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NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Views from Below: The Economics and Politics of Water in the Darjeeling Himalayas

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1. INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, when Nepal was reeling under a politically induced fuel crisis, a local taxi driver in Kathmandu city questioned, and wisely so, my need to travel across the breadth of the city for a thirty-minute meeting at the office of the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD). Struck by the elegant landscape of the office, and convinced that matters of utmost importance must happen there, he pressed me during my return to tell him about this office. On hearing my Nepali translation of ICIMOD's vision of 'enhancing livelihoods, equity, and social and environmental security for all mountain people[s]', he was deeply perplexed. Why was he, a resident of that very city, unaware of this Kathmandu-based institution and its worthy intentions? I am afraid I failed, despite my best efforts, to assure him of how he gains from ICIMOD's objectives.

In a similar vein, Gyawali and Thompson (2016) write, 'Ask any Nepali villager about the Millennium [now Sustainable] Development Goals (M/SDG) and you will be met with a confused shrug.' The term 'Millennium Development Goals' makes for a 'confusing mouthful' when translated into Nepali and, as the authors note, 'global concerns (sic) on the urgency to meeting these goals are poorly aligned with the everyday life challenges of ordinary Nepali citizens'. Both in the text (2016) and in personal communications (2017) Gyawali and Thompson argue that 'to put it briefly

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and bluntly, the architects of the SDGs have much to learn on what "sustainable", "development" or for that matter, what a "goal" is.' .

'Environment and the Himalayas' has been a global, developmental concern for a generation. Yet, the everyday challenges experienced by the dispersed and widely heterogenous Himalayan community lie at some distance—to put it mildly—from the world of environmental policies, strategies, interventions, and research. This note speaks to this disjuncture—to the politics and practice of environmental policies and strategies, and how these policies and strategies relate (or do not relate) to 'views from below' (Maathai 1995). In this case, I focus on the Darjeeling Himalaya region and compare contemporary 'productions' of environmental challenges here to everyday local realities. I draw attention to three developments which—although interconnected, and demanding more holistic framings—are selectively addressed (or not) as environmental challenges:

1. scientific claims on the urgency of climate change, which facilitate, ill-matched climate adaptation and mitigation programmes, including hydropower development projects, the latter identified as climate mitigating, i.e. generating clean energy;
2. researcher/ civil society critique on the re-emergence of large dams (for hydropower) which, although well intentioned, pays little attention to;
3. the everyday challenge of water supply, which has been a persisting and unresolved local reality, aggravated by both climate impacts as well as climate interventions.

Eckholm's 'Theory of Himalayan Environmental Degradation', which spoke of the inevitable and alarming ecological crisis in the Himalayan region in the 1970s, is long considered debunked (Guthman 1997). But the politics of environmental crises, or what Agarwal (2005) notes as the political production[s] of the 'environment', has persisted in relation to the Himalayas. Across the years, different environmental issues have been identified, aggregated, and positioned as grave and urgent challenges—but nonetheless resolvable by (mostly externally predetermined) technocratic solutions. Such theorizing reduces the 'environment' to an entirely abstract entity. In the process, it disassociates what 'environment' means locally, in the sense of the multiple, everyday challenges faced by local communities—the complexity of which is furthered by diverse ecological and uniquely local sociopolitical and economic contexts. Nonetheless, a selective imagery of the Himalayas in science, policy, and research is skillfully positioned in development as stories from below. Writing about the scalar politics of climate change in rural Nepal, Yates (2012) points to how narratives of

climate change that will fit with predetermined developmental solutions are first constructed, and then reproduced, as 'local' manifestations of climate change. It is inevitable that such 'normative frameworks of development [prescribing to] "desirable states" of socio-ecological systems' are deeply contingent on 'unstated assumptions and belief systems' (Yates 2012, 537).

The 'consensual presentation and mainstreaming of the global problem of climate change' (Swyngedouw 2012, 213), thrown in with the disproportionate power that statistics and numbers generate in environmental science, has helped make an overwhelming cause of climate alarm in the Himalayan context. Climate science is particularly symptomatic of aggregate assumptions and selective imagery. Pomeranz (2009) notes that 'glaciers, which almost never used to make the news, are now generating plenty of worrisome headlines'. Thus, a climate crisis in the Himalayas is highlighted even though data on climate-induced changes in the vast and scattered realms of what makes for the Himalayas is acknowledged to be sparse, uneven, and mostly unknown. What follows as disparate climate interventions speak of the age-old practice of a politico-environmental construction of local Himalayan landscapes.

This is not to say that the Himalayas are not a specific geophysical landscape or, for that matter, are not—as popularly described—a 'climate hotspot'. Indeed, as Pomeranz (2009, 5) notes, 'For almost half the world's population, water-related dreams and fears intersect in the Himalayas and on the Tibetan plateau.' The 'Himalayan Water Towers' is indeed real; what such imagery of water abundance masks is the reality that local communities scattered across the mountain region rely not so much on the region's perennial rivers but on groundwater that becomes available through natural springs (Tambe *et al.* 2012). For multiple reasons, and in many areas, the water in these natural springs has been drying up, but this reality has received comparatively little attention; and how diverse local communities cope with declining water sources has been even less researched.

In relation to recent climate interventions, I raise attention here to the paradox in policy prescriptions. The Himalayas are considered highly vulnerable to climate change and, therefore, are the focus of numerous climate adaptation plans. They are, ironically, also the target of ambitious hydropower development plans, positioned globally as a climate mitigation (clean energy) strategy. To that extent, there has been little consideration of how global climate strategies intersect with the local effects of climate. It is worth noting here that in national plans and policies, hydropower development is not pursued essentially to mitigate climate change but rather to meet objectives of sustained economic growth and energy demand. This

anomaly is evident in the deregulation of India's environment and energy policies and in interventions to speed up hydropower development. It is evident also in the conscious, careful delinking of national and state policies, strategies, and interventions on climate, water, and energy even though, fundamentally, climate change and climate mitigation—especially in the Himalayan region— requires making these intersections visible and deliberate, rather than ignoring them. It is another matter that while hydropower might be comparatively green—although this is a contested discourse—the environmental and social implications of large dams in the high-altitude, high seismic-activity regions of the Eastern Himalayas leave much to worry about (Ahlers *et al*. 2015).

The current development of hydropower in the region has, thus, been far from consensual, and the process has sparked critique, conflicts, and contestations. These developments have drawn the attention of diverse groups of civil society actors, including researchers, who question the dam construction activities in the climate-vulnerable Eastern Himalayan waterscape and their skewed human-environment implications, and the procedural and distributional injustices in the dam development process. This speaks to the second issue of focus—whether and how these metaphors (languages) and ontologies (discourses) of environmental injustices represent local realities. Here, I relate to Forsyth's (2014, 230) analysis that 'environmental politics does not consider deeply enough how or with whose concerns' discourses are framed and applied.

In the Darjeeling region, the well-intentioned researcher and civil societyled critique of large dams is as distanced from complex ground realities of latent old water injustice as climate policies and interventions are from ground realities. Specifically, the focus on dams—and not on the unique ways in which water flows and is available or not to local populations—completely overlooks the uneven economics of investments in large dams. This is especially true in comparison to severe under-investments in meeting the supply requirement of domestic and irrigation water supply (Joshi 2015) even though for the locals 'the water supply crisis is synonymous with the image of [the region's] town[s]' (Rai 2016, 48).

Although data is unreliable and anecdotal, it is said that in towns like Darjeeling less than 50 per cent of urban households are connected to the municipal water supply (Chettri and Tamang 2013). A lucrative private water market operates here, and permeates community and official interventions in water management. These hybrid arrangements of water delivery nested in entrenched political, social, economic injustices and are symptomatic of a democracy deficit evident in the wider political, social,

and economic setting (Joshi 2015). Local politicians point to the enduring urban water supply crisis as a key marker of the politico-spatial injustice:

> … in terms of infrastructure, … nothing has been added (by the current West Bengal Government) to … the water supply … [to] whatever the British had planned [then] for 3,000 people in Darjeeling town, [even though the population] is over 3 lakhs [300,000] (Wenner 2013, 209).

However, it is another reality that the everyday water supply injustice is obscured by other, competing political priorities and interests, including those of local actors. This persisting injustice relating to 'everyday water' has been disproportionately ignored by researchers. Many researchers, including me, are driven in no small degree by current flows of climate funding to write and speak about dams, which present a far more attractive, contemporary issue in relation to environmental [in] justice. My ongoing research around the politics of hydropower projects in the region often provokes ridicule and anger among friends and family who live here, who have often asked*:*

> What is the problem with large dams? Isn't that for development, for the economic upliftment of our backwardness? What about looking into the 'real water [supply] problems' we face here? Or is that not a good-enough topic for researchers like you? (Joshi 2015).

And yet, as the locals know very well, the problem is not just about water supply or dams. A participant at a workshop organised in Kalimpong in 2012 noted, 'The problem is not water—water is only one manifest of everything else that is wrong here. Solutions need to emerge here locally and they need to go beyond water.'

If we are to 'critically interrogate the universalizing and globalizing tendencies in asserting and invocating environment and related injustices' (Sikor and Newell 2014, 155), we must look beyond narrow development conceptualizations of the 'environment' guided mostly by funding and policy instruments. Such a practice often legitimizes the construction of 'local problems'—in this case, of climate change—so that they can be apolitically slotted into predetermined categories of environmental interventions. Among other things, such processes also tend to lump diverse groups of 'mountain people' 'as an already constituted and coherent group' (Tamang 2002, 317). Such rhetoric completely disregards the complex, historical, as well as evolving weave of social relations that determines how diverse groups of 'mountain people' in spatially unique contexts interact with what constitutes their 'environment'. This is the unfortunate divide between *'eagle's eye science* and *toad's eye science*' (Gyawali and Thompson 2016), but what the authors argue for—a fundamental rethinking of development, so that it is aligned with the everyday realities of

local communities—is easier said than done. This is especially so given the politics of scientific scholarship—although it is claimed to be highly objective, it is hardly 'neutral, [rather it] is unavoidably partial, unavoidably political, and has unavoidably ethical consequences' (Smith 2004; 504). Thus, locals, like the taxi driver in Kathmandu, remain excluded from discussions of "their" environment unless, of course, they are subjects of "scientific" research. Toadeye or citizen science has long been cast aside as not-good-enough science, and remains fundamentally disassociated from the high horse nexus of the eagle-eye science of environmental policy, research, and academia. This is testament in the unfortunate disjuncture of the economics and politics of water - in science, policy and research, and in everyday lives of the locals in the ecologically and socio-politically diverse Himalayas.

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