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CHAPTER 4

Dialogue across Borders

Dam Projects in Yunnan and Sikkim

PAYAL BANERJEE AND LI BO

This chapter explores what a new lexicon of subregionalism might look like. It entails transgressing borders of all types: geographical, disciplinary, discursive, and epistemic. First, we reach across the India-China border to look at their common borderlands. Second, we do not abide by a typical comparative approach by listing the similarities and differences that distinguish India and China as states, then ask whether or how each may compete or collaborate with the other. Instead, third, in comparing two cases of the same phenomenon—that is, local resource management—we talk to each other as researchers and concerned, transnational subjects of India and China. Together, we understand how a capillaric India-China still circulates within the states of India and China. And in so doing, fourth, we break epistemically from the statist border-centrism of Westphalia World.

Our dialogue—or more colloquially, “chat”—exposes the erasures identified in the previous chapters. That is, Westphalia overlooks opportunities for regional integration and development. Another layer to “what’s not there” becomes apparent: transnational action between India-China borderlands. This refocus is especially pressing given the role and influence of global corporate capitalism operating on national and local development in India and China today.

We begin with some background. The first part of this chapter documents two “ peripheral” borderland areas in India and China undergoing large hydropower development: the Teesta River in Sikkim state of northeast-
ern India, and the Nu River–Upper Salween in Yunnan Province in southwestern China. Our dialogue completes the rest of this chapter. We conclude with some thoughts on comparative eco-development projects for India-China within India and China.

**DAMS ACROSS THE BORDER**

Two dam projects currently dominate Northeast India and Southwest China. These are, respectively, the twenty-six-cascade dams on the Teesta River in Sikkim and the thirteen-cascade dams on the Nu River in Yunnan Province. The two regions share similar natural and social complexities: both are ethnically diverse, socially peripheral, geographically remote, and economically disadvantaged compared to their respective national centers. At the same time, both regions are resource rich and eager to improve their infrastructure, employment opportunities, and social indicators. International rivers, endowed with a significant heritage of biological and cultural diversity, are at the core of a way of life in both regions.

Nonetheless, both local communities across the border remain marginalized. The governments of India and China offer them limited or nominal participation in project planning, feasibility studies, and environmental impact—usually in the early stages. Official clearance (approval) requires such assessment reports. Consequently, grassroots agents experience comparable patterns of exclusion despite the very different political systems that prevail in the two states.

For this reason, NGOs play a prominent role at both sites. They have succeeded in slowing down decision-making processes dominated by “official experts and researchers” and in scaling back the number of dams proposed. In directing attention to intersecting social, economic, and environmental concerns, activists have pointed out that “experts” planning large dam projects have often excluded or underestimated the environmental and social costs in the locality. For example, large-scale hydropower schemes in India and China, particularly those in the Himalayan region, risk landslides, earthquakes, irregular flow patterns resulting from extensive land use, changes in land cover following dam construction, and climate change. Other unaccounted costs arise, also. Methane emissions from rotting vegetation due to dam-related changes in water flow, for instance, can be higher than those from fossil fuel power plants; fragmented aquatic habitats and
altered flow regimes threaten biodiversity and inland fisheries—a primary protein source for millions of people dependent on these resources within the watershed.

Not surprisingly, NGOs often face powerful resistance from national and local governments. Political elites in India and China proclaim their priorities in the name of development, nation-state building, and national security. Dam building, in particular, echoes rationales commonly heard throughout the globe: (1) rich perennial hydrological potential should be exploited to produce electricity for the region and beyond; (2) dams produce economic benefits for the investing government and private power companies through taxation, the maintenance of stable economic lifelines to other energy-dependent industries, such as mining, and the generation of revenues through power exports to neighboring states/provinces and countries; (3) large infrastructure-building increases employment, thereby outweighing any compensation to displaced local communities; and (4) dam projects improve the state’s capacity to control floods and provide irrigation for agriculture, thereby providing security and protection to local livelihoods. Proponents of hydroelectric projects and big dams view them as champions of “development,” labeling their opponents as “anti-development” (Rudra 2003).

Let us now briefly review each dam project in its own context.

Yunnan: To Dam an Angry River

The Nu River originates in the Qinghai-Tibet high plateau. It descends through southwestern China, primarily Yunnan Province, before entering Myanmar, where it is known as the Thanlwin (in Burmese) or the Salween (in English). The river becomes the border between Myanmar and Thailand for 120 kilometers. It drains a total of 320,000 k² and eventually flows into the Gulf of Martaban. More than ten million people from at least thirteen ethnic groups depend on the Salween watershed for their livelihoods. The Nujiang, the section of the Salween that flows through China, is found in the Three Parallel Rivers area (the Yangzi/Jinsha, Lancang-Mekong, and Nu-Salween), a hotspot of biological and cultural diversity recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site in 2003. The region is also home to twenty-two minority nationalities including the Naxi, Lisu, Tibetan, Bai, Yi, Pumi, Nu, and Dulong. The last two are indigenous to this region only.

Nujiang River ranks second only to the Jinsha–Upper Yangzi for its hy-
drological potential. Nujiang Prefecture holds 47 percent of the hydrological resources in the province while administering merely 14,700 km² (not even 3 percent of Yunnan’s land area). Besides its biodiversity endowment, Nujiang Prefecture is well known for its rich mineral deposits and is among the richest in China in terms of per capita resource holding. Yet Nujiang Prefecture has long been an inaccessible and economically backward region by national poverty standards or even Yunnan provincial standards. A large part of the administrative budget depends on provincial and national financial support, as it has been a poor and autonomous region for an ethnic group, the Lisu people, who constitute a relatively small and disadvantaged group. Accordingly, Nujiang’s prefectural government feels compelled to develop the rich hydro resources at its disposal.

A few Chinese power monopolies have sought to optimize Yunnan’s natural resources with hydroelectric production at the turn of the millennium. A new policy in 2000, the “Open Up the West campaign—Greater Western Development” (xibu da kaifa), further enabled a period of intense transformation in the power industry. Dramatic increases in the demand for energy consumption in the Mekong region, exacerbated by frequent electricity shortages in nearby regions of China, intensified industrialization in the populous eastern areas now turned into workshops for the global market.

In 2003, plans for a thirteen-dam cascade on the Nu River suddenly provoked public interest. China Huadian, one of the country’s most influential power monopolies, received a contract to develop the Nu River. To facilitate the investment, China Huadian established a joint venture with the Yunnan local government to form a subsidiary in November 2004 called the Yunnan Huadian Nujiang Hydropower Development Company. Provincial government documents and experts estimated that 50,000 to 70,000 local people would be displaced by the dam project (Y. Zheng 2006). Together with hydropower projects on the other two rivers of the Three Parallel Rivers World Heritage site, namely the Jinsha–Upper Yangzi and the Lancang–Upper Mekong, these proposed dams would gravely jeopardize their heritage status.

NGO Action, State Response, Local Representation

Chinese NGOs played a decisive role in the ensuing debates (Magee 2005; Busgen 2006; McDonald 2007; Feng 2009). In August 2003, when the China State Development and Reform Committee passed a proposal for a thirteen-cascade dam on the Nu River (21MW), with the approval of the
Yunnan provincial government, Chinese NGOs swung into concerted action. The Beijing-based NGOs Green Earth Volunteers, led by Wang Yongchen, and Friends of Nature organized a roundtable discussion to review the proposed Nu River hydropower project. They raised six points of concern: (1) the Nujiang is an integral part of the World Heritage site; (2) the Nujiang River Valley’s multiple values cannot be reduced to hydropower alone; (3) the river shelters a great number of freshwater fish species endemic to China and Southeast Asia; (4) the Nujiang washes through the faults in the Henduan mountain range, which are active with potential hazards due to soil erosion, landslides, and earthquakes that can shorten the expected economic cycle of a hydropower project; (5) the dam will unsettle people and introduce a great number of migrants to the area; and (6) persistent poverty along the Nujiang is due to multiple factors, and a man-made hydropower project alone will not solve them. More than thirty participants at the meeting echoed such views and the media reported widely on the event. Arguments representing both sides of the debate over the dams cut across many institutions and workshops, media reports, and carried on for months. 4

To the surprise of many, Premier Wen Jiabao suspended the project in April 2004, stating that “on matters of great social concerns, there is an understanding and opinion that on environmental protection, greater caution should be practiced and scientific decision-making must be followed.” 5

China’s NGOs savored their intervention in the eleventh Five-Year plan. A sense of urgency for river conservation and the water ecosystem intensified given the country’s water crisis at the time. Chinese NGOs also successfully identified issues of lack of transparency and informed content in dam decision making and the resettlement plan for local communities. They drew attention to the lack of focus on factors causing poverty in the dam construction areas. And the NGOs significantly slowed down the pace of the hydro development plan during this five-year period. Many regarded this intervention as the beginning of antidam expression in China.

The twelfth Five-Year Energy Plan (2011–15), however, truncated these gains. Contrary to expectations, the government scaled-up dam construction for most of the river projects. Power companies used the burden of climate carbon reduction to their advantage, arguing that climate change victimized communities on both sides of the Himalayas due to extreme weather conditions and hydraulic changes, such as landslides, earthquakes, droughts, and floods. But the power companies themselves also victimized local com-
munities by marginalizing them at all levels of decision making. The power companies had become, in short, the dominant stakeholders.

We find a similar story just across Yunnan’s border.

Sikkim: Hydroelectric Power Projects on the Teesta River

Sikkim, formerly an independent Himalayan kingdom under the Chhogyal lineage, joined the Indian Union in 1975 as a state. Since then, Sikkim has become a prominent tourist destination. Majestic peaks, lakes and waterfalls, forests, an excellent climate, trekking and mountaineering opportunities, and the numerous Buddhist monasteries attract tourists from India and abroad. Moreover, due to the present state government’s numerous proenvironment policies, such as the Green Mission, Sikkim has earned the reputation of being a model among states in India for implementing policies that underscore environmental sustainability in areas such as agriculture, tourism, and urban planning. And, in terms of geopolitics, Sikkim holds a significant location in India’s security discourse given its position in India’s Northeast within close proximity to China.

Contemporary debates and antidam activism around hydroelectric power (HEP) on the Teesta River in Sikkim reflect a larger discourse on India’s development and energy generation. The government of India has historically viewed hydroelectric projects “as the most economic and preferred source of electricity” (Government of India 2011, 1). Given the acknowledged desirability of hydro electricity, the Indian government identified several “objectives for accelerating the pace of hydro power development” (Government of India 2011, 1). These objectives might be summarized as follows: an ongoing emphasis on hydropower in future plan periods, increasing private investment, and emphasis on building a tripartite partnership between the private sector and the central and state governments. Moreover, one of the specific “Policy Instruments” to expedite the development of India’s hydro potential focuses on the promotion of direct private investments in hydropower projects.

India’s Northeast, endowed with an estimated 37 percent of India’s river waters and having been identified with the potential of contributing 41.5 percent of India’s hydropower capacity, is seen as a storehouse for hydroelectric power generation by policymakers and has been labeled India’s “future powerhouse” (Menon et al. 2003; Mahanta 2010). Indeed, the significance of this region’s rich water and forest resources has not escaped the attention of
international organizations such as the World Bank. One among the continuing series of state commitments for HEPs came in May 2003, when Indian prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee unveiled a new hydropower generation scheme, popularly referred to as the “50,000 MW Hydroelectric Initiative,” by commissioning the preparation of a Preliminary Feasibility Report (PFR) of Hydroelectric Schemes. India’s Central Electricity Authority formulated this scheme with sanction from the Ministry of Power. Seven state-affiliated public-sector consultants formulated the PFRs to provide details of the planning, preparation of project and equipment layouts, infrastructure requirements, preliminary environmental and geological studies, cost estimates, and economic evaluation. Completed ahead of schedule in September 2004, the PFRs identified 162 hydropower schemes in sixteen states in India with an aggregate installed capacity of 50,560 MW to be executed during the eleventh and twelfth Plan Periods between 2007 and 2017. According to these PFRs, 10 of the 162 hydropower projects were planned for Sikkim: Dikchu, Rongni Storage, Panan, Lingza, Rukel, Rangyong, Ringpi, Lachen, Teesta-1, and Talem for 1,469 MW of power (Central Electrical Authority, Ministry of Power, Government of India 2004).

Well before these initiatives, however, Sikkim was home to a dozen of what the government called “Hydel Schemes” from 1966 to 2000 (Central Electrical Authority, Ministry of Power, Government of India 2004). Since the late 1990s, the list of hydel schemes was enhanced further with the establishment of a new “cascade” of HEPs on the course of River Teesta: nearly twenty-nine large hydroelectric power projects along with numerous smaller ones, of which some are complete and generate electricity while others remain in various stages of completion. The contracts for these projects have been awarded to both public-sector firms, such as the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation, and private companies, such as Teesta Urja Limited. The state of Sikkim acts as a joint-venture partner in these projects. The ostensible purpose of these dams is to generate electricity, raise revenue, and facilitate development. Teesta Urja’s company website uses the tagline “Power for Peace & Prosperity” following the company title and states:

Water is nature’s most precious gift to mankind. Hydel power is a clean and green power as compared to other conventional power generated using fossil fuel. India—thanks to the mighty Himalayas—is blessed with immense hydel power potential. The development of this vast power potential has been given the top priority by the Govt. of India.
Antidam Protests and NGO Activism

Since 2007, local communities have heavily criticized and resisted the state government’s plan to sanction and build twenty-nine large hydroelectric projects in the ecologically and culturally sensitive Teesta River basin. At the forefront of antidam activism is the grassroots organization the Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT), founded and headed by Dawa Lepcha. The organization’s membership and supporters represent various segments of Sikkimese society: lawyers, journalists, educators, students, farmers, and Buddhist monks. Research with antidam protesters reveal the complex nature of an ongoing contestation involving the state’s people, representing all ethnic groups, activists, and spiritual leaders, against state officials and the hydropower corporations. The issues in question include the privatization of and the hydel project developers’ access to land and forests; encroachment into protected areas for ethnic Lepchas; disputes over leases and compensation; damage to venerated peaks, forests, and bodies of water; and extensive ecological, geological, and wildlife damage. An ACT press release from 2009 articulates the various dimensions of the rationale behind the protests and activism. It warrants quoting at length:

As per current plans the Teesta and its tributaries, will see a maze of large hydel projects. The so called “run-of-the-river” hydroelectric projects being developed involve the construction of large dams which divert the river waters through long tunnels, before the water is dropped back into the river at a downstream location after passing through a powerhouse. These projects are promoted as being “environmentally benign” as they involve smaller submersgences and lesser regulation of water as compared to conventional storage dams. This perception conveniently ignores the impact of several features intrinsic to this design. For example, long stretches of the river will be bypassed between the dam and powerhouse, with up to 85–90 per cent of the river flow in the winter diverted through the tunnels. Not only will this destroy riverine ecology, but a cascade of projects will mean that the river is in full flow only in brief stretches between two successive hydel projects. For example, the Teesta V project being “dedicated to the nation” today and being projected as being environmentally benign, involves the bypassing of 23 km of the Teesta river between the dam and powerhouse. The project has involved serious violation of green laws too during the construction phase. In 2007, the Sikkim Chief Secretary admitted to an environmental governance

The adverse consequences of Teesta Phase V, one of the initial segments of the larger Teesta dam project currently in operation, prompted people to take a closer look at the various aspects of these projects from inception to operation. ACT found many instances of environmental and forest clearance violations, granting of project clearances before the publication of assessment reports, disregard for public opinion or rigged public hearings, a host of geological and ecological problems, and a decrease in forest cover, among other socioeconomic issues. The organization’s 2009 press release further stated:

ACT and other sister organizations have been on a Satyagraha since June 20, 2007 to raise concerns about the juggernaut of over two dozen dams planned in the tiny Himalayan state of Sikkim which are becoming a serious threat to the rights of the indigenous communities and the ecological security of the Himalayan state. This Satyagraha completed two years on June 19th this year. (ACT press release, “Halt Dams Juggernaut on Teesta,” 4 July 2009)

With the help of information obtained via ACT’s Right to Information petitions, ACT prepared a list of several lapses and inconsistencies between the HEP project proposals and clearances and the final outcomes during or after project completion. ACT, for example, found that the number of HEP-affected families in Sikkim increased to 928 as construction progressed. This rate is alarming, given that the clearance for projects were obtained on the basis of much lower estimates, which projected that only 72 families would be affected by construction (ACT press release, “Halt Dams Juggernaut on Teesta,” 4 July 2009). ACT also held the state government responsible for neglecting specific laws and procedures for land acquisition, such as Amending Act 68 of the Land Acquisition Act 1984; the Land Acquisition (Companies) Rules, 1963; and the Land Acquisition (Companies) Act, 1963. Antidam activists viewed the state as the facilitator allowing private companies with HEP contracts to acquire land with ease.

On 10 February 2010, North Sikkim police arrested forty-three members of ACT, including its general secretary, Dawa Lepcha. Lepcha, one of the
most prominent proenvironment activists in Sikkim, reinforced some of the issues raised above during an interview for this research. Since the onset of ACT’s antidam activism, the grassroots group has invoked and practiced satyagraha—the Gandhian approach to nonviolent protests, frequently involving hunger strikes. Lepcha himself undertook and led protracted relay hunger strikes with other activists on numerous occasions, which extended over six hundred days. Their protests subsequently focused on specific projects proposed in North Sikkim, particularly in the Dzongu region, the holy land and exclusive reserve of the members of the state’s Lepcha tribe, whose rights in this area are protected by the Special Provisions under Article 371(F) of the Indian Constitution. Addressing his concerns about the dams’ impact on the environment and the sociocultural profile of the community in Dzongu, Lepcha said:

The spurt of large hydel projects in Sikkim is in direct contradiction of the constitutional and legal protection given to Lepcha tribe. The simultaneous construction of so many projects is going to involve an influx of a huge number of outside labor for a long period of time. These demographic changes are going to have a serious socio cultural impact, particularly in North Sikkim. We want the seven proposed projects in Dzongu scrapped and others in Sikkim reviewed. (Interview with Dawa Lepcha, ACT, 2010)

The development of HEPs continued despite ACT’s protests and petitions collected from a number of supportive organizations nationwide. The Delhi Forum, Kalpavriksh, the South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers, and People, and others appealed to the prime minister and the president of India to stop the HEPs. Although these petitions did not halt the construction process, they prompted, a month later on 18 July 2007, the Supreme Court’s Central Empowered Committee to ask the Sikkim government to respond to the issues raised by the Lepcha community. This court action yielded unsatisfactory results: the HEPs were not stopped. Instead, the state government engaged with ACT to persuade the activists to stop their activism and hunger strike, initially through invitations for negotiations, followed by more direct means, such as arrests. The state continued to reiterate the significance of HEPs for the state’s development and India’s power security, and appealed to ACT to withdraw their satyagraha. At least six rounds of talks ensued between the government and ACT, but none led to a conclusive breakthrough.
After a personal appeal from the chief minister, Dawa Lepcha and Tenzing Lepcha withdrew their indefinite fast on 21 August 2007, which marked the sixty-third day of their hunger strike.

In September 2011, Sikkim experienced a massive and destructive earthquake accompanied by numerous aftershocks. It claimed many lives, destroyed homes, and tragically killed workers trapped inside collapsing tunnels at HEP construction sites. The question of a link between this landslide and years of blasting, tunneling, and heavy construction on the mountains and riverbanks for the mega-HEP projects could not be ignored. The Concerned Lepchas of Sikkim wrote in a press release:

We the concerned Lepchas of Sikkim have been witnessing the entire ongoing natural catastrophe in Sikkim, particularly Dzongu, Chungthang and Lachung area with regret, shock and helplessness. Needless to mention here of our vibrant stand in protesting the Mega-Power Projects in the region which seismically falls in the most active Zone V. It is put on record here that the CLOS (Concerned Lepchas of Sikkim) along with the Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) fought for 915 days calling for the closure of all the mega-power projects from the region before the unyielding and inconsiderate authorities. (Concerned Lepchas of Sikkim press release, 24 September 2011, accessed from ACT website, http://www.actsikkim.com/)

This activism has continued since 2007 through multiple modes of resistance and outreach. These include relay hunger strikes, research and preparation of reports addressing the negative consequences of HEPs, awareness campaigns and tours, speaking engagements, appeals and press releases in the media, publication of campaign statements, and continuous research on HEPs in Sikkim. ACT also maintains an active website and blog online and regularly publishes features, videos, news coverage, and photo essays documenting the impact of the HEPs on people's lives and livelihoods. Networked with Indian and international organizations, such as the International Rivers Network, ACT invites such groups to collaborate on research and to campaign for change. In 2012, ACT commemorated the fifth anniversary of the commencement of their hunger strike protest against the HEPs in Dzongu by organizing a symbolic eight-hour sit-in (dharna) with the objective of demanding geological impact and assessment reports and reiterating their call for scrapping the Panang (280 MW) and Teesta Stage IV (520 MW) projects, which at the time were yet to start. This section would not be complete with-
out underscoring ACT’s role in sustaining what might be called the spirit of democracy—the centrality of dialogue, research, and awareness, harnessing informed public opinion with the aim to communicate with the state and work toward safeguarding political and socioeconomic rights. Moreover, along with ACT, there are dozens of other activist groups protesting the construction of dams on other rivers across India and simultaneously moving forward with an interlinked movement to challenge land grabs, access to mines and forests, and numerous other modes of privatization of resources that have rendered people displaced and, in most cases, disenfranchised.

Analytical and Practical Crossroads

We seem at a crossroads. Other than recognizing that both India and China share a common problem of local devastation due to national development, as discussed above, how should we proceed? Is it always a case of activists and local communities against government authorities? What’s the role of the media here? And why are there so many similarities in outcome between India and China despite their vastly different political systems?

Rather than continue with yet more academic analysis, we propose a dialogue or “chat” between the two authors. This format not only enlivens the discussion for the reader but its dynamic nature also engenders new insights or strategies for the two participants and their respective problem- atiques. Our chat, in short, demonstrates India-China at work. These exchanges were conducted via Skype and e-mail. The first chat occurred in February 2012; the second, ten months later. Additions and multiple revisions followed in text.

Following, then, is the chat between Li Bo (LB) and Payal Banerjee (PB) on India-China.

A Chat: India-China and the Environment

LI: Given India’s democratic system, why do groups like ACT or any Delhi-based organization seem to have little opportunity to demand proper consultation on project planning and environmental clearance? I presume that dissenters in India, unlike those in China, where the dam business is highly governmental, do not run the risk of being questioned on their loyalty and patriotism. Yet the government’s
conduct in India on dam construction seems to parallel that in China.

**Banerjee:** The type of political system matters but not in a linear, predictable way. When national and international elites collude, as in the case of large infrastructural projects involving massive sums of capital, elite claims of “national security,” “economic development,” and “investment returns” tend to override most other considerations, especially if they come from locations marked as peripheral. Indeed, there are frequent public debates, town-hall meetings, and unambiguous public demands for adequate assessment and neutral research. However, these events or reports can be rigged: inadequate publicity, gatekeeping, preventing some people from speaking out, or ignoring certain voices are common strategies. During instances of severe public protest and criticism, infrastructure projects may be postponed or scrapped, only to reemerge elsewhere, or even at the same river-site. This reminds me of the example you gave from China’s experience. Indian activists also point out that the powerful and politically connected builders and stakeholders call the shots. And, to highlight your point about loyalty and patriotism, indeed, the ACT in Sikkim has been called regressive, unpatriotic, and antidevelopment, which is another code for disloyalty to the nation.

**Li:** I am curious, what do you make of some of the similarities in outcomes or consequences in China and India, so far as activism and protests are concerned? The region between northeastern Indian and southwestern China, roughly two sides of the Himalayas, is home to certain ethnic groups and both areas are somewhat far from the political capital and financial centers. Not only is there an issue of how local voices are represented and heard at the central political arena through formal and informal channels, but there also seems to be a lack of capacity for the centrally located government, or even environmental NGOs, to understand and collaborate with local groupsmeaningfully. This is particularly true when the concerned people at the marginalized lands are ethnic minorities at the borderlands. In China, these aspects can be used easily as reasons for deploying the urgency of national security and border control. As a result, the intention for nuanced social and cultural understanding or profound discussions is discouraged or even prohibited. Meanwhile, the center’s strong determination to exploit rich natural resources in order to
incorporate the local economy into the larger national economic agenda of a unified national market, and the national or even international economy, leaves little space and opportunity for alternative expressions by and choices for the locals.

I believe the similarities between India and China also lie to the extent in which local livelihoods are being sacrificed for the sake of borderland security and sovereignty claims. There is enough evidence to suggest that when local livelihoods on both sides of the border are made difficult and locals have no sense of control over the situation, the borderlands lose their fluidity in terms of the movement of people, goods, cultures, and in its place anger and frustration give life to violence and everyday resistance.

I feel anxious and disappointed at a very personal level. As an environmentalist, I’ve gone through mostly losing battles and witnessed many environmental crises of different kinds in the last decade as China’s economic reform steamrolls ahead. But I also know that it is not an option for environmental NGOs in India or China to not take up the fight. Both countries have great population density and foresee market opportunities with rapid economic growth. Needless to say, environmental NGOs cannot afford to not challenge the adverse consequences, engage with people and politics, and advocate for policy changes.

Banerjee: I’d like your perspective on another question: What might be comparable issues in China in regards to how the state frames what are labeled as “obstacles” in developing HEPs? From the Indian example, I have noted that in its discussion of the merits of expediting and expanding HEPs, the government has made an effort to identify what it deems to be “obstacles” in the path of hydroelectricity generation. An excerpt from a hydropower policy document, as follows, might give you an idea:

The constraints which have affected hydro development are technical (difficult investigation, inadequacies in tunneling methods), financial (deficiencies in providing long term financing), tariff related issues and managerial weaknesses (poor contract management). The hydro projects are also affected by geological surprises (especially in the Himalayan region where underground tunneling is required), inaccessibility of the area, problems due to
delay in inland acquisition, and resettlement of project affected families, law & order problem in militant infested areas. (Government of India, Policy for Hydro Power Development 1998, 2)

Here, I find the framing of “obstacles” to signal the state’s construction of what it sees as hindrances in the way of development. And these hindrances include people, their resistance against marginalization, and relevant socioeconomic crisis! The strategy of naming impediments to development as “geological surprises,” “delay in land acquisition,” “resettlement of project affected families,” and “militant infested areas” reveals an administrative attitude that is overwhelmingly techno-bureaucratic. This position distances the state from people’s needs and lived experiences and from the more challenging questions of long-term sustainability of the ecosystem. Is there some form of a parallel in China?

L1: It is very interesting, indeed, the use of obstacles framed by Indian policymakers. Although the Chinese system does not use the same words, the obstacles listed as impediments to development refer to the very same issues, whose potential harm or costs are often minimized or underplayed. In other words, similar issues are externalized to the victims or to all taxpayers. The consequence is that the power company takes in more profits by not shouldering any social responsibilities. That is exactly how “obstacles” are perceived and addressed, without calling them such. More interestingly, the hydro-company’s projects are often marketed as a poverty reduction strategy and an economic stimulus, organized jointly by county and provincial government and power companies. They claim that these projects would light up the inaccessible communities that have been held in the dark regarding the information and technology markets. By providing electricity, they get the infrastructure to increase their choices and reduce their workload, previously conducted manually. The government plays a major role in painting and marketing this beautiful picture. When met with resistance, the government uses persuasion or coercion to deflect opposition. This is done in the name of national interest and national growth, which provides the projects with plenty of legitimacy until recently, when independent research and work on resettled population and damage to ecological and cultural heritage became increasingly available. This joint venture between government and the power business is very problematic.
And in the Chinese context, environmental NGOs can be negatively viewed. They are portrayed as a different kind of obstacle to development, or even antihuman and antisociety. China has only had a brief history with NGOs, starting in the mid-1990s, and these have been viewed as the result of foreign influence with questionable purposes. In less hostile terms, green NGOs have been profiled as those that have had individual livelihood security, and thus prioritized the welfare of wildlife over human beings, thus demonstrating no sympathy for local communities. This perception is not uncommon among mainstream techno-bureaucrats. However, one observes a greater degree of hostility against environmental NGOs in arguments that profile these organizations as obstacles to development and blame them for being engineered by sick foreign motives to block China’s economic take-off.

I wonder to what extent or, if at all, Indian NGOs experience similar allegations?

BANERJEE: Yes, one does encounter the “anti-India foreign influence” rhetoric periodically. If not always in the case of the anti-dam movement, then certainly this rhetoric appears in other realms of state concern, such as the so-called Maoist movement. The grassroots movements mobilized by organizations such as the ACT against the hydro-projects are frequently labeled as antidevelopment and antinational, standing in the way of India’s progress. I would add, however, that the central government in India is cautious about Sikkim’s proximity to China and as a result decided in 2013 to not involve the World Bank in the region’s power infrastructure development.

I wanted to hear your thoughts on another issue, Li Bo. I have noticed during my research that governments or agencies representing the state bring up the question of belonging (who legitimately belongs to or counts as, say, Lepcha) as a strategy to delegitimate people’s claims for justice. For example, in one of the official assessment reports for HEP clearance, the Lepchas of Sikkim were (inaccurately) represented as migrants from Assam and Myanmar, thereby delegitimizing their claims as the inhabitants of Sikkim. The ACT countered this claim by invoking the Supreme Court of India, which had declared the “Lepchas as the original indigenous people of Sikkim” (ACT press release, 19 July 2011).

Have you noticed comparable trends or strategies being deployed
in China from which we can perhaps build a framework to better understand the political strategies used by both states?

L1: In China, this differs a great deal. With the migrants—primarily those who moved from rural to urban centers as cheap labor—the question of ethnicity is not mixed with issues of land entitlement. Identification of ethnic groups was largely done at the beginning of the People’s Republic. In China, a close comparative example would be the interpretation of the Law of Regional National Autonomy (Sixth National People’s Congress 1984) to determine the best interests of the potentially affected ethnic groups. But it is not easy an easy parallel to draw.

There is another issue that I would like to address on the subject of representation. There has always been a critique that local communities in Nujiang watershed have had little representation in the Chinese NGOs’ antidam campaign, which is seen as urban-based, nature conservation-oriented, and driven by middle-class perspectives. This stands out as the most striking difference between the Chinese Nujiang and Indian Teesta campaigns. The latter is peopled by local Sikkimese living in and around the project areas. The Chinese political system is rather slow still in opening up to create an environment for NGO registration and ability to offer full-fledged services, even though much rhetoric has been given by the central government to encourage society to self-manage and self-help. Grassroots NGOs have always been a strictly regulated group given that their loyalty to national interests and national security has been greatly questioned. The remote and borderland areas of ethnic minorities in western rural China, despite decades-long village-level elections, still seem to reflect Han Chinese dominance; consequently, it will remain the most challenging zone for mobilization and expression by community-based NGOs. Therefore, environmental and policy procedural rationales employed by Chinese capital-based NGOs against dams are hardly representative of the local communities, even if some of the local communities’ issues were documented and discussed.

My question to you, Payal, is this: Do you agree that local communities in the Himalayan borderlands are doubly pressured by and sacrificed on the issue of climate change? Are you hopeful that Indian NGOs or large organizations in civil society might lead to a more inclusive process for the borderland communities?
Let me explain why I ask this question. As we know, China feels intense pressures to respond to the call of carbon reduction due to global climate change politics, particularly after the Copenhengen conference in 2010. But the government’s strategy has been contested domestically. I expect India will face a similar situation soon. While both countries, in terms of national per capita share of CO₂ emission, are still categorically lower than that of the industrialized nations (India is still much lower), that of the urban centers in both countries are or will quickly catch up following the conventional economic liberalization policies of the Western countries and financial institutions like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. Case in point is the citywide average of CO₂ emissions for Beijing and Shanghai. These have reached 10.8 and 12.9/tCO₂e/capita, while the national average is 3.40/tCO₂e/capita (Kossoy and Guigon 2012). In other words, the economic discrepancy and sharing of carbon debts between the rural and urban sectors is increasing. Both countries adhere to the principle of “Common but Differentiated Responsibility” in global climate change negotiations, but the game of quick economic catch-up for the urban centers in both countries will likely continue, while hiding behind the skeleton of the rural poor in their respective regions. And this “catch-up” will continue to take advantage of the natural resources in the vast rural areas and have the rural poor shoulder a disproportionate share of the environmental degradation and pollution. As far as hydro-dam development is concerned, river ecosystems and rural livelihoods that depend on the river system will be sacrificed in the name of clean energy and carbon reduction for those in urban centers.

Banerjee: Yes, I agree that the marginalized communities end up absorbing a disproportionate share of the costs of development. Marginalization, of course, represents a complex intersection of various factors such as gender, ethnicity, class, religion. And, in the case of Sikkim, there are considerations that are unique to the socioeconomic and historical contexts of the state. Some might argue that states in India’s Northeast are privileged because of certain protective exceptions (land ownership possible for Sikkim subjects only) or the central government’s financial assistance programs. Yet, if we consider the movement against the dams and concerns raised by the ACT, it is clear that the people in these regions are, as you say, doubly
pressed: they must make room for the development of mega-projects and confer legitimacy to the state’s Green Mission.

Li: Clearly, much remains to be done. This conversation has been most helpful.

I must say, working on this book, I have felt a bit lonely and challenged as I am the only nonacademic in this group. And attempting to compare real cases from two countries—especially, India—has not been easy for me.

But with your gracious participation, Payal, I feel the task is more possible to do. Through our conversations, I have become convinced that, together, we can gain a great vantage point with real demonstrative value. In a word, I am hopeful.

Banerjee: I, too, am hopeful and excited! I look forward to more exchanges and collaborations with you and others working in and outside China on these questions. Indeed, I think that the current India vs. China hyper-trope is very limiting: it constrains our consciousness, locks us into an unimaginative sense of self, and blurs the scope for truly listening to each other without the babble of narrow nationalism that is scared and scary, suspicious, and smug. As we realized, it prevents so many from seeing some of the compelling similarities in social outcomes and shared concerns. It is about time that the two ancient neighbors revived former traditions of exchanges while creating new possibilities for dialogue and collaborations in a non-state-centric manner. In a word, I share your hope!

CONCLUSION

This chapter has exposed a looming crisis in sustainability for the subregion. It compels rethinking in ecological, not just economic, terms. We need to recalibrate “efficiency” toward a more holistic understanding of “benefits” and “gains.” Here, local participation is key. It contributes to a broadening of national decision making, especially in foreign policy, to take into account local as well as national and regional interests. Moreover, we are only beginning to understand the worsening ecological system in China. Resource interventions that do not respect mountain ecologies create and reinforce interlocking webs of environmental and socioeconomic vulnerability. High levels of water stress and growing levels of desertification are early warning
signs of the rising costs that a fast-track model of growth demands. As much as 98 percent of the 2.64 million square kilometers of desert land, or 27 percent of the total national land area, lies in the western region of China where over 90 percent of the poor in this region live on desert lands. Severe degradation of the natural environment has seen the encroaching footprints of desert registering an annual increase of 3,500 square kilometers in the late 1990s (People’s Daily Online 2005; China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development 2012). There is now increasing consciousness that, if left unattended, these environmental transgressions hold the potential of boomeranging on the very source of growth itself. It is this realization that is waking up policymakers and energizing measures to repair the ecosystem’s “carrying capacity.”

Research remains to be done on monitoring the extent of these changes to the ecosystem in the Tibetan plateau or India’s Northeast. While scientific studies are beginning to establish the extent of damage to biodiversity in the Tibetan region, social impact assessments are largely absent. For instance, scientists, range managers, and development personnel working on the Tibetan plateau have not factored in the effects of climate change on Tibetan rangelands. They have focussed, instead, on questions such as whether the Tibetans are “rational” land managers. Yet evidence abounds with examples of innovative experiments from various border regions in jointly managing shared resources. Such innovative frameworks are particularly critical for addressing the challenges of a shared neighborhood. Scholarship needs to explore these prospects for a common analytical framework.

The two cases on dams from China and India demonstrate the intimate connections between resource management and democratic politics—perhaps best described as people’s interventions—in the region. In both India and China, local communities have suffered when the state decided to undertake large infrastructural projects, like dam building. In the case of Sikkim in India, NGOs based in local communities have advocated for “nature-friendly” and “holistic” development policies. In China, by contrast, the NGOs based in capital cities have worked closely with political and economic centers, along with the media, to shape public opinion on river projects. These projects’ exploitations and devastations to local resources, environmental and human alike, are well documented.

While unilateral, top-down decision making may be expected of a one-party state like China, how do we account for the manner in which local activists, community representatives, and NGOs have found their voices trun-
cated and lives displaced within comparable patterns of disenfranchisement in India’s parliamentary democracy? What results from this is the “winning” of the nation-state government at the expense of lapses and losses in connecting the landscape with the lifescape. But can this loss really provide security for the nation-state?

Instead of being distracted by the different political systems operating in China and India—and reifying binaries between authoritarian China and democratic India—this chapter has asked: Which experiences and outcomes are similar in both countries and what do these shared experiences compel us to reconsider? What is the common problem? And what do common outcomes—the primacy of mainstream development approaches, environmental problems, people’s marginalization, and displacement—indicate about power structures? Lastly, how can we achieve greater transparency and accountability, despite differences in political systems? Our analysis and subsequent conversation offered a concrete way to proceed. It promises hope for the future, we believe, given our method’s grounding in an ancient, capillary understanding of India-China.

Notes

1. In China, controversies have surrounded the Sanmen Xia Dam on the Yellow River, the Three-Gorges Dam on the Yangtze, and the Manwan Dam on the Mekong (Jing 1997; Yu 2004). Likewise in India, the Chandil, Icha, and Narmada dams have ignited intense criticism and public protests (International Rivers 2008; Banerjee and Sood 2012).

2. China Huadian was established in 2002, as the state-owned enterprise for production and supply of electricity, heat, and the development of power-related primary energy.


4. A representative and timely book that reflects and speaks for the views of the antidam NGOs, which composes many scholars’ collective work, is Kexue Fazhan Guan Yu Jianghe Kaifa (Scientific river development) edited by Yisheng Zheng (2005).


6. See http://www.sikkimpower.org/power/files/Status_20of_20HEPs.pdf and http://www.sikkimpower.org/power/power_developers.aspx for a complete list of
hydropower developers, along with other details regarding the status of environmental and forest clearances, land acquisition, and the Sikkim government’s equity in the projects.


8. Banerjee conducted research on these issues in Sikkim in August 2011 and from August 2012 to the fall 2015.

9. For more details about this antidam activism, see “Teesta’s Tears” (Bunsha 2008).


11. There is substantial scholarship on this issue. As the Carter Center’s (2000) research points out, “If one bases the assessment on China’s 5,000 years of history, which lacks a tradition of competitive elections, then China’s new experiment merits a more positive assessment. China’s approach to elections is incremental and experimental, and officials are constantly seeking ways to improve the process. In a decade, the program has made real progress.”