

# **Watered Down? Civil Society Organizations and Hydropower Development in the Darjeeling and Sikkim regions, Eastern Himalaya: A comparative study**

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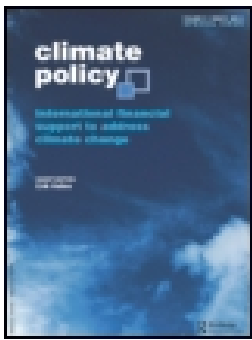
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# Watered down? Civil society organizations and hydropower development in the Darjeeling and Sikkim regions, Eastern Himalaya: A comparative study

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## ABSTRACT

Mitigating climate change is often framed as the ultimate collective action problem of this era and great emphasis is made on the need for approaches that foster 'cooperation' and 'consensus'. This paper argues that the irony of this rhetoric could not be more stark; climate policy framing is an exclusionary process, and climate mitigating interventions that are engineered essentially to address neoliberal economic concerns rather than environmental challenges are often the source of multiple new conflicts. In this regard, this paper shows how the response of local non governmental organisations (NGOs) to hydropower development in the Darjeeling region of West Bengal in the Eastern Himalayas bears evidence to Gramscian analyses of 'the manufacture of consent' between elite bourgeois actors – the state, formal civil society, political parties and the private sector. Such 'associational' unions are only occasionally interrupted, as in the case of the people's movement, Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) in North Sikkim. Finding a balance between resistance and enabling political space to think and act differently, the movement led to the cancellation of several hydropower projects put forward in the name of climate mitigation, and in the process, drew attention to political processes involved in the manufacture of consent. Using case studies from the Darjeeling and Sikkim regions, this paper distinguishes between Gramsci's vision of the political space of disruption vis-à-vis the covert agenda of climate consensus.

## Key policy insights

- A politics of consensus in relation to climate change is an outcome of, and in turn reiterates, a narrowing of distance between the state and civil society.
- Including civil society in climate policy decision making and implementation is considered positive and inclusive, however, it is important to note that civil society is not always and everywhere inclusive and transformative.
- Both at global and national levels, it is claimed that climate change interventions happen in an overall framework of participatory, inclusive environmental governance; in relation to hydropower development, we note that this is hardly the practice on the ground.

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Civil society; hydropower; political processes; climate change; NGOs; environmental governance

## Introduction

The culturally and ecologically diverse Eastern Himalayas region, considered climate-vulnerable, is currently also the target of ambitious hydropower projects. The dramatic comeback of large dams<sup>1</sup> producing hydropower as clean, green and climate-mitigating in global development marks a significant reversal in environmental policy from concerns over the social and environmental impacts of large dams as raised in the World Commission on Dams report produced in 2000 (Ahlers, Budds, Joshi, Merme, & Zwarteveen, 2015). Several studies have

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researched the social, economic and environmental outcomes of hydropower development through large dams, including in the locations discussed in this paper (Baruah, 2012; Goldman, 2001; Grumbine & Xu, 2011; Huber & Joshi, 2015; McDonald, Bosshard, & Brewer, 2009; Newell, 2017). This paper has a different focus. Viewed through the development framework of hydropower as a climate mitigating strategy, our analysis points to an overtly consensual approach to climate change policies and interventions. Here, environmental governance has allowed powerful players in the state, market and science community to come together and construct rhetorical claims of climate problems and solutions (Goldman, 2001; Gough & Shackley, 2001; Yates, 2012). In this paper, we explore how this practice of a manufacture of consent translates at a local governance level, demanding consensus from local elites – government, politicians and civil society. In this hegemony of consensual environmental governance, we also analyse how counter-hegemonic alternatives occasionally erupt and disrupt, re-politicize and re-democratize the consensual politics of climate strategies in line with Gramsci's (1971) vision. We do this by comparing and contrasting how local NGOs in the Darjeeling region of West Bengal, and an indigenous, organically evolved people's movement, the Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) in North Sikkim responded to state agendas of hydropower development along the Teesta river, which flows from Sikkim through the Darjeeling region in the Eastern Himalayas and onwards into Bangladesh.

Several researchers have questioned how globally-positioned *truths* about the environment and natural resources skillfully permeate climate discourse (Goldman, 2001; Swyngedouw, 2011, 2013). Goldman (2001, p. 194) has detailed how transnational financial and developmental institutions including the World Bank and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) have come together in a powerful alliance to construct the 'green development science' in which neocolonial conservationist ideas of enclosure and preservation, and neoliberal notions of market value and optimal resource allocation, find common cause. According to Swyngedouw (2011, p. 4), the positioning of climate change as an 'apocalyptic crisis' has helped re-boot capitalist growth; and obscure 'extraordinary socio-spatial heterogeneities and complexities ... to 'a universal singular ... commodity fetishism around CO<sub>2</sub>'.

Viewed through a climate lens, large dams producing hydropower can indeed be re-positioned as positive, based on combined principles of sustainability, development and economic growth. But several actors contest the 'truth' of supposedly win-win equations. Firstly, problems associated with large dams, i.e. submergence, resettlement and rehabilitation of displaced populations, and uneven distribution of costs and benefits, persist in current hydropower development interventions (Ansar, Flyvbjerg, Budzier, & Lunn, 2014, p. 4; Rao, 2006, p. 39). As McCully (1996) noted, water is renewable, yet dams are not. It is thus not unsurprising that hydropower development in the climate-vulnerable Himalayan regions is rife with controversies over their local impacts (Dharmadhikary, 2008; Pomeranz, 2009). Secondly, it appears that economic rather than environmental mandates drive hydropower development in several locations, including in India (Ahlers et al., 2015). Since the 2016 'opening up' of the power sector to private sector participation, the state seems to have obliged the demands by financial actors to unshackle the barriers inhibiting hydropower development.<sup>2</sup> Of the 262 dam (hydropower and irrigation) projects planned during the period between April 2007 to December 2012 in India, every single one was approved, and only two were sent for reformulation at the initial scoping stage (SANDRP, 2013). A rare audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India in 2016 noted that existing environmental clearance processes, particularly for hydropower projects, were fraught with serious violations, noncompliance and deficiencies (Singh & Dutta, 2016). Our field research findings, described below, correspond precisely to such deficiencies in the process of mitigating climate change through dam development. However, our focus is not on the social and environmental impacts of hydropower projects, rather, it is on the politics of climate consensus that seems to enable such development.

In a study analysing large dams across India, Duflo and Pande (2007, p. 1) had pointed out that 'Overall ... large dam construction in India is a marginally cost-effective investment with significant distributional implications, and has, in aggregate, increased poverty'. Nonetheless, in India's current liberalized policy setting, hydropower development is said to drive economic growth as well as energy security (FICCI-PwC, 2014). Regardless of a rather dismal environmental performance (see 2016 Comptroller and Auditor General report), the sector is positioned as greening the policy landscape. However, the rhetoric of such claims is evident in the contradictions between climate policies and strategies on the one hand, and hydropower development on the other. India's National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) speaks of the need to 'enhance ecological sustainability ... ensure stability, particularly of

the fragile Himalayan Ecosystem'. The term 'hydropower development' is conspicuously missing in the NAPCC text. On the other hand, State Action Plans for Climate Change (SAPCCs) for West Bengal and Sikkim, two Himalayan states with ongoing hydropower development, mention hydropower development, but largely in the context of enabling sustainable growth in mountain states. In the SAPCCs for both Sikkim and West Bengal, environmental concerns are reversed. The focus is not on how large dams might exacerbate climate change impacts, rather it is on how climate change impacts might threaten the viability and sustainability of hydropower projects.

Analysing the implementation of large dams for hydropower development in Sikkim and West Bengal we discuss what such developments signal for climate interventions, strategies and policies. Our findings draw attention to how the term 'climate' is conspicuously absent in the development of hydropower in Sikkim and West Bengal, even though hydropower development is otherwise at global and national levels positioned explicitly as a climate change mitigating strategy. We show how local NGOs who chose to contest the skillfully constructed green economic solution through hydropower development are coerced into silence, noting how resistance or even critique of such solutions is labelled in India as anti-national and anti-development (Sarma, 2014). Finally, we note how, in such coercive settings, people's movements un-shackled to development funds and instruments seem better able to critique hydropower development than formal, institutionalized NGOs. The distinction we make in this paper between NGOs and people's movements is not meant to vilify or glorify one above the other. Rather, our findings point to the different nature of challenges and risks of disagreeing with the state or a global neoliberal developmental agenda for those who function within and outside the system.

### The politics of climate change: consensual environmental governance

Drawing on Urbinati's writings (2003), Swyngedouw (2009, p. 608) explains how, in the current climate (pun intended), the very term 'governance' is reduced to its bare technicalities –

Governance entails ... coordinated activities appropriate to resolve some specific problems ... its recipients are not 'the people' as a collective political subject, but the 'population' that can be affected by global issues such as the environment, migration, or the use of natural resources.

In making prominent imminent, potentially worsening environmental challenges, climate policies have depoliticized the complexity of such challenges through a 'one quilted ... invocation of fear and danger', which masks different socio-ecological, – economic and – political contexts, as well as risks and challenges (Swyngedouw, 2011, p. 3).

In such a setting, 'the question [therefore] is no longer about bringing environmental issues into the domain of politics ... but rather about how to bring the political into the environment' (Swyngedouw, 2011, p. 2). The latter is the ideological mandate of civil society organisations (CSOs) – working to ensure 'citizen control of public life' (Cox, 1999, p. 27); critically engaging with state hierarchies, to 'keep the state accountable and effective' (Lewis, 2002, p. 571). India is especially acclaimed for its rich history of civil society movements and for action against environmental wrongs. A vibrant civil society can be traced to the country's colonial past, where both individuals and institutions worked to hold the colonial state accountable, challenged its undemocratic processes and effected social and political change (Berglund, 2009; Omvedt, 1994). Post independence, people's struggles against the state have been particularly prominent around big dams and displacement. According to Nayak (2010, p. 71), these pluralistic movements, functioning as 'coalitions, networks of organizations and actors' ... often 'funded and supported by diverse, trans-local interests and mandates' were key in 'struggle[s] against the state's (narrow) agenda of (economic) development through large dams'. In sum, 'environmental' concerns have been a common rallying point for a wide array of CSOs: community-based groups, social welfare organizations, non-profit institutions, social-action groups and movements, and academic, activist coalitions (Omvedt, 1993).

Civil society is certainly not a homogenous group, and neither are their actions and activities uniformly similar. Joy (2014) explains that there are CSOs who act on behalf of the state and those who take confrontational positions against the state and/or other powerful institutions such as the market, society, culture, religion, etc., to pursue transformational social change. And yet, the very existence and operation of formally organized CSOs, i.e. NGOs, is defined and dictated by official (state) norms in India and elsewhere. Ferguson (1990) speaks

of how the 'anti-politics' of *doing development* has historically and systematically disabled a political civil society. In India, all NGOs are (required to be) registered under a colonially-instituted (1860) Societies Registration Act. This Act, now considered as an Act of Parliament, puts all such registered NGOs under the purview of India's Ministry of Home Affairs. Only select NGOs are officially approved – to receive and use 'foreign' development funds. The Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) instituted by the Government of India (GoI) during the 1975 Emergency rule to regulate NGO functioning, has continued. In the recent past, the state has dealt firmly with NGOs with FCRA licences, particularly those who raised concerns on environmental challenges posed by the implementation of large infrastructure projects (McDuaie-Ra, 2008). In December 2016,<sup>3</sup> the Indian Express, a leading national daily, reported that the current national government had cancelled the FCRA licenses of around 20,000 NGOs, although of course technical reasons were cited as reasons for the termination of the licences. On another note, Mohan (2002, p. 128) points out how donors and other developmental funders have engaged local 'NGOs ... (who are) seen as more *efficient* than corrupt states' to replace the government 'in delivering (basic) services'. The few donors who recognize civil society's role in monitoring, and enhancing democracy and transparency in governance, rather than in replacing the state, unfortunately mostly reach out to reliable, 'urban-based, professional, elite, advocacy NGOs', who, 'concentrate on networking and encouraging public debate through [exclusionary] seminars and workshops' (Mohan, 2002, p. 129, 131).

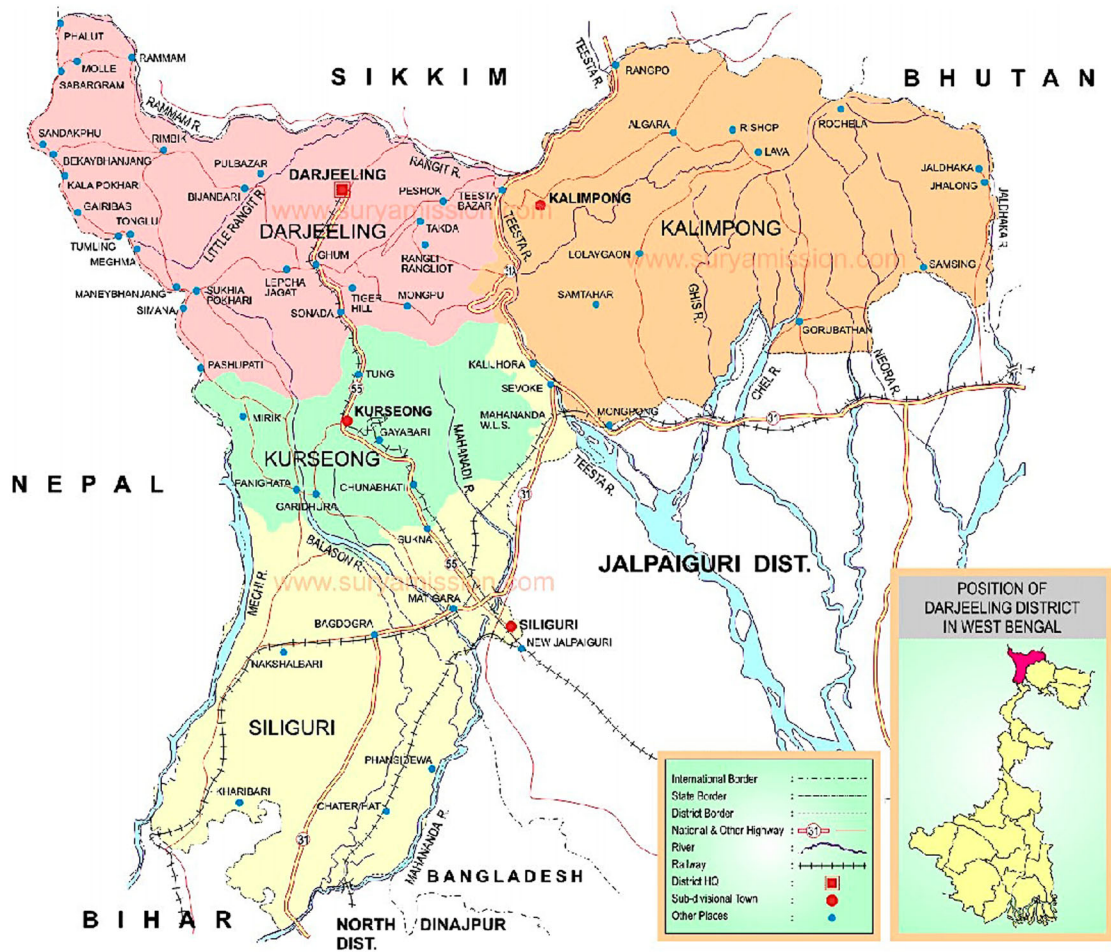
Distinguishing between the 'politics' that drives civil society from 'political' acts of resistance, Swyngedouw (2011, p. 376) laments that Jacques Rancière's ideological visioning of a political civil society, 'always disruptive ... refus(ing) to observe the "place" allocated to people and things' is an increasingly 'imagined' notion. In his 'Prison Notebooks', Gramsci (1971) had argued that alternatives to dominant ideas posed by associational unions of the bourgeois can and must emerge from ordinary citizens, from those who function outside the 'politico-jurisdiction' of hegemonic civil society. We have found this framework – of CSOs operating inside and outside the politico-jurisdiction of state authority and outreach – particularly useful in analysing local CSO response to consensual climate change intervention strategies in the Eastern Himalaya region.

## Research methodology and context

The findings presented in this paper reflect over three years' interaction with multiple NGOs and activists in the Darjeeling and Sikkim regions of the Eastern Himalaya, and draw on conversations in numerous meetings, workshops, formal and informal discussions. Additionally, the paper draws on two students' M.A. thesis research in 2015, which independently analyzed NGOs in the Darjeeling region, and the Lepcha anti-dam movement, Affected Citizens of Teesta.

In doing this research, we often reflected on the complicity and positionality of academics and researchers working on climate issues. It is in this light that we note Mohan's (2002, p. 129) concern that 'NGOs ... are under increasing criticism and scrutiny from academics and policy practitioners'. We also acknowledge a research project's limitations to unravel complex socio-political histories in a particular time frame, and we are also aware of how 'outsider' research-focused perspectives sit uncomfortably with complex local realities – the challenges, coercions and compulsions, spatial heterogeneities, social networks, local calamities, etc. that impact what NGOs and activists do (or can't) locally. Our findings thus try and portray, analyze, and interpret each situation's uniqueness, complexity and situatedness, giving a 'sense of being there' (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 129) with the intention to tease out learning for climate action and interventions.

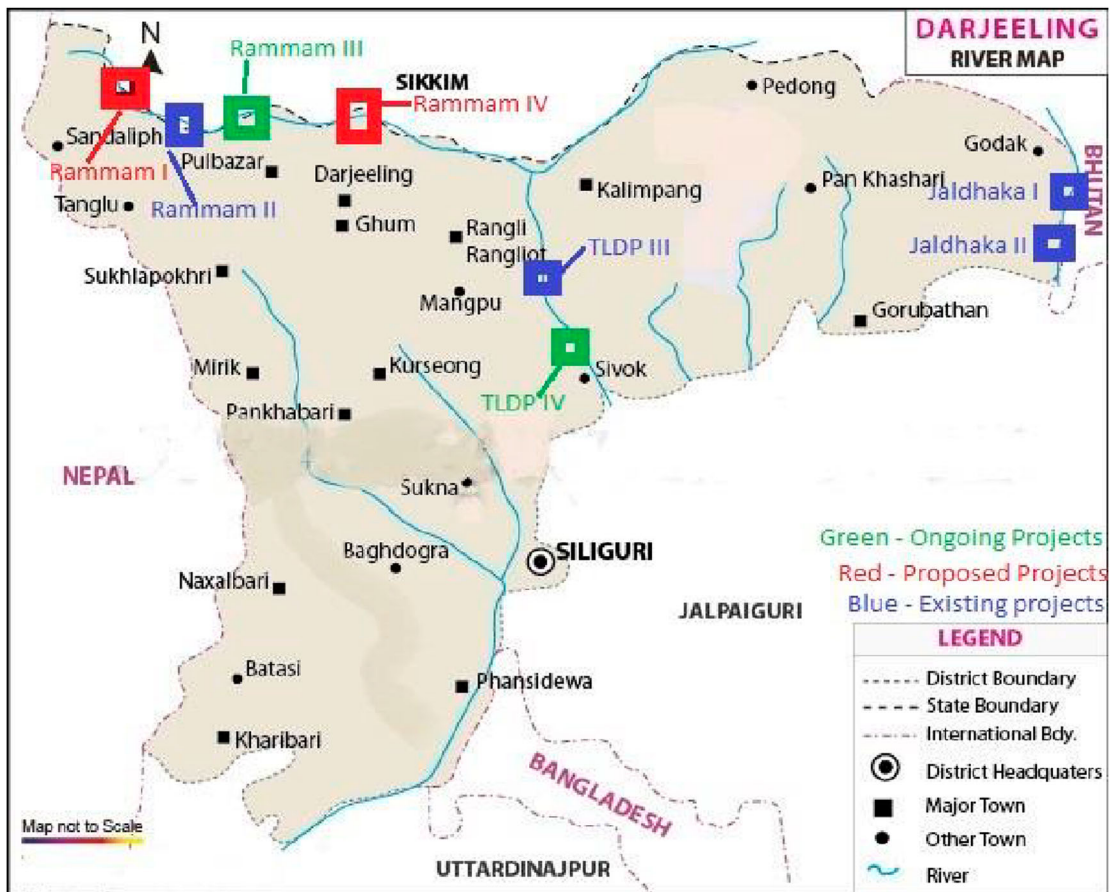
The Darjeeling district of West Bengal is in North-Eastern India, South of the state of Sikkim (see [Maps 1 and 2](#)). The projects discussed in this paper involve two recent hydropower developments, the Teesta Low Dam Projects III & IV (see [Map 2](#)), which were commissioned in 2016. From June to August 2015, we interviewed 30 NGOs in the Darjeeling region through qualitative methods. Our focus was to understand how and why these NGOs were established, how they operate and on what issues, eventually focusing the discussions on their engagement with the Teesta Low Dam projects. In addition, because the Darjeeling region has been embroiled for over four decades in a political struggle for a separate state, Gorkhaland, we tried to unpack the institutional structure and culture in which NGOs operate, the challenges and risks faced by staff members in their day-to-day work and how this impacts what they choose to do (or not). The interviews with NGO staff members and/or organization head were thus deliberately semi-structured.



Map 1. Darjeeling region of West Bengal.

Our research in Sikkim focused on dam development in the Dzongu region, which lies in North Sikkim. The Dzongu region has particular cultural and ethno-political significance for the Lepcha people. Once the key inhabitants of the Eastern Himalayas, the Lepchas are now considered a ‘Vanishing Tribe’ (Foning, 1987) – a minority, demographically, culturally as well as politically. The political history of the Lepchas is complex. For the purposes of this paper, however, the key point to note is that, following Sikkim’s annexation to India in 1975, the last monarch of Sikkim declared Dzongu as a Lepcha reserve (see Map 3), restricting access to the region, including for non-Lepcha Sikkimese citizens. This ecological and cultural preservation of Dzongu was also announced as constitutionally non-negotiable. This makes Dzongu in North Sikkim what is commonly referred to as the ‘last bastion’ of the Lepchas, a place where they are not a minority and where, supposedly, their culture, language and identity can survive uncompromised. This explains why the plan to develop seven large hydropower dams in Dzongu, five inside Dzongu and two along its borders was extremely contentious, and gave rise to the formation of the ACT. Unlike other contestations against large dams, the ACT struggle was not driven by material concerns about relocation, rehabilitation and/or compensation. It was relational aspects of space and place that led the Lepchas to declare that, ‘there can be no dams (along the Teesta River) in Dzongu’.

We used both qualitative and quantitative methods in analyzing the ACT movement. The respondents here were, except for two interviewees, all Lepchas. In all, 24 focused interviews were conducted with Lepchas living in Dzongu, in the state capital of Gangtok in Sikkim, and in Darjeeling and Kalimpong towns in West Bengal. The



Map 2. Hydropower projects in the Darjeeling region.

youngest interviewee was 19, and the oldest 80. As with the NGOs in Darjeeling, the qualitative interviews were semi-structured. In addition, 53 quantitative surveys asked open- and closed-ended questions of participants who were not interviewed in detail (through qualitative methods). In both studies, communication in English was largely possible with the respondents (NGO staff and Lepcha individuals). A translator was needed in only a couple of cases (Lepcha interviewees, ACT Study).

### The rise and fall of NGO resistance against hydropower projects in Darjeeling

In 2015, only one NGO among the 30 interviewed said they were (still) contesting hydropower projects. All other NGOs stated that they *no longer* resisted hydropower projects, though all claimed to have actively opposed dams (Teesta Lower Dam Projects (TLDP) III and IV) in the past. This shift intrigued us. What had happened and why did these NGOs insist on their silence regarding dams? Understanding this requires understanding how and why these NGOs were established, how they are currently funded, regulated and thus operate. Against this background, we discuss the engagement of local NGOs on environmental/climate issues and how this translated to the context of hydropower development.

### NGOs doing development

It is important to illustrate the political fragility in the Darjeeling region and how this impacts what local communities and NGOs do (or not) in relation to environmental challenges. Administratively, the region of Darjeeling





Map 3. Locating Dzongu.

is governed as the Gorkha Territorial Administration (GTA) under the state of West Bengal. However, as recently as September 2017, the GTA closed down completely for 104 days, during which time there was a violent conflict for political separation from the state of West Bengal. The entire region was physically cordoned off by state security forces and the state Government blocked internet usage. This was yet another attempt in the now four-decade long struggle to secure a separate state of Gorkhaland.

This precarity explains why local communities living along the major road connecting Gangtok, Sikkim's capital city, to Siliguri in West Bengal have been relatively silent about the two large dam projects, TLDP III and IV, operating in their backyard. Despite living here for over 70 years (Field research, 2015) these communities still lack legal rights to land as well as formal basic services. Kalijhora settlement, just above the Teesta Low Dam IV project (TLDP IV), has around 110 households. It was only in 1980 that the settlement was first included under a formal administration, Champasari Gram Panchayat (the three-tiered local government) in Siliguri, some 25 kilometres away. More recently, Kalijhora has been annexed to Sitong Gram Panchayat – which is a

steep uphill ascent, some 10 kilometres away. Kalijhora residents have little in common with the more settled, landed farming community of Sitong. ‘Such arbitrary inclusions shows that we are “this nowhere people”’ (Field research, 2015). In fact, the permanent office of the National Hydropower Corporation (NHPC) project which runs TLDP III and IV projects is now Kalijhora’s most prominent landmark. This is dramatically different to the grounded place-based identity that the Lepchas experience in Dzongu. The ways in which Dzongu Lepchas can articulate belonging to, ownership and control of the region’s land, rivers and forests is unthinkable for Kalijhora residents.

Such complexities in the Darjeeling region create a minefield of socio-political and economic challenges around environmental governance, which are areas where civil society could intervene. But no NGO in the Darjeeling region queries political-environmental coercions. Most NGOs in Darjeeling receive project-specific funds from the Central Government for activities such as organic farming, environmental awareness campaigns, forest floriculture activities, sanitation, etc. (Field research, 2015). The few with official approval to receive foreign funding do similar development work for donors such as the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) for safe drinking water; the US Agency for International Development (USAID) for community forestry work; and the European Commission for smallholder innovation for climate-change resilient food security, etc. NGOs here consider themselves immensely fortunate to have an FCRA-holding status and are thus careful not to lose it.

Luckily, as an organization we joined (sic) the FCRA in 1996; we had a couple of good people who supported us; we had our papers [in order]: society’s registration, income tax registration forms, etc. We are one of the few lucky ones who have the registration and we’ve been careful to ensure continued approval of our FCRA. It’s not easy, but we have our papers up to date and we’ve kept it clean and clear. We have continued our registration since the early 2000s, so almost fifteen years.

When we asked further on the aspect of luck in having an FCRA, we were told,

I think it’s got tighter and tighter ... newer rules. There has been a lot of control. And because we are a border state with Nepal, the Maoist movement there, the Gorkhaland movement here ... more and more FCRA’s are restricted here. So, we were lucky to get it’.

As noted elsewhere, project-driven development prevents ‘facilitating transformative development’ and demands accountability primarily to donors and other regulatory authorities (Banks, Hulme, & Edwards, 2015, p. 708). This also tends to make NGOs competitive and territorial, and evade issues of wider, political concern. With limited financial support, most NGOs struggle to survive and can rarely hope to address broader, political and/or environmental injustices: *‘There are many problems, but you need money to fight. We could file a case in the court, but for that you need to pay a lawyer. Without lawyers, we couldn’t file a case’* (Field research, 2015).

Ours is an organization that came up without too much financial support. We rely largely on funding from the Government. Somewhere around 1998 or 1999, it started dawning on us that this was not going anywhere because this is too small; we are not even able to create local influence, we have no power, really. We don’t have any fund, we don’t have any resources. Our actions are being guided by the ground rules set by the Government officials. We are evading the real issues, really. (Field research, 2015)

Thus, most NGOs in Darjeeling work on environmental issues defined by donor-driven agendas of deforestation, landslides, water-supply scarcity and biodiversity conservation. Here, solutions are often predetermined to match apolitical framings of socio-environmental problems (Yates, 2012). A few NGO workers spoke of politics and power in environmental governance, but these views are also mostly circumscribed to popular political agendas of Gorkhaland: *‘What is needed is to completely remove the West Bengal government [the forest corporation] which is interested only in profiting from our forests’* (Field research, 2015). However, such views are expressed with an immediate request for anonymity. After all, it is explained – ‘politics is the work of politicians’ (Field research, 2015). NGOs here, as we are told, *do development*, i.e. implement conservation, afforestation programmes and projects.

## The logic of apolitical development

Being apolitical requires careful effort by NGOs to avoid using their work and data to challenge contentious issues. A local NGO shared data which points to evidence that hydropower development in this fragile

ecology accelerates landslides. They are fully aware of the visible negative impacts of large-scale hydropower development in the region but are constrained from using this evidence to contest large dams. According to them, their role is to *'inform citizens and authorities about precautionary measures that can reduce human impact on landslides'* (Field research, 2015). This hesitation is both logical and skewed. Most local NGOs mostly rely on official flows of funding and are fully aware of the fact that FCRA-holding NGOs in North-East India and elsewhere have been regularly 'blacklisted' by government authorities. Often the reasons for this are related to raising environmental concerns that are considered politically incorrect, but of course, various other reasons are cited for 'correcting' the work of NGOs (Bhaumik 2003 in McDuie-Ra, 2008, p. 195). Dissent from mainstream development agendas is considered a sign of social dangerousness (Foucault, 1979) and is quickly contained at several levels. One NGO, which had actively protested against the two projects (TLDP III&IV), was summoned by the Ministry of Home Affairs:

Out of the blue, we were asked to come to Delhi with all our accounts and invoices dating back to when we started work and got registered as an NGO. Thankfully, we had stored all our paperwork. We took boxes of paperwork all the way to Delhi, there were so many boxes that it filled up an entire hotel room. Our meeting at the Home Office was chilling. Little was said, no explanations were given – it seemed we were being told indirectly to lie low. (Field research, 2015)

In our discussions, it was obvious that the question to ask was not why the silence, but rather, why any contestations? Why had some local NGOs chosen to protest against the TLDP III & IV projects in the early planning stages? Many of the NGO staff members we spoke to said that the environmental impacts of the hydropower projects were blatantly visible: river-ecology changes, increased frequency and magnitude of landslides, unpredictable shifts in groundwater availability around dam locations from excavations, tunnelling etc. As actors working on environmental issues, it was difficult for them to keep silent. These aspects of distributional environmental injustices – high risks, losses and challenges to local communities – made for a stark complement to aspects of procedural injustices in environmental governance. Official regulation as outlined in the environmental impact assessment (EIA) requires inclusive, consultative decision-making processes. On the ground, NGOs noticed *'the lack of transparency, lack of people's participation in any form of decision-making in relation to dam development'* (Field research, 2015). The respondents revealed how EIA documents were not made public or only EIA summaries (and not in the local language) were available at locations distant from project-affected regions. The NGOs observed consensual arrangements between hydropower developers, state and central government authorities and university faculty undertaking the EIA studies. They also noted how compensation was arbitrarily set for project-affected communities and/or promises made to local communities, so that they approved the projects. *'They told farmers in one village that a watershed project would be implemented, this was never followed through'* (Field research, 2015). In another village (Suruk), *'(developers) promised a bridge, a school, electricity connections – nothing was provided'* (Field research, 2015). The new agenda of Corporate Social Responsibility requires hydropower companies to invest a share of their investments in socially-relevant initiatives. This was (mis)used to manufacture consent, *'to privilege local elite (politicians, contractors) with contracts to construct roads, bridges, community centres, what have you'* and build on the patronage of the elite to enable companies to implement their projects 'smoothly' without any objections from local communities (Field research, 2015). Huge sums of money exchanged hands, enabling some of the local elite to become new political actors of prominence.

We fought the Rammam hydro-project and stopped [power] generation for almost two months by blocking the intake area. Eventually, the project manager came to our office and agreed to provide eight lakhs [800,000 rupees] per household ... So, we allowed them (the project-affected) to earn that. They also gave us an additional three crores [thirty million rupees] for surrounding developments; playgrounds, tourist development. (Field research, 2015)

In the contentious, fragile political space, this was an opportunity for aspiring local politicians to 'appropriate' resources. It was another matter that for marginalized residents of settlements such as Kalijhora, the gains through employment and compensation – no matter how short-term or skewed – presented an opportunity unlike anything they had experienced before. Our findings point to uneven terrains of citizenship and governance. It is only rarely and often too late (as in this case) that official reports (2016 CAG Audit report) confirm the inappropriateness of the regulatory processes applied in the case of environmental policies and strategies.

## The politics of dissent

During the peak of dam building activities on the TLDP III&V, several civil-society groups from Delhi and elsewhere, who had more experience on environmental and social injustices and also more political standing, supported local NGOs in their critique and contestation of large dams. This was when there was finally some coverage of these issues in national newspapers (The Economic Times; Indian Express). And yet, this networking, while immensely relevant, yielded a serious backlash for the local NGOs. Local NGOs realized they were far more vulnerable to local political coercion than civil-society actors from outside the area. Local NGOs were trapped in a setting where *'the [political] leaders were selectively coercing local communities and/or NGOs to either protest against the project or enable developers to go ahead with the construction'* as a tactic of having nuisance value (Field research, 2015). Although no one would validate this, everyone we met spoke of the large sums of money that exchanged hands through these processes – till the developers obtained the *'No Objection Certificate/s (NOC)'* needed for the EIA approval. More established politicians in Darjeeling also played into these games: Sometimes they would *'raise public opinion against the dams, participate in public hearings and ask pointed questions pending approval'* and at other times, declare, *'we have no rights to stop the project when the Government of India and the Government of West Bengal have already signed an agreement with the developer'* (Field research, 2015). Whenever it suited them, local politicians controlled the action of the NGOs.

For the TLDP III project, we had thoroughly prepared for questioning the developer, the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC) at the public hearing. When the time for the hearing came, we were threatened by the local politicians to not attend the hearings at all. We were told that if we were seen there, they (affiliates of political parties) would break our legs. (Field research, 2015)

A frightened NGO staff member mentioned with a request for anonymity, *'They wanted to kill me if I did not stop ... because when you talk about dams there is lots of money involved ... the companies give a lot of money to a lot of local politicians'* (Field research, 2015). We cannot substantiate this claim, except to say that this view was repeated by many others, including those in formal, public offices. This form of coercion is not surprising – violent coercive street-politics is in fact the dominant style of local governance (see Joshi, 2015).

In sum, various coercions eventually dissuaded local NGOs from challenging the decision to implement the dam projects, even though most explain, *'In your mind you know it's not good, it's all wrong. But feeling that is one thing and openly saying that, taking a princip[ed], political stand, throws you into the political area. Many of us cannot do the latter'* (Field research, 2015). Our findings contextualize what was reported in the 2016 CAG Audit report, including flawed EIA processes and flawed environmental governance. Additionally, our findings confirm that while water is renewable, dams are not. The fact that it has been possible to roll out large dams as climate mitigating interventions in fragile ecosystems speaks of explicit compliance at scale. Asking for whom and how hydropower development is beneficial is not tolerated well, but such questions are also rarely asked especially in fragile democracies. And yet, as we discuss below, despite the fear of dissent, the business of compliance does occasionally get ruptured.

## Dissent: the case of the Affected Citizens of Teesta

As mentioned above, it was relational, rather than material concerns that led to the ACT movement against dams in Dzongu. The Lepchas were not negotiating compensation, relocation or resolving anomalies in the EIA process for the dam projects. Rather they questioned the ecological, cultural and social impacts of the proposed seven large dams planned inside (5) and around (2) Dzongu.

Foning (1987), a Lepcha scholar from Kalimpong district in West Bengal, voices fears that resonate widely in the Lepcha community – that geo-political, social and economic upheavals in the region have decimated the Lepchas, and inter- and intra-national administrative boundaries have displaced and uprooted them, their culture and their way of life. Little (2010) notes that there are approximately 45,000 Lepchas in Sikkim and some 70,000 outside the state (Government of Sikkim 2006). Aside from the 7000 Lepchas living in Dzongu, all others, including Lepchas from outside Dzongu and other Sikkimese nationals, require an official permit to enter Dzongu. *'Dzongu is [the last bastion of] our Mayel Lyang (hidden paradise); if it is desecrated then our culture becomes extinct!'* (ACT ideologue, Athup Lepcha, reported in Arora, 2006).

In our research, Lepcha members and supporters of the movement often expressed that they found it hypocritical to say no to dams and still use/rely on electricity. Their argument was that Dzongu, as a protected Lepcha reserve, was ill-suited to such large-scale development. Some even added that perhaps large hydropower projects were more suited to *'other areas, where ... the carrying capacity is better – than [here] ... – an environmentally fragile and demographically endangered place'* (Field research, 2015). While the average ACT supporter was relatively indifferent to hydropower development in areas not affecting Dzongu, a resounding 88.3% of the same respondents were against it in Dzongu; 47.7% 'strongly opposed' dams in Dzongu (Field research, 2015).

We (Lepchas) have been here for centuries, following our culture, tradition, language. And today, in the name of development, they are finishing it. Is this development? When you lose your identity, you are gone. Finished! So ... in that sense, I think Lepchas, especially in Dzongu ... I think it is a sort of a design to finish us. (Mayel Lyang Development Board Chairperson, in Interview, Kalimpong, 2015)

The opposition to dams led initially by a handful of Lepcha youth from Dzongu is popularly positioned as a historic reassertion of space by a 'vanishing' tribe, whose identity is intertwined with the spatial relevance of Dzongu to their culture. And yet, ACT's success in cancelling four of the seven dams through a largely non-violent Gandhian pathway (Arora, 2006) described as 'a David and Goliath battle' (Little, 2010) goes beyond the environmental struggles of a displaced minority and powerful development actors. Gergan (2014, p. 70, 72) notes that, before hydropower projects planned in Dzongu propelled the reserve 'into the center of controversy', Dzongu was, for all practical purposes, 'a landscape of precarity ... [where] remoteness, isolation and poor infrastructure profoundly shaped everyday experiences'. The ACT struggle was deeply political; it was essentially a resistance to the coercion in the manufacture of consent by powerful outside actors, which was supported by the Lepcha elites in Dzongu. This practice of political patronage is essentially how government and governance operates in the State of Sikkim (Huber & Joshi, 2015). McDuie-Ra's (2011, p. 89) analysis of pro-dam actors is one of the rare accounts of how many Lepchas in Dzongu were pro-dam and against the ACT, even 'pressur[ing] the state to accelerate the projects'. The struggle of the protesting youth was against both internal as well as external actors and pressures. In the sections below, we describe how climate strategies shaped by principles of commodification, in this case, supposed material gains from clean energy and the offsetting of CO<sub>2</sub> (somewhere far away), are ill-equipped to recognize relational values and meanings of local places.

### **ACT: an unprecedented political movement**

It is important to note that the current elected government in Sikkim has managed to remain in power since 1994. This has been possible by skillfully establishing patron-client dependence among an ethnically divided constituency (Huber & Joshi, 2015). Any prominent critique of the government and governance was unheard of in Sikkim until the ACT movement. Nonetheless, while the NGOs in Darjeeling spoke of coercions and corruption, they were unable to publicly 'shame' their local politicians. On the other hand, the ACT founder members skillfully drew attention to 'the state's double standards': bestowing protected status on Dzongu as an ecological, minority-resident reserve, and then violating its own assertion by 'plans to take away the very land and indigenous culture of the people it claims to be protecting' (Dawa Lepcha, reported in Arora, 2006). This 'rejecting of the way things are ...' was unprecedented in Sikkim (Li, 2007). This 'practice of politics' had far-reaching repercussions – both for the ACT members, but also for the state. These deliberately political acts unmasked the otherwise carefully nurtured, rhetorical image of Sikkim as a model of Indian democracy.

ACT members consistently spoke and acted from a place of dissent. During the first public hearing event in the EIA approval process for the Teesta Stage III project in Chungthang, which borders Dzongu, ACT members noted that 80% of the audience were 'pro-dam' state administrative officials, politicians, dam developers and local elites. This disproportionate representation at an event meant to enable local community to participatorily review and decide on whether the project should be approved was immediately critiqued by ACT members as 'engineered to intimidate dissent' (Wangchuk, 2007, p. 35). When the technical proposal for this particular dam was declared as having cleared the EIA, ACT activists did not accept defeat. They pooled personal resources to file a legal case 'in the National Environmental Appellate Authority in New Delhi against the public hearing and the verdict' (ibid). When this failed as well, ACT activists physically blocked roads into Chungthang, preventing district officials and dam developers from surveying land needed for another hydropower project, Panan,

located in Dzongu. These inspections eventually happened – with police escort for the officials and developers and detention restrictions announced for the activists. And yet, the ACT members did not themselves impose their views among other Lepchas in Dzongu. 74 of the 99 Lepcha households in Dzongu, whose lands were to be acquired for the Panang hydropower project, welcomed the project. Wangchuk (2007) notes how, during the peak of ACT protests in 2007, some 90 Panan families handed over a memorandum clarifying that they were not part of the ACT protest and emphasising that they would welcome the project in return for better compensation rates and other technical safeguards. Nonetheless, the small handful of the protesting Lepcha youth from Dzongu were able to garner support from a much larger group of Lepchas outside Sikkim, and their protests eventually led to the canceling of the Panan project. Multiple tactics of coercion promising development benefits to supporters and to activists who withdrew their support, and the punishing of those who refused to yield, failed to entice the small number of ACT founder members (Wangchuk, 2007).

The ACT movement centred around dam building in Dzongu eventually moved the site of protests from Dzongu to the state capital, Gangtok. Here peaceful collective protests and marathon rounds of fasting totalling 915 days (between 2007–2010) helped draw national and international attention to the politics of hydropower development in Sikkim (Huber & Joshi, 2015). Protests were also staged in India's capital, New Delhi. Eventually, four of the five dams planned inside Dzongu were cancelled but, much more importantly, the movement exposed the structure and culture of coercive governance and the mere rhetoric of democracy in Sikkim. The exercise of people power tremendously inspired a new wave of citizen voice and choice. As a Lepcha ACT supporter from Darjeeling noted, *'Government will never make [people aware]. NGOs will not do that. It is the Lepchas themselves who have to do this. We did it'* (Field research, 2015).

Gergan (2014, p. 67) has argued 'that the anti-dam protests became a way for the Dzongu youth to question [not just] state development agendas [but equally Lepcha] elders and urban elite' who had long claimed to speak on behalf of the community. This dissent fractured families, in a cultural context where respect for elders demands complete subservience. It was thus against extraordinary odds that a few Lepcha youth acted upon the 'experience of everyday hardships' in Dzongu to expose 'the community's skewed dependence on Government and exclusionary practices' of governance through coercion (ibid, p. 68). As Gergan (ibid) notes, these young people became 'alchemists of the revolution', by defending their fragile homeland against the incursion of 'climate friendly' hydropower amid coercion, collusion, and obfuscation by political leaders and developers. The ACT movement was a complex struggle inter-weaving the personal and political, rhetoric and reality of indigeneity, and varying perceptions and experiences of place, identity and citizenship that exposed the rhetoric of development agendas, increasingly implemented as ill-conceived climate strategies.

## Conclusion

The politics of consensus, or rather the process of manufacturing consent for climate strategies, runs deep and wide. What we researched and discussed in Darjeeling and Sikkim mirrors the nature and circumstances in which hydropower projects are being rolled out in fragile democracies in the region: in India's North-East and in the neighbouring Mekong Basin. In the Lao People's Democratic Republic, the rush to implement hydropower participatorily happens where historically there has been no culture of participation (Goldman, 2001; Grumbine & Xu, 2011; Matthews & Motta, 2015), and where civil society is either absent, heavily restricted and/or criminalized (Matthews & Schmidt, 2014). Our findings draw attention to what is likely ongoing as a rhetoric of cooperation, consensus, citizen participation and engagement in processes of building large dams as climate mitigating strategies in these and other areas. As our findings show, the consensual politics of climate change 'shrouded (globally) in (a) complex rhetoric' of terms such as 'emission trading' (Gough & Shackley, 2001, p. 330) are grossly unrepresentative of unique ground realities and other values and meanings of place, space and nature.

It is not unsurprising that, although government and governance systems and processes, as well as the local communities experiencing dam development, in the Darjeeling and Sikkim regions were vastly different, the intrusions of power and politics in diverse places, institutions and actors were not significantly different. The power of the state resides not only in a 'centre' terminal point, but rather is diffused and networked through a range of 'technologies' (Foucault, 1979). And in the case of hydropower development, this power is welded

from the very apex of climate planning to areas where climate strategies are implemented – with powerful financial interests geared to commodify fundamental elements of life (Harvey, 2006).

Our findings show that counter hegemonic possibilities for political action, and more nuanced, alternative re-visions of human-nature links, require civil society to carefully distance themselves from ‘epistemic climate coalitions’ (Gough & Shackley, 2001). Unfortunately, this is hardly possible for formal NGOs, especially those engaged in *doing development*, because political power operates rationally *through* rather than *for* civil society, making NGOs both the object and subject of the bourgeoisies and the elite (Bryant, 2002; Rose, O’Malley, & Valverde, 2006; Rose & Miller, 1992; Sending & Neumann, 2006). NGOs in the Darjeeling region (as elsewhere) – entangled in the ‘service delivery paradigm’; bound by ‘financial logic and challenging local circumstances’; and under scrutiny, discipline, control and surveillance of the state – can do little else but collaborate in this web of consensual governance (Rahman, 2006, pp. 451–453). The positioning and promotion of large dams as environmental as well as economic solutions did provoke some local NGOs in Darjeeling to ‘return to politics’ (Banks et al., 2015, p. 715), but these initiatives were short-lived, partly because of the context in which these NGOs exist and operate. In the Darjeeling region, the absence of a functional ‘political’ democracy impacts the lack of civil society, and this vicious cycle persists. And like in Darjeeling, but differently in Sikkim, civil freedoms have long been missing (Joshi, 2015), although precisely for that reason they should re-emerge. Nonetheless till then, hydropower development or any other form of translocal coercion, requires no more than a façade of participation.

In such a skewed terrain, the ACT movement was born out of a different visioning – one where identity and citizenship was not disassociated from place and space, where Lepchas, Dzongu and the Teesta were intertwined socially and culturally. Thus, the language of the resistance was rooted in expressions and meanings of feelings and emotions (Hudson, 2009). The movement was successful not only because it existed and operated outside established systems and structures, but also because the actors did not speak in the material language of dams and development – the language promoted by the state and spoken by the NGOs as well. This was a strategic difference: the state had no tools or methods to respond to the relational aspects of resistance. Here, Gramsci’s ideas of creating and claiming a space for political agency was possible. This required crossing multiple conventional boundaries of community and society, re-politicizing themselves, their personal relations, surroundings and the wider political context. In that context, dams became the medium/means, rather than the object/end, of this desire for transformation (Vispute and Joshi, *forthcoming*).

Our findings draw attention to the conscious naivety through which unequal partnerships between the state, markets, civil society and diversely unequal local communities are promoted in the climate discourse. We question this ‘rhetoric of partnerships’ (Mohan, 2007) and ask where the line is drawn between consensual environmental governance and the manufacture of climate consensus. We could conclude by stating that a greater solidarity between diverse civil society actors and institutions could perhaps better challenge the consensual politics of eco-governmentality. But this would suggest ‘associational unions’ (Gramsci) and cast a shadow on the logic of countering hegemony. In any case, this recommendation is easier said than done. What remains of a dammed Teesta river flows far beyond the divided administrative borders of the states of Sikkim and West Bengal – well into Bangladesh. Even between the closely nestled Sikkim and Darjeeling regions, ethnic-fractures and local politics divide, rather than unite, local communities and the civil society. Nonetheless, governance is on the ‘move’ and relationships between the state and civil society are neither static nor predictable. It is in this fluidity and uncertainty that we anticipate that citizens in diverse settings will, in diverse ways, continue to reshape the politics of climate consensus despite challenging odds.

## Notes

1. The IFC Guide to Dams for Developers and Investors (2015, p. 18) specifies the following typology by scale of production:
  1. *Micro*  $P < 0.1$  MW
  1. *Small*  $0.1 \text{ MW} < P < 10 \text{ MW}$  (some countries go up to 30–35 MW)
  2. *Medium*  $10 \text{ MW} < P < 100 \text{ MW}$
  3. *Large*  $P > 100 \text{ MW}$ .
2. <https://energy.economictimes.indiatimes.com/energy-speak/hydropower-project-development-in-india-issues-and-way-forward/1713>
3. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/since-2014-20000-ngos-lost-fcra-licence-4447820/>

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