "total" impact as explained in Gaventa's framework on power. Although top-down in nature, this political patronage relationship operates via the party-based delivery and distribution of public services and benefits in Sikkim, usually in exchange for party allegiance and loyalty towards the ruling dispensation. This patronage politics is deeply embedded in the social fabric of Sikkim right from the grassroots ward to village to Panchayats to GPUs, affecting all walks of life and overtly visible during elections, party rallies and seeking employment opportunities. The NHPC as well as the new private Independent Power Producers have followed a similar path in dispensing patronizing welfare and social aid – today in the name of corporate social responsibilities – to woo the public and creating a system of dependent patron–client relationships just like the State Government. No one wants to

offend nor confront the party in power nor the powerful companies. This is also because power, even at a local level, is literally "personified" by the elected Member of Legislative Assembly, Chief Minister, Ministers, State and Central bureaucrats including the power company officials – all too visible given their everyday presence and engagement at village weddings, funerals, cultural functions, social gatherings, party rallies and public talks. The different faces or forms of power therefore have for long operated and become visible in the actions/inactions and functions of people who personify or represent power, which makes it difficult to escape or challenge the political patronage system.

This is why, behind the fear of being labelled party-*drohi* [traitor] or anti-party, it was the fear of falling out of the ruling party's or ruling people's or powerful companies' patronage that prevented many Lepchas from offering and showing solidarity to the anti-dam factions – and participating in the aggressive "mobilisation of bias" through "organizational outflanking" of ACT. This anti-party fear was only to project a negative image for ACT as anti-development and anti-national, damaging trust building between ACT members with the majority of Lepcha residents, making a pariah of the anti-dam protesters in their very own ancestral Dzongu region. So brutal was this mobilization-of-bias followed by victimization and intimidation that many key anti-dam activists later on resigned from their activism due to lack of local support for the anti-dam struggle in Dzongu after losing the election. This manufactured exclusion of the anti-dam protesters and of their anti-dam issues has also resulted in what Gaventa (1980,255) has pointed out as "a sense of defeat or sense of powerlessness" that affects the consciousness of potential challengers and those sympathetic towards the anti-dam cause in Dzongu, creating and perpetuating the "culture of silence". It took a powerful flip by the ruling party to break the "culture of silence" on anti-dam supporters. Could this then be victory of the anti-dam movement as it is often claimed, or should it rather be analyzed as a temporary "misalignment" of the dominant forms, spaces and levels of power? For certain, both pro- and anti-dam issues have been used as "vote banks" and for strategic, electoral tactics, to leverage favorable political outcomes by politicians, ruling and opposition parties.

4

4.7 Conclusions

To conclude, we have explained why the Lepchas switched their positions on dams and hydropower. We have shown why and how the GoS, its representatives and the companies strategically operated in this dam/anti-dam political mining field in order to secure compliance and support at the grassroot level. We also examined how they continuously seek to stabilize power relations among the governing and the governed, to choreograph 'hydraulic order and the politics of the governed' (Chatterjee, 2004; Hidalgo-Bastidas

and Boelens, 2019). Implications for the dam movements and mobilisation in the region remain to be seen particularly as natural disasters such as landslides, flash floods, glacial lake outburst floods and earthquakes are exacerbated in the region, compounded and amplified by human greed, failure and mismanagements. The granting of power projects to questionable power companies, conducting blotched public hearings, exaggerating the benefits of large dams and downplaying the adverse negative impacts of the same, resorting to coercion and intimidation and so on have greatly increased the risk, vulnerability, fear and uncertainty in the project-affected areas, especially in the environmentally sensitive regions of Eastern Himalaya. Numerous dam failure disasters across the world – Vajont dam disaster in Italy in 1963 and Banqiao Dam disaster in 1975 to name a few – including many across India such as the Machchu II dam failure in India in 1979, seem to be forgotten easily. The latest flood disaster that completely washed away Sikkim's largest mega dam – the Teesta Stage III that was built at 1530 m above mean sea level in Chungthang village, North District of Sikkim, and commissioned less than five years ago – has caused colossal loss of life, properties and human displacement all along the Teesta Valley in Sikkim and in the neighboring state of West Bengal. The flood also completely damaged the NHPC's Teesta Stage V lying downstream of Teesta Stage III. And as reconstruction and repair are being planned, dam issues and conflict are back in Sikkim again. We are to assume that with the mass flip against large dams in Dzongu that received both the ruling as well as opposition party's support, the recent dam failure disaster in the region that affected parts of Dzongu and the emerging dam controversy gaining attention in Sikkim, things ought to have worked in favour of the Lepchas of Dzongu and dams ought to have been cancelled, but ground reality was no different. Large dams are meant to stay in Sikkim, and where better than North Sikkim – far away from the scrutiny of the public.

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Chapter 5. Discussion and conclusion

This chapter marks the end of my dissertation and doctoral research journey. It has focused on the politics of contestation and non-contestation of hydropower development in the Eastern Himalayan region of Sikkim over the last three decades. In particular, I have scrutinized how, during and as a result of this process, notions of place, space, identity and related forms of power among and within different social groups have been deployed and reshaped. Next, I have investigated what effects this hydropower contestation/non-contestation process has had on territoriality and territorialization processes.

This final chapter begins with a summary of the main findings of the three published case studies (Section 5.1). This is followed by a detailed review and discussion of the cases vis-à-vis the broader implication regarding the theoretical concepts that I have used, the hydropower discourse that has evolved in these high mountain communities, and the emerging issues of socio-environmental injustice that accompany such development (Section 5.2). A reflection on methodology and re-positionality post-fieldwork is given in Section 5.3 to set the scene for the main conclusions of my research as elaborated in Section 5.4.

5.1 The main findings of the different chapters

In the three sections below I shortly review each of the three chapters that present the main findings and analytical lines that stand as the basis of my thesis.

Chapter 2 has asked the question of *how people-place connections come into being and are experienced differentially; and how these relations are embedded in place history and evolve differently across situations and scenarios in the wake of hydropower development*. To respond to this sub-question 1, I have analyzed why and how the 1200 MW Teesta Stage III Hydro Electric Project (HEP) was successfully implemented over eleven long odd years without contestation in Chungthang Gram Panchayat Unit (GPU) located in the North District of Sikkim. This is remarkable not only because of the fact that it is the largest Teesta River Valley cascade dam project in Sikkim, but also because Chungthang GPU lies within the North district, demarcated and restricted for safeguarding the territorial interest of the indigenous Lepchas and Bhutias residing within it, and where other neighboring areas such as Lachung, Lachen and Dzongu upstream and downstream of the Chungthang GPU have been engulfed in fierce anti-dam contestations. In the chapter I have highlighted Chungthang GPU's ethnically fragmented social context and its atypical multi-ethnic,

heterogenous demography that has taken shape as an outcome of the economic and political history of the ruptured frontier regions of North Sikkim. I have explained the resultant constitution of a heterogenous population comprising the indigenous Bhutias and Lepchas (BL) and the remaining 'others', separated into distinct social categories of 'local/non-local' and 'public/non-public'. Although not official, but ambiguously formal as-well-as informal, these social categorizations are based on indigeneity, political history of the place, and recognized citizenship. Such categorizations not only establish the inhabitants' current and ancestral 'link to land' but also reinforce ethnic boundaries and divides within the GPU. This disproportionately endows and privileges some with stronger agency, identity and *haqs* (rights) than the rest, and thereby gives rise to variegated experiences of people-place connection. I have scrutinized and explained how people-place relations and connections come into being, are experienced, and evolve differently across situations and geographies. Embedded in this complex interplay of indigeneity, place-history and divisive social practices, the development of Sense of Belonging (SoB) is enabled or hindered. In other words, it deeply influences particular groups' valued involvement, acceptance and recognition in the social-system, which is crucial for people-place relations. The issues of who can and cannot voice opinions, make claims and take decisions relating to Chungthang GPU (the place) and its residents (the people) are thus deeply embedded in the area's cultural politics and its local expression of power relations.

As I elaborate, a definite but varied sense of place was articulated by the diverse residents of Chungthang GPU, but not all sense of place articulations translates to sense of belonging and thereby, the defense of place. That is, having rooted sense of place and thus sense of belonging does not guarantee protection of place. In this chapter I showed how the everyday life worlds of the Lepchas in Chungthang GPU are intertwined with their cultural, traditional, religious, spiritual beliefs and practices, and civic duties and responsibilities. This strengthens their 'place-attachment' and 'place-identity'. Their ancestral link to land and related land endowments bestows them with exclusive political and economic privileges, including sole rights to making decisions on local, natural resources. The Bhutias and the 'others' with no ancestral history of dwelling in Chungthang GPU are conscious of their 'functional reliance' on the place for sustenance and livelihoods. The years of residency evokes in them a certain 'place-familiarity', but 'place-belonging' is constrained and limited, and different for the Bhutias and for these 'others'.

Translocal development interventions did not spark any solidarity along interethnic lines here; not even among the traditionally united Bhutia-Lepcha (BL) community. Also among non-BL outsiders, voice and articulation in 'public' domains of formal and informal governance processes of decision-making is most clearly absent. Among them, placelessness, exclusion and non-recognition is starkly visible. I therefore show how and

why people-place relations are not only deeply embedded in Chungthang GPU's history, culture and legislation but they also accentuate divides. In other words, I explain how people-place connections and relations are shaped and recreated through established power positions and privileges or the lack thereof. This results in differentially experienced people-place connections that elicit diverse responses locally, ranging from fierce contestation, to indifference, to enthusiastic acceptance.

In the case of hydropower development, the Lepchas residing in Chungthang GPU have not resisted dam construction as this powerful group has gained disproportionately from these developments through land compensations and project-related benefits as housing, jobs and other economic opportunities. Even for those that did not get these benefits, it allowed them to maintain unchallenged their privileged position in decision-making by virtue of their identity as 'public' and 'local'. In ethnically and socio-politically fractured communities like Chungthang, translocal developments such as the analyzed dam development can reinforce ethno-social divides and disparities, and re-align traditional place-based ethno-centric solidarities along new politically-motivated lines. Therefore, local social coalescence cannot be taken for granted as these rest upon more complex relations, which evolve in both socio-cultural as well as politico-economic contexts.

Chapter 3 focuses on the cultural politics of identity, territory and self-governance. It does so by examining and responding to sub-question 2: *How do different communities connected to distinct places (re)produce and politicize identities to contest hydropower development; and how are such place-based identities strategically mobilized?* For this, I analyze how, in their home territory regions of Lachung and Lachen, the indigenous Bhutia communities (the Lachungpas and Lachenpas) successfully challenged all proposed hydropower projects and have managed to sustain an anti-dam opposition. My analysis describes and analyzes the remarkably effective strategies of collective action against hydropower development. It shows the crucial role that local place-based identity has in shaping and influencing the different expressions of collective action that have been able to halt hydropower development. The Dzumsa, a prevailing traditional system of self-governance among the Lachungpas and Lachenpas, is a center piece of their collective resistance against large dams in Lachung and Lachen. Still, territorially exclusive while ethnically cohesive collectives like the Dzumsa do not automatically or easily coalesce as a response to outsider-imposed agendas and interventions.

Contrary to popular imageries, the Dzumsa is neither an egalitarian nor a democratic institution. Rather, collective action is mobilized by some individuals who politicize the notions of territorial collective identity. When communities are fractured into polarized groups, these vernacular institutions as the Dzumsas become highly politicized. They become the means to coerce divided communities into a collective front or unity, which

5

is nonetheless 'agonistic'. This implies that through the Dzumsas an overall spirit of cooperation is created to fight back against dam development in their territories, despite many other existing conflicts and disputes in and among these communities. As I show in the chapter, they operate as complex networks that are able to mobilize some of the main determinants for collective action by using amongst others traditional systems and practices of shamanism (*Chya*). I explain how crucial elements in these local/translocal powerplays are the politization of identity, a strong and sturdily established institution for decision-making, and place-based territoriality. These three elements are constantly and strategically mobilized in their struggle against internal and external threats. Directly related to this, I show how principles of 'vernacular statecraft', that is, mechanisms of governance used for governing the communities such as established institutions, rules and control mechanisms, helped bringing the local communities together in imperfect unions to oppose dam development. However, what I also show in this chapter is that these same mechanisms that keep communities united against the threats of dam construction pose high social, political and emotional risks to those that do not align with the normative principles of the collective.

Theoretically, this chapter shows that identities are not always rooted in land, territory, culture or even indigeneity. Rather they are strategic, fluid, political actions that serve to defend a particular group from 'outsiders/others' and(or) to protect specific claims and interests. From this perspective, the united anti-dam stand by the Lachungpas and Lachenpas is much more than just the voicing of socio-economic and environmental concerns relating to large dams. Their resistance is also and more importantly about (re) claiming territory, (re)asserting collective identity, reiterating collective action, and valuing as well as using their own knowledge and modes of knowing and being.

In *Chapter 4*, I analyze the conflicts and struggles between the Government of India, the State Government of Sikkim, power companies and Sikkim's autochthonous tribe, the Lepchas. The chapter investigates sub-question 3, which focuses on *how intra-ethnic mobilizations and counter-mobilizations shape hydropower contestations; and what implications this has in terms of the power relations between the governed and the governing?* I respond to this question by studying one of the ongoing dam conflicts in Dzongu, particularly zooming in on the period from 2011 to 2017. In this period abrupt shifts in positions of local Lepchas re-configured and escalated dam contestations. The locally elected Lepcha politicians became the most vocal anti-dam advocates, aggressively attacking the latest hydropower initiatives and openly supporting the local anti-dam activists and organizations that they had condemned and 'victimized' in the past. Conversely, many staunch anti-dam activists and dam opponents turned into fierce pro-dam supporters themselves, joining forces with the other pro-dam supporters and hydropower-developing

companies. New alliances were created, and the old ones broke down, giving rise to a complex web of hydro-politics. Informed by the power cube framework developed by John Gaventa this chapter shows how locally, opposition to- or support of hydropower development is deeply intertwined with locally grounded multi-scalar patronage relationships. This chapter brings to the fore how local elections bring out dam conflict and the operation of power into the open. This sometimes leads to abrupt and unexpected switches in positions in relation to hydropower development. These switches, I argue, should be seen not only as 'strategic electoral tactics' but also and importantly as contentious political struggles that (re)configure power in the region. In this process, powerful political actors continuously seek to stabilize power relations among the governing and the governed, choreographing a specific order and hierarchy of political patronage that stretches way beyond simple pro- and anti-dam actors and coalitions as it is embedded in deep hydro(-electoral) politics and power plays.

5.2 Discussion

In the three case studies I have examined how power and leadership are structured within local collectives and communities; how the characteristics of a place – and of the communities associated with that place – inform the political identities, interests and perceptions of residents. As the chapters make clear, I recognize and scrutinize how every place is constituted through not just local histories and socio-ecological transformations but also through wider social, economic and political processes and power configurations.

The three case studies bring to focus how hydropower development was operationalized by the (state and central) government and electricity companies in North Sikkim under the rhetoric of progress, development, national and public interest, disseminating tall claims of benefit in the backward areas. These are however not just any 'backward, undeveloped areas' of Sikkim – they are in fact, the last 'intact' and 'pure' Lepcha-Bhutia landscapes imbued with their religious places, socio-cultural spaces, spiritual ancestry, values, history, memories and their ways of living. North Sikkim unlike the rest of the East, West and South districts of Sikkim remains a demarcated 'restricted and protected' area for indigenous Lepchas and Bhutias in Sikkim. The irony is that whilst both place and people are protected by Sikkim's old laws as well as the Indian Constitution, these areas are exploited, appropriated and sacrificed in the name of 'development', 'common good' and 'public interest'.

Principally, this thesis is thus not about large dams or hydropower technicalities but about contestation, consent and conflict associated with large dam development. Embedded in the socio-political and historical context of the region, it gives rise to a

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unique interplay of the politics of place and place of politics. Hydropower development does not automatically invoke uniform and unanimous consent nor dissent among the tribal Bhutas and Lepchas including non-BL "others" residing within North Sikkim, but splits individual community members into supporters and opposers of such development. This appears to be a common feature associated with extractive development processes around the globe, be it hydropower development (see Fletcher, 2008; Huber, 2012; Diduck et. al., 2022; Hernando-Arrese and Rasch, 2022), mineral mining (see Rasch, 2012; Rasch and Köhne, 2013; Landeo, 2017; Malik, Diduck and Patel, 2022; Dilay, 2022), sand mining (Szabo and Hegde, 2022), logging (Brosius, 1997), or oil extraction (Valladares and Boelens, 2017) and others such as irrigation, urbanization, food production, etcetera (see Roth et al., 2014; Roth et. al., 2018), which all split communities in myriad, complex ways.

In this discussion I reflect on four important aspects of how the interactions between place, identity and power shape each other in their transformations. First, I look at how participation and consensus-building function as a power mechanism. Second, I reflect on the relation between Sense of Place and Sense of Belonging in the context of fragmentation of place-based identities. Third, I elaborate on the implications of the strategic mobilization of fluid and multiplex identities. And, fourth, I look at the politics of place and the place of politics.

5.2.1 Participation and consensus building as power mechanisms

In Chungthang it was the overbearing authority of the influential elderly (in Nepali called the *thulo-thala*), that is, the aged 'local' and 'public' Lepchas, to decide for the entire community over the Teesta Stage III anti-dam concerns raised by younger Lepcha youths of the GPU. *Thulo-thala* in Chungthang are the wealthy and landed village heads, political leaders and representatives, who aligned with the nationalistic vision of viewing dam-building as development. Differently, in Lachung and Lachen, decisions for the community were made by the collective Dzumsa members resorting to *Chya* and *Ma-Chya*, challenging the government of Sikkim and dis-aligning with their elected representative who supported such development. Thereby they successfully blocked the entry of large dam development and power companies in their region. Next, in Dzongu, it was the party-based elected political leaders (MLAs and Panchayats) deciding for the people of Dzongu. In how far do these decisions made by the powerful, like *thula-thalas*, Dzumsa collectives, and political leaders and panchayats, reflect real grassroot level consultation? Is there meaningful and democratic participation by all in decision-making processes regarding hydropower dams?

The arenas of decision making are traversed by power. First, there are obviously the powerful agents of hydropower development, such as the GoS, GoI, power companies and associated bureaucrats, mostly non-BL's in Sikkim's case. Next, there are the powerful

stakeholders with vested economic interest who support such development, such as the tribal elites of North Sikkim itself -- those with hereditary land, large landownership, holding village titles and being elected in powerful electoral positions in the Panchayats and Sikkim Legislative Assembly – in short the *thulo-thala* of North Sikkim. Often these indigenous tribal elites work in collaboration with the powerful agents of the hydropower development regime. Therefore, at public hearings conducted by Panchayats or Dzumsa, truly powerful arenas, these tribal elites basically decide for the entire community. Community participation is limited to a consent of yes and no. In the cases where members and(or) communities expressed a 'no', such as those raised by youth (like in the case of Chungthang) or by small groups of concerned people like the Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) members, they are outflanked or dissed aside. For the powerful village heads and elites expressing resistance or ambiguity, the entire state machinery works in tandem to assure, placate and cajole them to saying 'yes' – in other words, a consent is already manufactured or engineered, which is then mobilized at public hearings by the local and public tribal elites.

Therefore, when Sikkim's communities at the grassroot level decide whether or not projects are to be allowed in their place, the faith of the project has often already been decided by their elite and powerful heads. When they enter decision making arenas, consent for either yes or no are already manufactured. In this way, there is hardly any meaningful participation. Inviting citizens' opinions, like informing them well in advance and all through the process, can be a legitimate step toward their more serious participation. But if consulting them is not combined with other modes of participation, it directly deprives them from sharing and taking into account their concerns, inputs and ideas in the developmental process. In Sikkim, the most frequent, or rather the only method used for consulting the public are the public hearings often organized by the elected village leaders (or the *Gram Sabhas*) or informal meeting organized by non-elected members of communities. When powerholders such as elected village heads, tribal elites or politicians restrict and limit the input of the public solely to this level, participation remains what Arnstein (1996:219) once has referred to as a "window-dressing ritual". It is common to find that people are primarily perceived as 'statistical abstractions', and participation is measured by how many people can be made to attend public hearings and give their 'yes' or 'no'. What powerholders achieve is the evidence that they have gone through the required motions of involving and consulting the local public affected by development interventions. In Sikkim, the socio-political history that categorizes and separates communities and families as insider/outsider, public/non-public and local/non-local further limits participation processes to a few. Next, even with these categories of local and public, we see that a particular categorization is permeated by cultural politics which results for many in not guaranteeing their participation. Participation ends up as window dressing rituals.

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5.2.2 Fractured territorial sense of place that either enables or constraints sense of belonging

I have explained how Sikkim, a former Kingdom till 1975, has guarded and made citizenship (Sikkimese Subject, or Certificate of Identification) very difficult for outsiders. The latter assert their Sikkimese identity otherwise. But in dam contestations, Sikkimese identity or Sikkimese sense of place does not make people mobilize uniformly or massively. Defense of place against large dams is therefore territorially fragmented. While the socio-political history did result in territorial identities and territorial struggles, the coalescing of a Sikkimese collective identity to challenge outside development interventions or outside desecration of Sikkim's sacred landscapes is missing.

Rather than witnessing a collective sense of place (SoP), the latter has shrunk into particular places and territories. People's respective territories are their immediate sites of resistance and protest – they do not move beyond their designated territory. We see that whether it is Chungthang, or Lachen and Lachung, or Dzongu – the Lepchas and Bhutia (Lachungpas and Lachenpas) all have their own distinct ways of operating exclusionary practices and norms to establish place-based or territorial insider-outsiderness to control decision making processes. These hamper the formation and mutual articulations of sense of belonging (SoB). As exercises of power (as we have conceptualized in Chapter 3), such practices and norms operate at two levels. First, when one encounters the 'other' (in the process of othering some selected groups or communities) and has to eliminate them from the decision processes. Second, as a disciplinary form of control and influence amongst and within themselves. Local collectives and in particular their leadership control decision-making through using locally distinct expressions of identities, in order to guarantee the manufacturing of consent.

In Chungthang, both the non-public/non-local 'others' as well as local but non-public Bhutias are not allowed meaningful involvement in the social everyday lifeworld's of the Lepchas. The local and public Lepchas – the powerful elites – dictate terms and use their ancestral connection to the place of residence to restrict recognition and involvement of all those not having ancestral connection within Chungthang GPU, i.e. their specific territorial, place-based identity. This exclusionary practice constraints the formation of SoB to the place, community and people. Valued involvement in the community is cut off for some, making them distant and reinforcing their othering. But also some of the younger and educated Lepchas with ancestral links and rooted SoB are often disciplined into a subordinate position and a 'culture of silence' by their own Lepcha leaders.

In Lachung and Lachen, the practices mobilized and enforced by Dzumsa unfolds in two ways. While non-Dzumsa members are automatically excluded as outsiders and do not even count, for the insider Lachenpas and Lachungpas, the idea behind social boycott

and removal from Dzumsa membership threatens people's involvement in the community. Hence it poses a threat to their existence and survival outside the social system of Dzumsa. The vernacular statecraft of *Chya* and *Mah-Chya* are collective acts and cannot be undertaken by individuals – it asks for a community's full involvement in the socio-religious act. So belonging is double-edged: some do not get to belong and cannot participate; some belong and cannot afford to not participate. Inside-outsiderness is mobilized both by cutting off as well as by imposing valued involvement – in either way, minority voices never find space – be it for dams or anti-dam. The power of the collective, pro-dams like in the case of Dzongu (before the shift in the position of the elected representatives), or anti-dams in the case of Lachen Lachung, either reinforces the afore-mentioned culture of silence or drowns resistance by those not representative of the collective.

As I have shown in Chapter 4 however, pro-dam and anti-dam positions are evolving, in close interaction with associated identity politics and political power plays. Therefore, dam conflict does not reflect or highlight only a shrinking SoP and fragmented place-based struggles. The region also sees, simultaneously, a building-up and expansion of SoP that brings people together to these places of struggle. As a researcher I may not always experience or perceive SoP by simply having myself and examining others' lived experiences in the place of concern. SoP is evolving in a rapidly globalized context, interacting with various new mediums, actors and transforming structures, which may wake up our senses of place, senses for place and senses in place.

5.2.3 The strategic mobilization of fluid and multiplex identities

Given the socio-political history of the Sikkim and its frontier district regions like North Sikkim, it is evident that these distant highland mountain regions were ruptured at different historical periods. The dynamic (and often violent) contact of its inhabitants with the alien 'other', like the British, Indian government and various policies, has imposed control over their traditional ways of living. Identities have been, and continue to be, constructed or affirmed, asserted or negotiated, in contact with the others. Therefore, identities are not static, they are fluid. Further, there is not one identity but multiple, complex (multiplex) identities that are strategically mobilized or de-mobilized.

All the three study areas highlight this. In the regions of Lachung and Lachen, where the presence of the Indian Army and the controlling of border was felt the most and impacted their herder lives and living, we saw the reassertion of place-specific Lachungpas and Lachenpas identities. Here we can go back to the first successful anti-dam project that Sikkim witnessed in 1997 – the cancellation of 30 MW Rathong Chu HEP in West Sikkim. The protest was led by Buddhist Bhutia and Lepcha monks, and grounded on the protection of their Buddhist sacred landscape and waterscapes associated with the

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Buddhist monastery and festivals. The success in Lachen and Lachung was due to *Chya* and *Ma-Chya* practices that were aggressively conducted by insiders, the Lachenpas and Lachungpas protectors of their place. This place-based, territorial identity of the Bhutias of only Lachung and Lachen, recognized, sustained and collectively mobilized by their traditional Dzumsa, is what empowered them and makes them heard. Meanwhile, North Sikkim is also a Buddhist sacred landscape but its mobilization was not directly based on religious or cultural grounds; it was rather founded on fragmented territorial places and site-particular spaces. Why not appeal using their Bhutia-ness or more specifically their Buddhist-ness to garner support from across North Sikkim or Sikkim or even out of Sikkim? Why not call for protection of Lachung and Lachen the way Dzongu Lepchas do? The Lachenpas/Lachungpas anti-dam struggle, which never caught public attention nor media attention and yet succeeded, was firmly grounded on their respective territory or place: Lachen and Lachung. Lachung and Lachen are markers of their identities – being Lachenpas or Lachungpas benefits them, distinguishes them from other Bhutias. They will cease being Lachungpas and Lachenpas without Lachen and Lachung. Hence grounding their distinction through a particular geographical area, invoking their rooted history, they politicize their collective identity via the Dzumsa. And vice-versa, this reinforces the power of Dzongu via their collective identity – neither of the two can do without the other. This also deeply relates to political consciousness. Strategically they protect their distinctness and their distinct system, which gives recognition to their being Lachungpas and Lachenpas, and enables their collective territorial recognition and defense against undesired interventions.

Place, culture and identity are, indeed, closely connected, but in manifold and complex ways. And always these notions are linked through power and imbued with power. As I have explained, all of my cases bear witness to this. For instance, the Lepchas call themselves Rong (a Lepcha word meaning ravine-folk or the dwellers of the valley) and they define themselves by their association with the sacred mountain Kanchenjunga. This mountain is regarded as the source of their knowledge, culture, religion, wealth and resources, and place of their origin. As I have explained, being Lepcha is an already protected indigenous tribal community in Sikkim, but not all Lepcha-inhabited places are protected. So, unequal geographies lead to unequal identities and powers. And place-making is not neutral. For instance, Dzongu as the bastion of Lepchas, and 'Dzongu Lepchas' as distinct from the Lepchas of North Sikkim, associate with identities that are strategically confirmed and reinforced.

The chapters show how this cultural politics, in which identity and belonging are not simply rooted and historically grown but mostly also politically enacted, is fundamental to understand pro-dam and anti-dam positioning. Apart from Dzongu (protected

under Notification 3069) and Lachen/Lachen (protected by Dzumsa, since Dzumsas can make their own rules), all other parts of North Sikkim despite being 'safeguarded' for its indigenous BL population remains vulnerable, porous and open to any external entry. An illustration is the successful construction of two dams along the administrative boundaries of Dzongu – while Lepchas of Dzongu fight tooth and nail to stop entry of dam fully inside Dzongu. Mobilizing identity, ethnicity, SoP and SoB, then, are strategic and political instruments to defend territory. As a clear example, because of acclaimed territorial identity, the Dzongu Lepcha, grounded on Dzongu identity, have delayed and made the construction of Teesta IV difficult.

Therefore place informs identities. But place-based identities are saturated with and through power. These varied and power-laden identities are backed by differing ideologies and legitimization, and may pose differing objectives and interests. All the three cases show how power and powerlessness are related to various constructions of identities that build on imaginaries of insiders and outsiders, inclusion and exclusion, rootedness and political strategy.

5.2.4 The politics of place and the place of politics

Throughout my dissertation it has become clear that, in Sikkim, places themselves are the focus of political conflict and contestation in many ways. Dams are political and dam conflicts arise because places are never neutral entities with undisputed objective meanings. Large dam interventions put particular places at the core of local, national and often regional or even global attention. They trigger contestations over the meaning of place, its values, understandings, plural ontological orderings, and what that place and its natural resources offer differently to different human groups, and to different nonhuman communities. Altogether, the plural and conflicting options for, choices regarding, and interpretations of place, and its multiple connected meanings and identities, sets the stage for politics. And it asks for the place of politics.

Politics operate in and through places: how the particular entwinement of social and economic processes in different places can produce different policies and political strategies; and how power is distributed and exercised within communities. The importance of place comes not from any intrinsic environmental influence, but from the distinctive configurations of social relations that exist in particular places. The discursive understandings of 'place' that people map on to these social configurations can influence both the power relations within localities and the way in which residents engage politically with the wider world.

As the three cases show, place is inherently politicized, because it is caught between forces both from within and from outside, and is acted upon by diverse players with

5

diverse appeals and interests. As Sikkim dam development conflicts around particular places show, to talk about a politics of place entails acknowledging that political actions are always place-based. To this respect, Harvey argued that "it is only when relationality connects to the absolute spaces and times of material and social life that politics comes alive. To neglect that connectivity is to court political irrelevance" (2006: 293). An alienating sameness and globalizing 'placelessness', as is often assumed in modernist/modernizing discourses, actively denies vernacular folkways of being in, thinking with, constructing, and belonging to particular place. Therefore, I have shown how the multiplicity of place in Sikkim dam struggles provides a context for the formation of political identities and the identification of political interests. In all cases, political activity has been organized and mobilized around place, through power and place-based identity constructions. Place-power-identity configurations were basic to insider-outsider constructions and local-nonlocal categorizations; in all conflicts issues as homeland understandings and territorial defenses were colored by the politics of place defining the place of politics.

5.3 Revisiting positionality and methodology

Fieldwork is a dialogical process in which the research situation or research encounter is structured by both the researcher and the subject group or community being researched (England, 1994). Therefore, reflexivity is critical to the conduct of fieldwork; it induces self-discovery and can lead to insights and new hypotheses about the research questions. As I will explain, throughout the years, these new insights have fundamentally marked the changing course of my research.

Dams, and dam development as a politically sensitive topic and issue in Sikkim, had already been mentioned by scholars in a number of studies. But fundamental insights and research on the everyday and culturally-laden politics of (non)-contestation of hydropower development were still in its infancy, and the connected notions of place, identity and power interlinking hydropower development to territorialization processes were new. Trying to fill this gap has not been an easy endeavor. When I began my fieldwork in early 2016, dams and dam related issues were still controversial, mired in extreme suspicion and distrust against the inquirer by everyone – bureaucrats, government officials, political leaders, activists, power companies, community people and civil society organizations.

Therefore, research in dams would not have been possible without first intimating my extended family in Sikkim. It's important to recall my 78-year-old Sikkimese grandmother's advice to me before starting my field work in North Sikkim. She had cautioned me saying, "If anyone asks you where you are from, just say you are from Sikkim. Say you are a Sikkimese. And stop speaking like a Nepali. Speak like us. What may take 10 minutes to

do, may take days for those from 'WB' [indicating West Bengal]." This was my first tryst to the notions of insider-outsider in Sikkim, where being from West Bengal – my home state that neighbors Sikkim – makes one an instant outsider, a non-Sikkimese.

Even though I was not researching dams in the technical aspect, because of the contentious nature of dams and dam issues, I had anticipated and feared administrative hurdles entering North Sikkim whilst declaring the purpose of my visit. I stated myself as a 'student' pursuing PhD research applying for an official Government permit to stay and conduct research in Chungthang GPU where Sikkim's most controversial dam, Teesta Stage III, was under construction. To my surprise, after being informally interviewed for over an hour by the highest-ranking GoS bureaucrat (on the topic, nature, questions, objectives of my research), I was granted my permit to investigate in Chungthang GPU, including the surrounding areas of Lachung and Lachen – a permit that was to be renewed monthly. This of course, on the assurance that the findings be shared with his office. He claimed he was intrigued by my thematic concept of Sense of Place, and curious to understand how people-place connections come into being in dam affected areas. But behind informal negotiations, I believe two factors played a crucial part. First, I could not claim being Sikkimese like my grandmother had instructed, but being from Darjeeling had initiated a long discussion about Darjeeling and establishing our familial ties with families scattered in Sikkim-Darjeeling – establishing my authenticity and posing me as a non-threat. Second, my conscious use of the term 'student' and not heavy loaded terms like 'researcher' or 'PhD scholar' (the common term used in the region) projected me as a learner who did not know anything – different from an investigator with presumably hidden agendas. Both projected me as a neutral outsider without any vested interest. Here I must point out that affiliation to universities, even foreign universities, carried no weight.

5.3.1 Hydropower dams: Building trust

While I secured an official permit to North Sikkim, entry to Chungthang was facilitated by a resident of Lachung – my Sikkimese Aunty's friend – who fixed my accommodation in Chungthang, a children's homestay, in their term 'a safe and secure house'. Not in a house of anti-dam activists, or a comfortable luxury hotel, or a homestay affiliated to rich powerful people. The choice of a children's homestay, with school-going children ranging from 6 years old to 14 years old, run by a local Lepcha family, proved ideal for detaching myself from possible affiliations or labels of pro-dam or anti-dam supporter households. My host family was run by Akku (Uncle) – a retired Indian Army soldier, Ani (Aunty) a cook at a local primary hospital, two sons (one a voluntary schoolteacher and the other seeking employment) and about 12 paying guest children from distant villages going to school in Chungthang. While this entry established me as someone already associated with a 'local'

5

of the place, giving me a sense of protection, this also made visible my non-affiliation to powerful institutions (an NGO, luxury hotel, or rich local people's house), which made me vulnerable. So on the one hand, I felt a sense of power (or emerging insiderness) being affiliated to a local host family, and on the other, I also felt powerless (as an outsider) being without a powerful contact. This established my neutrality in Chungthang GPU, helping me 'hang out' without the tag of pro-dam or anti-dam inquirer, but it was far from gaining trust.

Even though I gained easy administrative permit and entry into my first study site – Chungthang GPU, the distrust and suspicion that dams evoked was palpable. Any inquiry or mention of Teesta Stage III or power company or GoS, was almost a taboo in the initial phases of my field work. An excerpt from my field notes (field diary) for April 2016 says, "my last month in Chungthang – a cold evening, and we sat around the fire chatting, singing and drinking. I decided to broach the dam topic since we were in a group hoping for an informal group discussion. Why not? We have been friends for six long months – we have shared meals, drinks and time. But before I realized what happened, one by one, the group of eight under different pretext called it a night and went home. I realized just how sensitive talks on dams were when I found myself sitting by the dancing warm live fire – all alone." Of course between 2016 and now much has changed and today, mentioning dams no longer invokes the kind of fear and suspicion that it did before the GoS changed. Trust building is/was not an easy process – it is/was traversed by power. The choice of ethnography proved helpful.

5.3.2 The insider-outsider conundrum: negotiating multiple identities

Despite my condition as being both an outsider and an insider researcher, familiar with the geography and social relationships, this investigation certainly is no 'backyard' research (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992). There are indeed many similarities and commonalities with my regional homebase, but also stark differences. The relative insider-outsider status (neither complete insider nor complete outsider) enabled me to disclose information and see first-hand the workings and imbalances of power between outsider inquirers and research subjects. My mixed background and my multiple identities, including my gender, facilitated access to the region, access to people's lives and interaction with them – but not instantly. It evolved during my prolonged stay in the field during which I became even more conscious about which identity to use and where – playing with what Holmes (2020:7) called the researcher's ability to "consciously manipulate their positionality". I have paid special attention to these multiple identities, acknowledging the advantages and disadvantages that may have far-reaching implications for the process of data gathering and its interpretation.

What does it mean to be an insider or an outsider or both or none, to the groups and individuals I have interacted with in Sikkim? It has commonly been assumed that

being an insider means easy access, the ability to ask more meaningful questions and read non-verbal cues, and most importantly, be able to project a more truthful, authentic understanding of the culture under study. But on the other hand, insiders have been accused of being inherently biased, and too close to the culture to be curious enough to raise provocative questions (Merriam et al., 2001). As an outsider – a non-local, a non-public, not Sikkimese – enabled me to create space for many participants to voice their stories, opinions and experiences with regard to hydropower development - which they could not articulate in front of the influential neighbors or the village majoritarianism. My findings reflect many of these unheard and unarticulated, minority voices, which makes my work critical – and therefore raises some ethical and moral dilemma. Being an outsider had its own consequences too.

As researchers, we can be insiders or outsiders or both to a particular community of research participants at many different levels and at different times (Merriam et al., 2001). At various points during the research, I was an insider, outsider, both insider and outsider. And yet one is neither a full insider nor a full outsider and I had to work around the periphery of relative insider-outsiderness. Thereby I had to cope with what Nayaran pointed at, that "two halves cannot adequately account for the complexity of an identity in which multiple countries, regions, religions and classes may come together" (Narayan, 1993:673). Factors such as education, gender, sexual orientation, class, race, or sheer duration of contacts may at different times outweigh the cultural identity we associate with insider or outsider status. That is indeed the case here; in multiple ways my multiple backgrounds and the research subjects' multiple identities would put a stronger weight on our interactions than just the insider/outsider binary.

Gender is one such important identifiers; being a female in a male's world. Dams are deeply masculine structures – and everywhere one encounters with males – even when one inquires with women, one is directed to a male, from the politicians to village leaders to drivers. Being female inquiring about these masculine structures and topic fascinated many. Overall, they were sympathetic that some woman from 'Darjeeling' had come all the way to study dam issues. My gender played some role in facilitating and establishing communication and travels across the mountain roads. Being a woman, projected me as non-threat, gaining some kind of sympathetic attitude towards me.

These researcher identities, gender, education, birthplace, class, etcetera, therefore have implications, and influence the information I got, the people I could talk to, the spaces that were opened or closed. Such identities are both relatively fixed and fluid – both at the same time. It is being and becoming. It works and does not, also depending on whom I would interact with. Like Baviskar (1995:88) has said, "identity is not static; it is continually made and unmade in interaction with different others – this dialectic is not a politically

5

neutral one". Identity is a relational 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.

5.3.3 *My own search for answers: Reciprocity and 'wanna-be-insider'*

My multiple identities empowered and privileged me with access to the restricted areas; into the homes of many, provided with data by many. Many, particularly women, offering their sense of gratitude and relief for interviewing them, thanking me for being 'their voice' and instructing me to 'carry their stories' to as far as possible. But not all data can be used. Where these identities privileged me, it also constrained me. How to accommodate requests by key anti-dam activists like, "don't write something that's unfavorable to the movement. If it can't help the movement, be considerate", or "I will tell you everything, but these should not go in your transcript". For such reasons Cresswell and Cresswell (2018:152) would warn against 'going native'. It is easy to support and embrace the perspectives of participants in a study. In qualitative studies, this may mean taking sides in such a sense that the research only discusses the results that place the participants in a favorable light. In quantitative research, it may mean disregarding data that prove or disprove personal hypotheses that the researcher may hold. It is academically dishonest to cast the results in a favorable light to the participants' or researchers' inclinations. A constant dilemma I was faced with concerns what voices I should include and what voices I should have excluded. The work of Baviskar (1995:15) rings, "The greater the intimacy, the greater the danger of betrayal. I was treated with warmth, openness and generosity by my friends in the Andolan and the Sangath. How could I pay them back with criticism? Who would trust me again? Who should I be true to – my friends or some of secure intellectual ambition? My privileged position as an academic allows me the luxury of critical evaluation; they are defending their life" and their place.

My prolonged stay in North Sikkim, the multiplex of identities I operated with and my relative outsider-insiderness in the region, gave me the luxury to indulge in additional intellectual pursuit because I was relatively free to observe, document and articulate many burning issues that inhabitants could not express – issues directly tied to their places, identities and scared sites. Living in a place where people were talking about place-based conflict in 'hush' matter, propelled me into the path of the 'scholar activist' (Borras and Franco, 2023) while in the field. Apart from my academic commitments, I wrote two popular opinion pieces in the state's leading newspaper, Sikkim Express, and on a popular online news portal, The Darjeeling Chronicle. In these I made use of the theoretical concepts and historical events to describe the gradual cultural and place appropriation of these highland communities, and their sacred sites scattered across North Sikkim in the garb of national security and again, development. This was not completely my own endeavor – it was their

voice, and their stories of struggle which I articulated, as a small attempt to give back to the community for their kindness – writing and highlighting about issues not usually written about in Sikkim. And in the process, to be, think and feel like the 'insiders' who raised these issues with me behind closed doors. These opinion pieces including my research and findings are however no 'activist research' (see Hale, 2006:97) that often employs "methods through which we affirm a political alignment with an organized group of people in struggle and allow dialogue with them to shape each phase of the process, from conception of the research topic to data collection to verification and dissemination of the results". Rather, given my relative positionings, they are my attempts of 'cultural critique' (of the region and people I am relatively familiar with) that Hale (2006:100) describes as "intellectual production uncompromised by the inevitable negotiations and contradictions that these broader political struggles entail".

Finally, as mentioned earlier, research therefore is not an outcome but a process that enables the researcher with a multitude of learning, un-learning and re-learning opportunities – bringing about transformative learning in some. During the course of research, I too underwent self-discovery and re-learning not only as a researcher but also a conscious local person, woman, citizen, of the Sikkim-Darjeeling Himalaya, with several take-home lessons for my home district of Darjeeling in the state of West Bengal and the people's statehood struggle therein. Being from a region that has time and again erupted in violent agitation demanding separation from the state government of West Bengal, where issues of 'development' [*bikash*], 'land' [*maato*], place [*jaga*], power and identity [*chinhari*], have dominated the agitation discourses and been at the crux of recurrent demand; my research on the anti-dam struggles of the Lepchas and Bhutias has allowed me the privilege to explore, understand and analyze the deeper nuances of many of these loaded, complex academic concepts theoretically and its operation at various scales in the field. This also enabled me to extrapolate this process of getting to understand statehood struggle in my home district, as an advocate as well as a critique of our demand. The quest for research and understanding social issues that touch us, our lives and our environment thus continues.

5.4 Conclusions

Since the announcement of twenty nine additional new dams for Sikkim under the 50,000 MW India Hydroelectric Initiative, launched in 2003, this region witnessed the commissioning of seven large dams across the State (from 96 MW to 1200 MW) and several small dams (ranging from 3 MW to 12 MW). These have been undertaken by both private, state and central power entities. Sikkim also witnessed the cancellation of many dams, particularly in the North District of Sikkim, as well as its first colossal dam failure in the

state that completely washed away the state's largest HEP, the 1200 MW Teesta Stage III in Chungthang. From a 'culture of silence' observed among the majority of the population in Sikkim to rampant 'victimization' of those opposing government dams, Sikkim has witnessed all of it. The 'hydro-rush' that was much talked and written about since 2003 is not anymore blatantly visible but still ongoing. Though not so openly promoted and facilitated by the State, large dams and building plans are still there – slowly, silently and steadily expanding across Sikkim, now with several small, mini and micro dams as well. This makes research such as mine continuing to be relevant and needed. Most of the hydropower development accounts and the overall narration of Sikkim's mega hydraulic infrastructure discourse has been from above – an "eagle's eye approach" (see Gyawali and Thompson, 2016). There, the problem is defined from the high perches of powerful positions and institutions. This thesis has provided another narrative, from below – taking a "toads eye approach" (Ibid.), to figure out what is happening on the ground. From the three case studies and the various ways each of these cases were woven with theoretical concepts I draw the following conclusions.

First, *the socio-political and historical context of Sikkim profoundly influences and colors the differential responses to external development interventions.* This gives rise to specific sites and identities that affect the contestations and evolving dynamics of hydropower development projects in Sikkim. Without in-depth understanding of historical context in which the present hydropower development is situated, it is impossible to understand the different responses of people, different social relations and unique histories of place and its people. The actions of place-making, place-meaning, place-marking and defense of place are all imbued and shaped by this historical context, in which the places and people have evolved together. Therefore, responses to hydropower development are influenced by the histories and grounded dynamics of the place that gives rise to Sikkim's multiplex of identities and claims that privilege one community over the other.

Second, *places are strategic and exclusionary social constructions. 'Place' deeply matters but not for everyone in the same way, constituting highly diverse fields of power.* Places are significant as they are not only markers of identities and territories but also determine the historical continuity of communities such as the Lepchas and Bhutia-Lachungpas and Lachenpas of North Sikkim. With the historical context in which specific place and specific communities are embedded, this gives rise to rooted ancestral claims and distinct sites of resistance as place-markers of anti-dams or pro-dams. This place rootedness enables the Lepcha-Butia communities to engage in place-politics, not privileged to other Sikkimese communities like Sikkim's Nepalis, Biharis, or Tibetans. Specific territories or places are imbued with place-meanings, place history, place-attachment and place-identity that can respectively pull the Lepchas and Bhutias-Lachungpas and Lachenpas to generate

movements. This means that, for example, Dzongu, and Lachen and Lachung, are today place-markers of anti-dam movements. The non-BL others can at the least engage in politics but not (strong) place-politics because they do not have a single place from where to generate movements nor lay ancestral claims. The others therefore suffer from what Relph calls 'placelessness'.

Third, *identities of people and of places are not fixed: they are fluid, emerging and malleable, and therefore differential with respect to triggering collective action.* Identities are not always rooted to land or territory. In confrontations, commonly, they rather are strategic political constructs and actions that serve to defend vis-à-vis outsiders and 'others', or to protect or project specific dam claims. Moreover, it is not just any identity but rather specific identities at specific points in time and context are politicized to bring about transformative collection action. These identities are often functionalized in anti-dam promotion and contestations.

Fourth, *in Sikkim, 'dams' are definitely not a 'Lepcha thing' as they are made to be.* Large dam development certainly has deeply affected the autochthonous Lepchas, which has raised strong research and media attention. This attention is importantly related to their indigenous, rooted, ancestral place-based connections with their homeland area. Lepchas strongly identify and relate with several places across Sikkim, through their folklores, mythical stories, memories and claims. The same goes for the Bhutia communities across Sikkim. However, just as Lepchas and Bhutias are affected by dams, others population and ethnic groups are so too. My research shows how each have their own particular histories and relationships with dam intervention projects, but the voices of 'the others' have not been heard or documented.

Fifth, *rooted sense of place and sense of belonging do not automatically translate into the defense of place in tribal indigenous communities.* When confronted with society's powerful elites, Sikkim's tribal communities are often fractured into different factions. Communities and families also have a multitude of diverse and sometimes diverging identities and interests, even manifested in one and the same person, which makes that sense of place (SOP) and sense of belonging (SOB) are not the only drivers for reactions and responses against hydropower dam development and other largescale interventions. The absence of a collective sense of belonging weakens overall people-place relations, thereby weakening 'defense of place'.

Sixth, *dam development is definitely not some technically driven neutral intervention but a power laden, carefully planned political 'win-lose process'.* They are designed and implemented for profiting. As long as Sikkim remains under the fiscal and financial dependance of the Center (i.e. the Government of India), mega and large dam development will continue to be planned, constructed and commissioned in the state, where the Center

5

as the power-choreographer decides when and where and by whom hydroelectric power is to be developed. But hydropower development is a threat to the survival of several of the tribal communities. Dam conflicts in Sikkim, therefore, in many cases are not (just) about compensation or displacement but about the aggressive encroaching of the protected sacred indigenous spaces, places and territories of North Sikkim. In different ways also the non-tribal communities often feel threatened. This paranoia will also continue triggering myriad forms of responses and resistances.

Seventh, *not only the design, building and implementation of large dam complexes by development interventions but also the corresponding, often paradoxical responses are actively shaped by contradictory, powerful forces.* Dams in Sikkim have invoked mixed responses, both individually and at community level. Some responses are based on free will or self-volition and others under the influence of diverse forms of power, manifesting a complex panorama of grey shades in between. A careful toad's eye approach is required to observe and understand the responses and the mechanisms which invoke such responses. Even collective community level actions are not easy to mobilize and require the thrust of power forces, be it the state government, influential institutions like the Dzumsas that deploy powerful practices like *Chya* and *Ma-Chya*, or complex electoral politics. Dam development is deeply contested in many places across Sikkim but not in even or uniform ways.

Given these, Sikkim and its government is therefore in urgent need to (re)evaluate its ambitious aspirations and objectives to secure self-reliance and economic development largely from the perceived revenues generated from hydropower development. Large dams are no simple solutions to regional development. Sikkim is still in a dam building spree on its pristine headwaters, be it large, small, mini and micro dams. Nevertheless, other avenues must be explored for sustainable economic growth and thereby a course of development that is really meaningful, participatory, economically feasible to the people of Sikkim. It is a quest to defend the livelihoods and cultures of the minority indigenous, tribal highland communities, but also to give profound and meaningful shape to a development process that causes no negative externalities to the other communities in Sikkim. Sikkim is a rich biodiversity hotspot in the Eastern Himalaya with unique species of flora and fauna; its highland communities have their distinct history and ways of living; and the region is prone to recurring natural calamities – such core factors make that large dam development endeavors run counter to the most basic forms of socio-ecological integrity and environmental justice.

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Annex 1: List of publications

Refereed Publications

Dukpa, R.D.; Joshi, D.; Boelens, R. Hydropower development and the meaning of place. Multi-ethnic hydropower struggles in Sikkim, India. Geoforum 2018, 89, 60–72.

Dukpa, R.D.; Joshi, D.; Boelens, R. Contesting Hydropower dams in the Eastern Himalaya: The Cultural Politics of Identity, Territory and Self-Governance Institutions in Sikkim, India. Water 2019, 11, 412.

Dukpa, R.D.; Hoogesteger, J.; Veldwisch, G.J.; Boelens, R. Hydropower Politics in Northeast India: Dam Development Contestations, Electoral Politics and Power Reconfigurations in Sikkim. Water 2024, 16, 1061.

Popular Publications

'The Plague of Burrowing Field-mice (Uttane-Musa) in the Sikkim- Darjeeling Hills - A Time-bomb Ticks', SIKKIM EXPRESS, Gangtok, 6 February 2022 (print and online edition). Available online: https://tinyurl.com/4d3thxsy

'If "I am Gurudongmar", About Time I am Protected', SIKKIM EXPRESS, Gangtok, 15.05. 2023 (print and online edition).

What's In A Name: Historical, Religious And Cultural Appropriation Underway In North Sikkim – Are You Even Aware? Available online: https://tinyurl.com/mvba5bax

Annex 2: WASS Training and supervision plan

Rinchu Doma Dukpa

Wageningen School of Social Sciences (WASS)

Completed Training and Supervision Plan

Name of the learning activity	Department/Institute	Year	ECTS*
A) Project related competences			
A1 Managing a research project			
WASS Introduction Course	WASS	2015	1
Writing PhD Research Proposal	WRM/WASS	2015	6
CERES Basic Training Course	CERES	2015	12
'*The Grand Dam Flip in Dzongu – Resistance or Power (Re)configuration?*'	National Conference on 'Tribes, State and the Environment: Contemporary Research from India's North East,' India	2023	1
'*Hydropower Development Contestation in Sikkim: Whose "Environmental" Justice?*'	Innsbruck International Mountain Conference, Austria	2022	1
'*Understanding Hydropower Development Conflict and Cooperation in North Sikkim: The Epic Case of interdisciplinarity*'	International Seminar on 'Eastern Himalaya: Exploring Multi and Interdisciplinary Research Approaches,' India	2022	1
'*A sense of place or place of sense? A curious case of the Teesta Stage III Hydropower Project*'	International Conference on 'Climate Change Policies and Politics' under 'Flooding and water related vulnerability', The Netherlands	2016	1
Summer School on "Environmental Justice and Water Governance in the Eastern Himalaya", held in India.	Sikkim University, India & Wageningen University, The Netherlands	2015	1.7
A2 Integrating research in the corresponding discipline			
New perspectives on the urban and rural: spatial thinking in the social sciences.	WASS	2015	4
Systematic approaches to reviewing literature.	WASS	2015	3
B) General research related competences			
B1 Placing research in a broader scientific context			
Qualitative Data Analysis for Development Research	CERES	2015	2
A Practical course on the Methodology of fieldwork	CERES	2015	2
Qualitative Methodology and Economics	CERES	2015	1.5

Name of the learning activity	Department/Institute	Year	ECTS*
B2 Placing research in a Societal context			
The Plague of Burrowing Field-mice (*Uttane-Musa*) in the Sikkim- Darjeeling Hills - A Time-bomb Ticks'	SIKKIM EXPRESS, Gangtok, India	2022	1
If "I am Gurudongmar", About Time I am Protected'	SIKKIM EXPRESS, Gangtok, India	2023	1
What's In A Name: Historical, Religious And Cultural Appropriation Underway In North Sikkim – Are You Even Aware?	The Darjeeling Chronicle	2017	1
C) Career related competences/personal development			
C1 Employing transferable skills in different domains/careers			
WASS PhD Council Member	WASS	2018, 2019	0.5
End Note Literacy Introduction/ Demonstration	WGS	2016	0.6
Prepared Rapporteur Report of Pani Satsang: From Conflict to Cooperation: Hydropower Development in Tista and Tamor Basins of the Eastern Himalayas	Organised by Sikkim University, India and Wageningen University, The Netherlands	2015	1
Participated in International "Pani Satsang: Alternative Hydropower Trajectories in Nepal: Policies, Institutional Modalities and Ground Realities"	NWO CCMCC CoCOON workshop, Nepal	2016	0,5
Special lecture on 'Dams, Politics and Environmental Justice'	Department of Political Science & Department of Education, Kishore Bharati Bhagnani Nivedita (Co-ed) College, West Bengal, India	2023	0.2
Special lecture on '"Water" on World Water Day'	Department of Geography & Department of Economics in collaboration with IQAC, Salesian College, Siliguri Campus, West Bengal, India	2022	0.2
Special lecture on 'Hydropower Development Contestations in Sikkim: Who's environmental justice are we talking about?'	Center of Himalayan Studies, University of North Bengal, West Bengal, India	2019	0.2
Brain Training	WGS	2017	0.3
Total			**38.5**

*One credit according to ECTS is on average equivalent to 28 hours of study load.

About the author

Rinchu D. Dukpa was born in Darjeeling, in the Himalayan regions of West Bengal, India. She trained as an economist at the Universities of Calcutta and Visva-Bharati, India; and then shifted into interdisciplinary research after acquiring a Master in Natural Resources Management from the University of Manitoba, Canada. Her earlier work was on food security issues in the Himalayan regions of Nepal with a focus on market value-chains of underutilised cereal crops. She also examined the Geographical Indication (GI) Status of Darjeeling tea and if GI-based tea brand security has also translated its commensurate benefits to workers. She currently holds the post of Assistant Professor in the Department of Economics, Rampurhat College, University of Burdwan.