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(Note: All photos by author, unless noted otherwise)

ABBREVIATIONS

BL	Bhutia-Lepcha
CM	Chief Minister
CoI	Certification of Identification
DONER	The Union Ministry of Development of the North Eastern Region
FD	Forest Department
GAC	Gorkha Apex Committee
GI	Geographical Indication
HMNE	Horticulture Mission in North East
ICOMOS	International Council on Monuments and Sites
IHCAE	Indian Himalayan Center for Adventure and Eco Tourism
IUCN	International Union for the Conservation of Nature
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
KLCDI	Kangchenjunga Landscape Conservation and Development Initiative
KNP	Khangchendzonga National Park
MLA	Member of the Legislative Assembly
MNA	Macro Management in Agriculture
MP	Member of Parliament
NEC	North East Council
PM	Prime Minister
RKVY	<i>Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojna</i> – National Farmer’s Development Scheme
RTI	Right to Information
SAGY	<i>Saansad Adarsh Gram Yojna</i> – Parliamentarian’s Model Village Scheme

SBFP Sikkim Biodiversity Conservation and Forest Management Project
SIMFED Sikkim State Co-operative Supply and Marketing Federation Ltd.
UNESCO The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
YHAI Youth Hostels Association of India

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PRÉCIS

This dissertation asks what happens to the politics of multiculturalism in postcolonial India, epitomized in the motto of “unity in diversity”, when “diversity” becomes not only a social, but also an ecological good, given the value placed on biodiversity in the Anthropocene. This ethnography studies marketized conservation practices such as ecotourism, in the northeastern frontier state of Sikkim, as emergent sites of a politics of *bio-cultural recognition*, where recognition-seeking ethnic groups articulate their under-valued cultural diversity with the valued biodiversity of this Himalayan region. The central questions are: if recognition of diversity by the state is a mode of being subjected to its sovereignty and of being bound to it, what liberatory potential does being subjects of marketized conservation paradigms offer to marginalized frontier communities? What are the limits of these alternative avenues of recognition? And what is the impact of this politics of ecological and neoliberal multiculturalism – negotiated between frontier citizens, conservationists and national tourists as financiers of neoliberal conservation – on the postcolonial liberal state, which ceases to be the sole adjudicator of recognition and redistribution, that is a significant source of its authority?

The Indian “ethnographic state” has historically set rigid bureaucratized criteria for granting recognition and redistribution to marginalized socio-economic groups. Marketized environmentalism can be an escape from state sovereignty, especially for ethnic groups that are unable to articulate their sense of exclusion to fit such state criteria. These alternative avenues however engender new forms of symbolic violence. The limits of biocultural recognition, this ethnography argues, comes from the ecological circle, the market and the state each making conflicting demands of the recognition-seeking nature-culture assemblages. In the ecological paradigm, diverse cultural groups that help in preserving nature are held in high esteem. The

biodiversity discourse however places a strong emphasis on nativism of species, treating introduced biota with suspicion. This parameter becomes problematic for certain frontier communities, who fear the invalidation their claims about environmental stewardship, given their history of migration into the region. On the other hand, the demand made of nature-culture from the market perspective is one of exotic distinctiveness, irrespective of nativism. Here the anxiety, especially for Sikkimese citizens of Nepali ethnicity, is that their Hindu customs, practiced in subtropical landscapes, will fail to impress the primarily Indian tourists who seek an encounter with discernably “other” hill-tribes, in idyllic alpine Himalayan settings. Lastly, despite the state itself promoting neoliberal development, urging communities to orient themselves towards the market, state functionaries worry about losing their authority in the process. Adequately showing deference to state authority, even while marketizing their nature-culture, becomes another onus for the marginalized groups, necessary in order to avoid retaliatory assertions of power from state personnel. The five chapters trace these impasses, analyzing the different types of “diversity” that are demanded of frontier nature-culture, in various sites of community-ecology-market-state encounters. Ethnographic sites include forest walks, trail-building excursions, ecotourism festivals, tourism policy planning sessions, organic agriculture promotion and forestry meetings.

Moving away from the emphasis on the receding of the state, as often occurs in studies of neoliberalization of conservation and development, this dissertation attends to the state’s reactions to this perceived decline. The state’s ambivalence about the market as a competitor to its authority, and the position of development subjects caught between the state and the market, be it in ecotourism or organic agriculture, is the object of analysis. The aim is to complicate both the idea of unchallenged neoliberal hegemony and the idea of the market as an escape from the

bounds of the nation-state. Secondly, the ethnography draws attention to the incorporation of more-than-human neighbors into human politics over recognition of belonging. Analyzing the political alliance between the Nepali people and the peacock for example, the dissertation examines the ways in which these assemblages articulate and disarticulate. The effort is to expand the understanding of participation in multicultural politics in the Anthropocene. The research sheds light on the ‘cross-pollination’ of ecological and political discourses of belonging, representation and boundary-making. Ecological science, culture and politics, it highlights, are unpredictably intertwined in the quest to make landscape boundaries meaningful. Lastly, domestic tourism to indigenous territories has grown in recent years in India. This phenomenon remains under-examined when read simply as the neoliberalization of nature-culture. The ethnography highlights the impact of the national liberal citizen-as-tourist on ethnopoltics, that arises not from the all-encompassing power of the tourist gaze, but rather from the frontier community’s anticipation of the gaze and their desire and given-to-be-seen by it. Yet a constant second-guessing of what aspects of the frontier’s nature-culture will meet with positive validation makes the tourist gaze an opaque and anxiety-inducing catalyst of ethnopoltics.

The politics of neoliberal and ecological multiculturalism, the dissertation demonstrate therefore, entails a diffusion of physical sites and of governing gazes of recognition. In this diffusion, it argues, communities trade the postcolonial state’s binding ethnographic matrix of cultural categorizations in favor of an unbounded yet anxiety-inducing terrain of negotiations, that is equally unsettling for the state and for its multispecies citizens.

INTRODUCTION

In early 2015, a forest-fringe village in India's north-eastern frontier state of Sikkim was gearing up to claim its spotlight as the first ecotourism destination being promoted by the state's Forest Department under its \$62 million biodiversity conservation initiative. Sikkim is part of the eastern Himalayan mega-biodiversity hotspot, as designated by Conservation International (Mittermeier et al. 2011). Between its subtropical to alpine climate zones, all located within a distance of a hundred odd kilometers, it boasts significant ecological diversity. Statistics cited include 4,500 species of flowering plants, 550 species of birds, 690 species of butterflies and so on (SBFP 2011). Promotion of ecotourism is a way for the state to marketize the conservation of this nature, in keeping with the global imperative of neoliberalization of environmental conservation. Capitalizing on the popular perception of the state as a destination with idyllic mountain communities living in close harmony with nature, various pockets of nature-culture in the state are being developed as ethno-ecological commodities¹ or "products" by the Forest Department. The goal is to incentivize conservation efforts in these villages, inhabited by particular ethnic groups such as the Bhutia, Lepcha, Sherpa, and Nepali/Gorkha, by directing the tourism spending of India's citizen-consumers (as the predominant category of environmentally-conscious tourists to the region) to them.

Accordingly, the assemblage of forests of the Fambang Lho Wildlife Sanctuary, packaged with the culture of the predominantly Nepali/Gorkha community of the nearest village, was the first ethno-ecological commodity being marketed by the Forest Department (FD). Since

¹ Here I am drawing on the term ethno-commodity that Comaroff and Comaroff (2009) have coined, to describe the phenomenon of cultural commodification being undertaken agentively by ethnic groups that present themselves as corporatized, market-oriented blocs in late capitalism.

the ecotourism festival was meant to “open up the village to the market”, a two-minute promotional video was produced to help publicize the event. Financial constraints unfortunately led to the video being aired only on some regional television channels, and on the several feet-wide electronic screen that graces the main shopping promenade in the state’s capital of Gangtok. Akin to Gangtok’s downtown or high street, any tourist passing through town would find herself here at some point of her tour. Hoping to draw such tourists to the sanctuary which is less than an hour’s drive away, the video staged snapshots of village life in Pangthang. This included one Indian and one foreign tourist being escorted on a birdwatching trip in the forest to “get recharged...in nature”, as the caption stated. As part of the village tour, they were also seen being guided through the process of handweaving a bamboo mat, inspecting cardamom crops and milking cows. The video opened with a “traditional welcome”. Women dressed in the traditional Nepali *chaubandi* skirt and blouse smeared a rice and vermilion *tilak* or mark on the guests’ foreheads, and draped a *khata* i.e. ceremonial scarf over their shoulders. The montage ended with the tourists being helped to dress up in the ethnic-wear of the region, as a sign of cultural immersion. One of the tourists wore the attire of the Bhutia tribe, the acknowledged indigenes of the state, whose presence in the village in question however was marginal. The attire comprised of a silk brocade tunic and fur hat. The other tourist wore the Nepali/Gorkha *chaubandi*-patterned shirt and trousers, with an orange vest and waistband adorned with a *khukuri* i.e. a traditional Nepali knife. This scene ended with a villager putting the black Nepali *topi* (flat-cap) on the tourist’s head. The advertisement then closed with the details of the festival and the organizers.

The day after the video went live, on my daily morning visit to the Forest Department headquarter, I found the ecotourism division office in a state of frenzy uncharacteristic of its

usual bureaucratic pace. The secretaries were scampering around with letter drafts for corrections, and the Divisional Forest Officer in-charge of the program was fielding various phone calls with rising degrees of urgency. Seeing the advertisement at the promenade, a political organization called the “Gorkha Apex Committee” (GAC) was accusing the Forest Department of misrepresenting the Gorkha community of Sikkim, and thereby “hurting the sentiments of the community”.

The politics of recognition in an avowedly multicultural state like India is always a volatile issue, with charges of misrecognition seen as a failure of a crucial state function. The argument for cultural recognition is that “as a result of repeated encounters with the stigmatizing gaze of a culturally dominant other, members of disesteemed groups internalize negative self-images and are prevented from developing a healthy cultural identity of their own” (Fraser 2000, 109-110), and from seeing themselves as equally-valued participating citizens within the polity (Markell 2003; Taylor 1992). The GAC was charging the FD with such a failure of recognition because the “traditional Nepali *topi*” shown in the ad, which is usually black in color (sometimes with an insignium of the Nepali knives or *khukuri*), in this instance had the two-triangle flag of Nepal depicted on it. Such an infraction, the GAC claimed presented a negative image of the community as outsiders, aligned with a foreign sovereign nation-state. It thereby undermined the identity of the group as legitimate citizens with centuries of belonging in Sikkim’s landscape. While the officers in person blamed the advertising agency for the oversight, the vendors in Gangtok for selling such non-nationalistic *topis* and the size of the display screen for magnifying a two-second error, in their formal capacity they immediately issued an apology, and ordered a fresh edit without the *topi* for further promotional use.



FIGURE A.1: Stills from the Forest Department's promotional video, showcasing the nature-culture of Fambang Lho Wildlife Sanctuary for touristic consumption.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5HSHnJfCbeM>

This dissertation is an inquiry into this contentious ecology-oriented and market-oriented conjuncture of post-colonial multiculturalism, asking about the transformations in the politics of recognition that are precipitated with the emergence of marketized conservation programs as a site or avenue of ethno-politics. The reorientations in the positions both of recognition-seeking citizens and the recognition-granting state is the object of analysis. Even as on one hand, this

conjuncture may free culturally and politically marginalized citizens from being singularly beholden to the state for recognition, the above instance nonetheless highlights the new anxieties engendered about being misrecognized by citizen-tourists, who are the financiers of neoliberal conservation and the face of neoliberal multiculturalism. For the state, this development entails an anxiety about its continued power and significance, given that it no longer has a monopoly over the granting of recognition as a source of its authority. Such multi-sided anxieties of recognition, at the intersection of state, ecology and the market, as is evident in the incident of the *Nepali topi*, and the political responses they give rise to are analyzed in this ethnography

Firstly, as I ethnographically trace ethno-ecological commodification not only in Pangthang, but also in two other villages, one a predominantly Nepali village called Kitam in South Sikkim, and the other a predominantly Sherpa village called Okhrey in West Sikkim, I ask: what happens to the valence of “diversity” when it is not just a social, but also an environmental good, i.e. when discourses of cultural diversity articulate with those of biodiversity conservation? While the essentialization of proximity to nature as a parameter for adjudicating claims of indigeneity or tribal status has been well-critiqued (Baviskar 1999, Damodaran 2012; Shah 2010, Skaria 1995), what this ethnography adds to the conversation is an attention to the specificity of the biodiversity paradigm that has emerged as the hegemonic conservation concept in the last few decades. What new possibilities for recognition does the articulation of cultural and biological diversity open up? On the flipside, the symbolic violence perpetrated by the “ethnographic state” (Dirks 2001) and its governmentalization of cultural difference has been extensively analyzed (Cohn 1987; Ghosh 2006; Middleton 2016; Sundar 2000). Along these lines of inquiry, what new modes of symbolic violence does the turn to bio-cultural diversity engender? What demands does it make upon subjects to render themselves

legible along specific eco-scientific lines? These demands, I highlight, creates the conditions for marginalized citizens to form what I see as political alliances with what they perceive as valued biota within the conservation paradigm. This dissertation traces these nature-culture assemblages that are born out of and respond to this regime of biocultural recognition. And it traces the binds these assemblages – of the peacocks and Nepali people, or the Japanese cedars and indigenous Sikkimese populations for example – are caught up in, in the process of staking claims of belonging in the landscape. The ethnography therefore draws attention to the political and social considerations through which biodiversity gets implemented as a conservation regime. And to the ways in which biodiversity as scientific discourse permeates and restructures the questions of socio-political representation of marginal ethnic communities, their legitimacy of belonging in a landscape, and their demands for redistribution of resources. The politics of articulating identity and belonging in this ‘cross-pollinated’ terrain is interrogated in this dissertation under the rubric of what I call the *eco-logics of recognition*.

Secondly, the contention over the Nepali *topi* also puts a finger on the question of the role of the emergent tourist gaze, and by extension the role of the market in this politics. The Indian state’s commitment to multiculturalism as a foundational ideal is evident in the idealization of “unity in diversity” as the official motto; in the various constitutional provisions for recognition of marginalized cultural-economic identities of castes and tribes; and in concurrent provisions of redistribution of resources to such marginalized groups (Kapila 2008; Khilnani 1998; Tharoor 2007). Accordingly, studies of recognition politics in India have remained state-centric. Eco-tourism to indigenous/tribal, marginal (and palpably “exotic”) areas have gained popularity in India. Yet, the significance of this phenomenon to the dynamics of recognition, engendering citizen-to-citizen interactions, has not received adequate attention. The question of the role of the

market in matters of indigeneity usually leads to critiques of neoliberal expropriation of natural resources in indigenous territories. Indigenous people then are either cast as heroes, resisting neoliberalism in the name of culture and group identity; or seen as co-opted into its logics.

I offer an ethnographic understanding of the phenomenon of neoliberal multiculturalism in India, in terms of the politics of marketization of ethnic difference. In looking at the touristic encounter between ethical consumers and frontier communities, I am interested in exploring the role of the “good feeling” of India’s liberal capitalist consumers (Povinelli 2002) in opening up spaces for the negotiation of multicultural recognition. On one end, globally, the trend of “ethno-commodification (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009), with tourism promotion being one manifestation, has been hailed as a route to economic sovereignty (Cattelino 2008) for communities, freeing them from the oppressive grip of the state. On the other end, being subject to the essentializing gaze of the neoliberal tourist has been theorized as a form of panoptical disciplining by global capital (Duffy and Moore 2010; Urry 2011; West and Carrier 2004). Pushing back against both these narratives, I theorize the impact of marketization on ethnopolitics in Sikkim as an emergent gaze, entering into a field of recognition, in ways that precipitate anxious articulations of identity. The central effect of the gaze I argue is not the fear, resistance or surrender to a neoliberal logic, but rather this anxious second-guessing of the demands being made by the gaze. I argue therefore that ethnopolitics reshaped by growing marketization needs to be interrogated as a significant phenomenon, that is not limited by income generation statistics through tourism or the depth of engagement of middle-class Indian tourists with their ethnically marginalized compatriots. In drawing on theorizations of the opacity of the gaze (Hansen 2012; Lacan 1981; Merleau-Ponty 1968), my aim is also to add to the anthropology of tourism more broadly, by calling for more attention to this non-transparency of

mutual visibility in the touristic encounter. The question that was provoked, for example, by the controversy of the *topi* was whether an average tourist, looking for a general presentation of village life as the exotic other of his or her urbanity, would be bothered by the blink-and-miss-it presence of the Nepali flag? Inquiring into how such arguments are settled tells us more about the phantasmic nature of the tourist gaze under which ethnic identities are articulated and negotiated, beyond a commonsensical principle of the sovereign consumer.

Lastly, as the dissertation explores the dynamics of this emergent multifaceted regime of recognition, the focus is also on recalibrations of state authority as a response to these transformations. The expanding horizon of recognition (especially of indigeneity) beyond the bounds of the nation-state has been seen as liberatory (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009) or at least potentially liberatory (Markell 2003). Conversely, with respect to marginal identities of castes and tribes, the seeking of recognition in international arenas has been criticized for encouraging a few elite subject positions, these positions being divorced from the everyday realities of national politics in which such marginalization is primarily negotiated (Ghosh 2006). Neither approach asks how states react to this expansion of the horizon of recognition, real or perceived. One of the agendas of my ethnography is to trace how the state responds to the rise of the market and of global conservation discourses as agents of recognition, how its representatives seek to retain state sovereignty and authority in the face of the purported competition with its functions, and the impact of this new anxiety of the state on its development subjects.

RECOGNITION BEYOND THE STATE

The overarching analytical concern here is to ask what happens to the politics of recognition when moved from a singularly state-centric to para-state or non-state avenues; which in Sikkim appear to be environmentalist practices and the market. The emphasis on recognition

in terms of respect for cultural difference (Rosaldo 1997) and dialogic validation of group identity (Taylor 1992; Kymlicka 2001, Honneth 2003) has been a topic of debate in recent times. The charge is that the emphasis on recognition over economic redistribution undermines a concerted opposition to capitalist expropriation as the root perpetrator of inequality (Fraser 2003; Rorty 2000). This argument in turn is criticized for being rooted in a reductive Marxism understanding of culture (Butler 1997; Honneth 2003). Redistribution and recognition have co-evolved in India's liberal politics (Kapila 2008), with the postcolonial state focusing both on affirmative action and the need to outlaw cultural expressions of caste-tribe hierarchies. The valence of this opposition that is explored in this dissertation pertains to the effects of the Indian state involving the market in redistribution functions, previously seen as the sole responsibility of the development state. Povinelli (2002) has drawn attention to the "cunning of recognition" in terms of the power it bestows on liberal recognition-granting citizens. The good feeling of these liberal citizens, she argues, depends on the melancholic position in which indigenous recognition-seeking subjects are put, who have to perform their otherness by erasing traces of colonizing modernity, while also stopping short of evoking moral repugnance towards inadmissibly diverse cultural practices. The impossible demands made on tribal subjects in India, to fit into the "tribal slot" has been well-critiqued (Damodaran 2006; Kapila 2008; Middleton 2016; Shah 2010).

Pachen Markell (2003) posits that the problem with the recognition paradigm stems from an elusive quest for sovereignty, which is bound to be frustrated given the open-ended nature of identity that is always in the making. More specifically, arguing that the quest for recognition leads to more subjugation than emancipation, he states that "to appeal to the state for the recognition of one's own identity – to present oneself as knowable – is already to offer the state

the reciprocal recognition of its sovereignty that it demands” (31). His point, drawing on Mitchell’s (1991a) theorization the “state effect”, is that states gain their sovereignty through the power to grant recognition and thereby govern difference. Thus, state sovereignty emerges in the act itself rather than being antecedent to it. An escape from the “bounds” of recognition, for Markell, therefore lies in a “more modest hope for a non-sovereign practice of democracy... [which entails]... the multiplication and diffusion of the sites around which struggles for recognition are carried out, resisting the putatively sovereign state’s implicit claim to hold a monopoly on the distribution of recognition and to be the ultimate arbiter of contests over identity” (116). This multiplication of sites, for Markell, creates the space of refusal to be beholden to one significant other, which may provide a respite from an utter frustration through misrecognition. Such an approach, he writes, would privilege “the pleasure of potency”, even as it may compromise the pleasure of sovereignty (116).

The ethnographic question explored here then is, if conservation and tourism are emerging as diffuse sites of struggles for recognition, is there a pleasure of potency for recognition-seeking subjects that makes the politics of recognition less oppressive? In the reduced monopoly of the state over matters of recognition, is its power reduced? If so, asking how and to what effect, as I do through the dissertation, helps take Markell’s argument to the next step. Therefore, the question to ask about the contestation over the Nepali *topi* is whether the sovereignty of the state was re-consolidated through its gaffe and apology, or was it reduced to the role of a mediator, whose job was to represent ethnic groups to the market to the best of its abilities?

The answer to this question, and its many iterations that arise in various other scenarios of ethno-ecological commodification in Sikkim has two dimensions. Firstly, in agreeing with

Markell about the widening of the scope of politics through the diffusion of sites of struggle for recognition, the question about potency gained goes hand-in-hand with questions about new bounds, or new ways of being beholden to emergent regimes of recognition. These regimes of legibility are traced below as the “eco-logics”², and also the “market-logics” of recognition, which as I demonstrate, make contradictory demands of legibility on subjects. Thus, what the market demands of the nature-culture of Sikkim, as an out-of-the-way “exotic” frontier does not square with all the criteria set by the biodiversity discourse that needs ‘nature’ to be framed in specific terms. The anxiety of trying to reconcile these contradictions, I argue, set various limits to the possible pleasures of potency for the development-conservation subjects. The second limit, that the next subsection will discuss, involves the push-back from the state itself.

Eco-Logics and Market-Logics of Recognition

In terms of eco-logics, what makes “nature”, broadly conceived, legible as “biodiversity”? What then makes ethnic groups legible, or at least potentially legible as positively valued actors within biodiversity conservation projects? Biodiversity in ecological discourses is not simply taken as value placed on an aggregate diversity in nature. To be objects of conservation, especially according to the prioritizations of biodiversity hotspots, the eco-logic of recognition rests on parameters of “endemism”, i.e. the biota being “naturally” restricted to a particular place and found nowhere else (Choy 2011, Helmreich 2005); and on the parameter of being under threat of extinction or being endangered (Bruchmann 2014,; Lamoreux, et al 2006, Lowe 2006, Morrison and Lycett 2014). How do these parameters influence the possibilities and limits of recognition of cultural identities within the conservation framework? My focus is on the

² Here I am extending Middleton’s (2011, 2016) concept of the “etho-logics” of recognition that he used to look into the current role of the Anthropological Survey of India in creating parameters of legibility of tribal difference.

ways in which endemism, often scaled down to a concern for nativism of biota (i.e. emphasis on the “naturally occurring here” rather than on the “not anywhere else”) in Sikkim’s conservation landscape, emerges as the most significant logic that those seeking recognition have to grapple with. The stretching of the concept of endemism to nativism occurs in the implementation of biodiversity conservation in the wider “ecological circles” (Choy 2011), that include a wide range of forestry staff, ecotourism advisers, environmental NGO personnel and village-level “stake-holders”. In this everyday ecological practice, the terms native or indigenous are used to ascribe value to species. While this can be read as a misunderstanding of ecological science, my objective is to understand the power of ecological discourses at the site of their implementation. Inasmuch as nativism is the common parameter spoken of at this site of execution of ecological science, it emerges as a central eco-logic that assemblages seeking recognition perceive as the criterion they need to negotiate.

Given the deficit of belonging, Nepali communities such as the ones in Kitam and Pangthang see their inclusion in marketized conservation interventions by the state as a pathway of recognition, granting them room for maneuver beyond the state’s recognition-redistribution parameters. The post-colonial Indian state’s recognition framework, inextricably linked to a commitment to economic redistribution, espouses a commitment to remedying marginalization that derives from socio-cultural prejudices. Positive discrimination is envisaged for lower castes and for tribal groups, who can be included in the schedule if the caste or tribal group can prove its historic marginalization according to criteria set by the ethnographic state. Such “ethno-logics (Middleton 2011; 2016) do not officially accommodate a deficit of belonging that the Nepali community faces as a form of misrecognition rectifiable through state recognition. This has led to the fragmentation the larger Nepali/ Gorkhali identity into smaller ethnic groups that can seek

inclusion within the Scheduled Tribes list. While the fragmenting of the larger cultural identity itself has caused consternation within the community, many sub-groups have yet not been successful in securing a position in the list, leading to further cultural-political frustrations. Meanwhile in the history of conservation, the articulation of cultural diversity with biodiversity began when global organizations such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) began valorizing indigenous knowledge of biological diversity and including this in its policy approach (Convention on Biological Diversity 1992; Maffi 2001; Hathaway 2013). Given this conservation trajectory, for Nepali/Gorkha villagers of Sikkim, the performance of environmental stewardship and knowledge offers a window of opportunity for positive validation of their identity, that can circumvent the fragmentation of the Gorkha identity and the rigid ethno-logics of the state, while holding the promise of economic support that is often sought by marginalized groups from the state recognition process. Yet the question now is whether the eco-logic of nativism creates limits to the recognition of biocultural diversity that mirror the conditions and impasses prevalent in the state-citizen negotiations on the issue, or whether the ecological avenue creates greater room for maneuver and therefore potency for groups hitherto denied substantive cultural citizenship.

The first insight is that this intersection of biological and cultural diversity gives rise to particular assemblages of recognition. I break down the general notion of environmental stewardship to analyze the associations communities make with specific valued biota, to study the contours of the claims of multispecies coexistence. Chapter one therefore begins with the multispecies knot of the Nepali people of Kitam and the peacock of Kitam Bird Sanctuary as the subject of recognition through conservation and touristic consumption. Chapter two sheds light on the material and symbolic imbrication of specific flora, such as the Japanese cedar

(*Cruptomeria japonica*), the Sal trees (*Shorea Robusta*), rhododendrons and Chir pines (*Pinus roxburghii*) in the ethno-politics of the region. The potency of such assemblages, which exceed the purely human as subject of recognition, is the object of inquiry. Here I draw on Haraway's (2008, 4) call to attend to "worlding" as a process of "subject and object shaping dance of encounters" between species, through which actors become who they are. My focus in the chapters is on the everyday messiness of such entanglements. "Living intersectionally" (ibid, 18), with the peacock in Kitam or with the Cedar in Panghtang, following Haraway's apt analogy, involves sharing a table with messmates who don't know how to eat well together. Thus rather than idealizing modes of multispecies encounters, or attributing them to any essential cultural outlook, this ethnography emphasizes the need to situate such expressions of multispecies co-existence within emergent historical-political context that open up the spaces for such articulations. The first chapter therefore also chronicles the difficulties for the Nepali citizens of Kitam in sharing a table with the peacock as the chosen more-than-human political ally. The latter's uncooperative behavior, in being a crop-raider for example, reflects its unwillingness to share in the project of seeking recognition of an idealized biocultural citizenship in the landscape. The chapter traces the negotiation of such disjunctures in the trajectories of the actants of the assemblage, the Kitam community's quest for eco-cultural recognition.

The eco-logics of nativism, in terms of the rising interest in the care of native species in horticultural and forestry circles, in some analysis is read primarily as a superimposition of rising xenophobic tendencies into the non-human realm (Subramaniam 2001, Raffles 2017). Jean Comaroff (2017) terms this "horticultural ethnogenesis", as a form of Lacanian metonymic displacement, where fears of immigrant takeover of culture and economy is manifested in the policing of the pedigree of plants. My ethnography traces the negotiation of nativism – as a

demand made of people, plants and animals in Sikkim – between villagers, forestry officials, conservationists and ecotourists. In doing so, I shed light on the cross-pollination of ecological and political discourses of belonging, representation and boundary-making. My argument is that such cross-pollination leads us to interpretations beyond the framing of the problem as solely the importation of social biases into ecology. Science, culture and politics are unpredictably intertwined in the quest to make landscape boundaries meaningful. Between principled rejections of nativism in favor of espousals of a cosmopolitan ethic, and reactionary commitments to nativism (as the options presented in the analysis of the scenario), I attend to the material and discursive accommodations through which multispecies and multicultural coexistence, albeit contested and volatile is forged.

I use the term multispecies inasmuch as my focus is on the ways in which specific species in Sikkim’s landscape come to be deeply implicated in the politics of belonging through the discourse of nativism as an ecological and a political ideal. Such species therefore become actants with “legibly biographical and political live”, rather than mere “*zoe* or ‘bare life’...which is killable” (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010, 545). The caveat is that the knots between the native and non-native plants, animals and people I am interested in highlighting are contingent and akin to political alliances, rather than to transcendental ontological relations of kinship and care (Govindrajan 2018³; Kohn. 2007; Miller 2019). Like human political alliances, this involves not only articulations but also disarticulations arising out of the different actants’ histories and current and future interests. As the peacock or the Japanese cedar have their own agendas of

³ Govindrajan while writing of human-animal relationships of care and kinship also distinguishes her work from the tendency in the ontological turn to “sometimes suggest that native conceptions of the nonhuman world constitute a radical alterity, a difference they sketch in totalizing and homogenous ways that bear troubling resemblance to the idea of culture as a bounded whole” (12).

ecological adaptability, migration, reproduction – such that the peacock sometimes takes literal flight from the very village which has huge political stakes in its unique presence there, and the cedar sometimes proves to be too “selfish” of a species to be posited as a good “messmate” for a diverse eco-system – the story told in these chapters is one of a process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization of these biocultural assemblages towards a quest for recognition.

Accommodations towards multispecies and multicultural coexistence are also necessitated by the market-logics of diversity. This parameter solicits representations of diversity that often diverges from the ecological concern for nativism. Tourists, as the ostensibly financiers of neoliberal conservation in the villages come seeking an encounter with ‘otherness’, as the foundational logic of travel. I trace the negotiation of these divergent demands and their outcomes both in interactional settings of host-guest encounters, and in various scenarios beyond such interactions, where tourism promoters imagine the demands of the tourist gaze, and give themselves to be seen by this gaze that is as much a product of their own anticipation as an objective reality beyond it. Different assemblages therefore find themselves in the interstices of positive validation, because of the contradictory demands at work. The Japanese cedar, as an introduced species that is prominent in the conservation landscape makes ecologists and foresters anxious. Yet as it meets touristic expectations of the Himalayan landscape, its inclusion within the biodiversity project has to be accommodated. On the other hand, the Nepali community living in the native sal forests worry that their Hindu customs, practiced in subtropical landscapes, will fail to impress the primarily Indian traveler. The desired touristic encounter, the hosts intuit, is one with discernably “other” hill-tribes, in idyllic alpine Himalayan settings. The expanded avenue of recognition of diversity on the frontier, as the dissertation traces, is one entailing the negotiation of eco-logic and market-logics, that as individual parameters are

demanding, and taken together are often at cross-purposes, by actants recruited into assemblages where every participant is not equally invested in the process or outcome.

Anxieties of the development state in diffuse regimes of recognition

A central claim of this ethnography is that theories on the transformation of recognition – be it Markell’s (2003) general proposition about potency beyond the bounds of the state, or Comaroff and Comaroff’s (2009) discussion of sovereignty gained by “Ethnicity Inc.” at supra-state levels through lawfare or participation in global capitalism – do not address the ways in which states cope with losing the monopoly over recognition of diverse identities as a source of sovereignty. As I show in my ethnography, in cannily perceiving this potential threat to its sovereignty, the anxiety of recognition is also shared by the state, as a concern about its diminishing authority. I focus on three particular contestations that emerge out of this anxiety of the regional development state.

The ethnographic object in chapter three is the numerous tourism festivals or “*melas*” that have proliferated in Sikkim, through which its purportedly “exotic” culture is presented in the form of ethno-commodities for touristic consumption. Within the local cosmology, the ubiquitous *melas* serve as sites for cultivating relations of political patronage. Communities organize a fair, inviting a political representative as a chief guest. Reciprocating the honor, the chief guest makes a public monetary donation to the village, thereby cementing the patronage relation. This complex of state-subject relations is perceived to be threatened when the *melas* start doubling up as tourism fairs. The fear is that the position of the patron, as a master of ceremonies as it were (Mazzarella 2013), will come to be occupied by the tourist, to whom the performance of the fair will now be oriented. The chapter observes the manifestation of these anxieties in the ecotourism fairs in Okhrey and Pangthang, attending to the pushback articulated

by the state personnel. Thus, even as the neoliberalization of development leads the state to marketize its interventions (as with ecotourism), the prospect of sharing authority with the tourist also provokes reactionary assertions of power from state functionaries. How the ethno-commodifying host communities negotiate between these two poles of authority – of the income-generating tourist guest, and the development benefit-channeling political patron – that vie for sovereignty, is analyzed in the chapter.

A similar conundrum of retaining sovereignty over touristic spaces arises at the level of policy making. Chapter four traces the drafting of Sikkim’s newest tourism policy, starting from the heated consultation meeting between tourism entrepreneurs, civil society organizations and state representatives, to the more circumspect recommendations that appeared in the final draft. As a frontier whose cultural survival has been accommodated in Indian state-making through a “protective discrimination regime” (Baruah 2005), regional states in the northeast can deny substantive citizenship rights to non-autochthonous national populations in the state. In privileging indigenous citizens⁴ over national citizens, Sikkim can deny the latter the right to state-controlled economic opportunities and the right to buy land. Even as tourism is often characterized as a mode of ensuring cultural survival through visibility and the profitability of maintaining indigenous traditions (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Nash 2000), the expansion of tourism as a free market economic enterprise attracts competitive “outside”⁵ labor in positions of drivers, guides, waiters etc. Such private enterprise confounds or shrinks the state’s ambit of

⁴ The rule of thumb is that those who were citizens under the erstwhile monarchy of Sikkim continue to enjoy protected citizenship rights within the Indian nation-state, above and beyond those enjoyed by Indian citizens. Baruah characterizes the similar classes of citizens in Assam as citizens and denizens.

⁵ With respect to the tourism operations the outsiders seen as a threat are the taxi operators who are known to be either hill people from the neighboring Darjeeling and Kalimpong district or from the foothills in Siliguri. The hotel staff is usually from the community to which the person leasing out the property from a Sikkim Subject belongs to. Bengalis make up a substantial number.

influence where the protective discrimination regime can be a fundamental mode of exercising sovereignty, through the parsing of “Sikkim Subjects”⁶ from “outsiders”. How the regional state tried to circumvent this legal limit to sovereign exclusion of outside participation in tourism as a private economic enterprise, to try to maintain a protective discrimination regime is traced in this chapter. It highlights the resultant problematic quest for disciplinary powers over national subjects, and the uneven impact of this approach on different economic strata of citizens.

The last chapter tackles the ethno-ecological commodity of “Sikkim Organic”, that is the successful initiative of becoming India’s first fully organic state by 2015. The conundrum is the initiation and continuation of this development “mission” in a populist democracy despite various pragmatic limits encountered in its ability to generate profit for farmers, to lead to self-sufficiency in production, or to involve farmers in democratic decision-making. My argument is that to try to evaluate the success or failure of the organic mission solely on agro-ecological or agro-economic terms is to see the issue from the wrong perspective. As an ethno-ecological commodity “Sikkim Organic” attests to the regional state’s own intermediary status. While deriving authority from granting recognition to its citizens, as a marginal state, Sikkim also depends on recognition, and affirmative resource allocation from the centre. The organic initiative is one way of seeking this recognition by performing the role of an environmental steward and pioneer.

I argue, therefore, that rather than focusing on its material output alone, it is more productive to see Organic Sikkim as a political brand through which the regional state seeks

⁶ Sikkim Subject is a legal category providing protected rights to Sikkim’s indigenous residents, under article 371F of the Indian constitution. The history and content of the provision is discussed in the next section. At the time of writing this introduction, the parallel constitutional provision that granted special protection to Kashmir was summarily withdrawn, which casts a somewhat ominous shadow on the future of this form of accommodative federalism.

recognition of its green developmentalist (McAfee 1999; Mendoza 2018) credentials. Firstly, I analyze organic agricultural production – following Bernard Cohn’s (1983) writing on the significance of reciprocal political gift-giving in the consolidation of political encompassment in colonial India – as a “*nazar*”, offered to the center as a way of seeking “*khelat*” in terms of development doles. This *nazar* was offered to the center by staging the 100% certification milestone as a grand Organic Festival, in 2016, dedicated to the Prime Minister as the chief-guest of the ceremony. The claim made during the festival was that Organic Sikkim offer the nation not only ecological security but also political security by keeping peace in an otherwise insurgency-prone region. Development stimulus and agricultural subsidies were the reciprocal expectations from the center, adhering to a politics of patronage well-rehearsed in the local idiom. The successes and failures of this mode of ‘organic patronage’ is explored in the chapter.

Secondly, this ‘organic politics’ is further compounded by the state’s anxieties about retaining the value of organic agriculture as political brand. On one end, organic initiatives are often globally and nationally associated with ground-up farmers movements that foster farmer’s sovereignty (Aistara 2018, MacRae 2016; Shiva 2016; Trauger 2014). This perception makes farmers the subjects of the goodwill of the organic brand. The other subject who can reap the fame accruing from the phenomenon is the ethical consumer, who pays premium commodity prices to act justly towards deserving farmers. As the author/maker of the brand, the challenge for the regional state is, following Mazarella’s (2003) adaptation of Annette Weiner’s (1992) retheorization of the kula exchange, one of “keeping-while-giving” the value of the brand; without losing its political currency to agricultural producers or to ethical consumers. The chapter analyses the discursive maneuvers performed to meet this challenge, where the regional

state, in its marketized development initiative, finds itself defending its authority and legitimacy against constituent farmers, the increasingly powerful market and the central state.

These three chapters taken together provide ethnographic insights into the mutations in patronage politics occurring with the neoliberalization of development and conservation. Such an understanding adds to works in development studies that have grappled with the question of the reduction in welfare function of the Indian state, whose legitimacy nonetheless depends on retaining its credentials as the source of entitlements for its development subjects (Sharma 2006; Gupta 2012). Participation in ecotourism and in organic agriculture may provide the citizens of the frontier with an avenue for showcasing their biocultural diversity which is less dependent for validation on the monopolistic control of state over questions of identity, belonging and questions of economic redistribution. Yet, ways in which such ostensibly innovative interventions are sought to be re-embedded within historical-political cultures of patronage and hierarchical subjectivation point to the limits of the politics of potency enabled through the diffusion of sites of recognition.

As a whole, the dissertation illuminates an emergent politics of what I term “green citizenship” on the frontier. In the past decades, various approaches have challenged the limited understanding of citizenship as the sum total of the formal legal mode of belonging or exclusion in a polity (Anjaria 2016; Clarke 2013; Hall and Held 1990; Holston and Appadurai 1996; Ong 2005, 2006). Holston (2008, 197) distinguishes formal inclusion from substantive exclusions in the distribution of rights, practices, institutions of citizenship. Theorizing this distinction, ethnographies have critically examined particular substantive modes through which citizenship claims are made, beyond the bare minimum formalizations. Nikhil Anand (2017) has developed the term hydraulic citizenship to point to the iterative, material process of recognition as citizens,

through the ability to access the civic service of water supply. Petryna (2002) describes the emergence of biological citizenship in radiation-exposed Ukrainian subjects. To claim subjecthood within the paternalistic regime of post-socialist governance, citizens have to negotiate the state's scientific grid of intelligibility of radiation exposure and social networks which facilitate one's access into bureaucratic regimes of medical care and life insurance. More specifically, my work aligns with Rosaldo's (1997) theorization of cultural citizenship, which draws attention to lack of respect for cultural minorities that perpetuated an experience of second-class citizenship. The discussion of the association of Latin American citizens in the United States with illegal immigration, that then stigmatizes the entire cultural population with aspersions of being outside the law, is especially relevant to the scenario I address.

My ethnography attends to the claims for respect made by the suspiciously-perceived Nepali citizens through the avenues of green initiatives that create a "slot" (Trouillot 2003) for performing biocultural belonging. Similarly, the phenomenon of Organic Sikkim, I argue, cannot be understood outside of Sikkimese citizens' desire, setting aside the internal ethnic divisions, to occupy a green slot within the nation. What the term green citizenship highlights is the centrality of environmental subjectivity, both as a matter of self-governance by citizens and of governance by the state, as an increasingly significant aspect of the politics of state-making in northeast India. The articulation of nature and nation has a long history (Cederlöf and Sivaramakrishnan 2006; Kelly 2000; Koerner 1999). My focus is on the impact of the regime of biodiversity conservation as an international covenant, where protecting nature as national patrimony has become a science and policy-backed prerogative (Fall 2014; Heise 2016). My effort is to analyze this current articulation of nature, nation and citizen, enabled by the neoliberal governmentalization of nature as national patrimony. The ethnography draws attention to human

and non-human subjects who are then explicitly or implicitly characterized as “out-of-place” (Van Driesche and Van Driesche 2000), because they contravene the emphasis on nativism in the biodiversity discourse. It investigates the negotiation of this out-of-placeness, be it of the anxious Nepali citizen, the sometimes-resented out-of-state conservation professional, or the aesthetic yet introduced Japanese cedar. This approach helps shed light on the political positions of those who seek to legitimize an ethno-nationalist claim towards exclusionary belonging through the biodiversity conservation regime, and also those who seek to broaden the horizon of “naturalization” of belonging for such out-of-place subjects.

In the rest of the introduction, I first lay out in greater detail the historical and contemporary ethno-political context in Sikkim, in terms of the layered deficit of belonging of the Sikkimese within India and of the Nepali ethnic group both within Sikkim and the larger nation. This is followed by an elaboration on my methodology intertwined with a deeper dive into the analytical categories of biocultural assemblages of belonging, the phantasmic tourist gaze as a regime of recognition, and the character of the neoliberal development state. I close then with a short outline of the chapters.

ETHNOPOLITICS AND DEFICIT OF BELONGING ON THE FRONTIER

This ethnography is based on fifteen months of fieldwork in Sikkim, a border state, surrounded by Nepal in the east, the Tibetan Autonomous Region in the north and Bhutan in the west. Given this strategic location, this small state, currently with an area of 2,740 square miles⁷, has always been a significant territory in the geopolitical considerations of precolonial, colonial

⁷ As Balicki (2008) elaborates, writing from the indigenous perspective, “over the centuries, the Sikkimese [monarchs] lost the Ha Valley and the area now occupied by Kalimpong in North Bengal to the Bhutanese, Limbuana in eastern Nepal to the Nepalese, the Darjeeling hills to the British, the Chumbi Valley to the Chinese, and eventually, what was left of Sikkim to the Indians.

and postcolonial regimes in the region. The population of the state, 610,577 in total, comprises diverse ethnic groups, often over-simplified as a tripartite division of Bhutias, Lepchas and Nepalis⁸.

Sikkim's deficit of belonging within India

One of the basic tenets of inclusive representational democracy is for every constituent to perceive the national collective will to be potently their will, even if all decisions therein do not align with their individual preferences (Markell 2003; Kymlicka 2001; Taylor 1992). This becomes especially problematic for the northeastern frontier given that a sense of shared history and culture, be it of a pre-colonial past, colonial oppression or post-colonial state formation, is in marked deficit. The 2007 Hindi film *Chak De India*, depicting the journey of a fictionalized women's hockey team, begins with the arrival of various regional players to the national training camp. After being mistaken as "Nepali or Chinese" by catcallers who presume they will not know Hindi, the two women from the northeast are then "welcome[d] as guests" by the administrator. Asked why they look unhappy, one of them quips, "how can one be happy being called a 'guest' in one's own country?" The creativity of capitalism has made this misrecognition (based on phenotypical distinctions) a profitable one, with various "Thai Spas" springing up in malls in metropolitan cities such as New Delhi, that employ northeastern service providers. Since *Chak De India*, other recent socially conscious films like *Pink* have highlighted the harassment northeastern men and women face in finding housing in other cities, due to various negative stereotypes about dietary preferences, lifestyles, and sexual promiscuity.

⁸ A popular narrative of this tripartite division is that the Lepchas initially called Sikkim *Nye-mae-el* or paradise, the Bhutias termed it *Beymul Denzong*, or the Hidden Valley of Rice and the Limbus of Nepali origin called it *Sukhim* or new abode. Names of restaurants and travel agencies today bear testimony to this origin myth.

While such cultural experiences of misrecognition and othering unite the northeast as a bloc, the historical political trajectory of the different states vary. Under the British Empire large territories in the region were classified as “backward tracts”, with limited applicability of British laws (Baruah 2005, 36), especially in zones beyond the Inner Line Permit⁹. Therefore, the telos of the integration of the frontier into an Indian nation-state was not naturalized. Sikkim’s status is further unique within this scenario. While the Inner Line Permit regime was applied to Sikkim (and still is, wherein foreigner citizens need special permission to enter the state), it was a British Protectorate with a semi-sovereign Buddhist monarchy (established in 1642 CE) that remained so after decolonization.

The Buddhist monarchy’s encounter with the British began during the Anglo-Gorkha War of 1814-1816, when it was promised the return of its territory usurped by Nepal in return for cooperation with the British armed forces¹⁰. In 1835, the territory of Darjeeling was ceded to the British as a sanitarium, which eventually became one of the empire’s primary tea growing tracts¹¹. Fundamental misunderstandings about the terms of this transfer with regard to sovereignty and taxes owed¹² led to various minor conflicts; these peaked with the arrest of

⁹ The Inner Line permit prohibited the movement of British subjects into certain areas of the northeast, as per the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulations of 1873. For a detailed exposition of the logic of governance beyond the zones demarcated by the “Inner Line Permits”, see Kar (2009).

¹⁰ *The Gazetteer* claims that on account of the Treaty of Titalia, signed in 1817 after the British defeated Nepal, territory which has been previously annexed from Sikkim by Nepal was returned to Sikkim (Risley 1989 [1894]). Recent studies have sought to question this imperial bias. Consulting Sikkim’s Palace documents, scholars assert that during the Sino-Nepalese War of 1788-1792, siding with the Chinese forces, Sikkim had itself won back some of its territory which the Gorkha expansionist powers had laid claims to. However, the subsequent treaty between China and Nepal failed to take cognizance of these military feats, causing Sikkim to actively aid the British in their operations against the Gorkha army and thus rightfully benefit from the Titalia treaty (Dorjee 2011, 67; Mullard 2011, 175-179).

¹¹ For a discussion of Darjeeling’s colonial history as a tea estate, see Besky (2013), Sharma (2016), Rune (2017).

¹² The British acquired Darjeeling for a yearly rent of six thousand rupees and considered it to be under their sovereignty (Rock 1953). Sikkim’s monarchy, Mullard (2011, 182-183) explains, according to its customary laws expected taxes on new enterprise undertaken in the granted land; and expected the return of Sikkim’s subjects who fled to Darjeeling escaping conditions of bonded labor. The granting of asylum to such subjects, under Britain’s antislavery law of 1838, was seen as an affront to Sikkim’s sovereignty (ibid).

Darjeeling's Superintendent Dr. Campbell and the well-known botanist J. D. Hooker during their botanical expedition in Sikkim in 1849. In this moment of articulation between ideologies about nature and nation, the British took punitive action against Sikkim for obstructing a scientific expedition, leading to Sikkim losing more of its territory, and a treaty that established de facto British supremacy in the region¹³. In 1887, British contestations with China over the opening up of trade with Tibet reached a boiling point. Sikkim, seen as deferring to Tibet in this conflict, had to face the ire of the empire. Thus in 1888 the Tibetan troops were expelled from the territory and Sikkim became a British Protectorate (Mullard 2011,184). Till decolonization in 1947, Sikkim was governed by the *Chos rgyal* (The Sikkimese/Tibetan term for king, pronounced *Chogyal*) and the royal *durbar* (court), with substantial power actually vested in the Political Officer appointed by the British to advise them. The latter were interested in maintaining Tibet as the "buffer" state that would ensure the security of India's northeast frontier, without the more costly alternative of maintaining significant military troops on the frontlines (McKay 2013, 6).

With the decolonization of the subcontinent, the Indo-Sikkim treaty was signed in 1950, making Sikkim a protectorate of India. This meant that matters of communication, foreign affairs and defense remained under the jurisdiction of India, which also retained the right to intervene in internal administration should law and order be threatened (Datta-Ray 1984; Hiltz 2003,70; Rustomji 1987). The last recognized *Chogyal* Palden Thondup Namgyal, who inherited the throne in 1965, made implicit and explicit bids for greater sovereignty for Sikkim, with a public rhetoric of renegotiation of the treaty with India, desires for Sikkim's inclusion in the United Nations, demand for a reduced presence of India in Sikkim's administrative structure and the

¹³ The treaty of Tumblong signed in 1861 gave the British the right to construct a road into Sikkim, abolished trade monopolies, lift tariffs on British goods and to arbitrate disputes with Sikkim's neighbors (Mullard 2011, 184)

transfer of excise duties on goods imported into Sikkim that were being retained by India (Cooke 1980; Das 1983; Hiltz 2003; Rose 1969). This assertion of Sikkim's distinct political identity was rooted, as Hiltz (2003) argues, in claims about a distinct Tibeto-Burman cultural identity. The non-inclusion of the Nepali population of the kingdom in this politico-cultural imaginary proved detrimental to Sikkim's sovereign aspirations.

As per the Indian official discourse, Sikkim was merged into the Indian union after a referendum on the issue was held in April 1975. This followed a few years of popular unrest. In spite of comprising more than seventy-five percent of the population, the Nepalis had the same number of seats in the Sikkim Council as the Bhutia and Lepcha communities, who are seen as the original inhabitants of the land. This sense of exclusion from the nationalistic discourse that centered around the autochthonous citizens led the Nepali population to push for representative electoral politics and unification with India. In this period, the palace and the political parties had also become increasingly opposed in their stands (Das 1983; Gupta 1975). Thus, B. S. Das (1983,13), the Indian Chief Executive Officer during this period, characterized the Indian government's role as one of overturning the administrative breakdown in the kingdom (by calling in the Indian Army). The agentive actors in his narrative were the democratically-oriented local political parties representing the Nepali middle-class, whom the *Chogyal* had alienated. India, he argues, played the paternal peace-keeper in these internal power-struggles. However, there is much to dispute this interpretation. Various parties to the conflict have accused India of fomenting these internal divisions, using "crowds" from outside the state to bolster the narrative of internal dissent (Cooke 1980; Datta-Ray 1984). They also blame India for disregarding more

moderate voices seeking a mediation of the conflict¹⁴, and highlight the legitimacy of Sikkim's demands pertaining to a share of taxes and greater autonomy of administration. Also suspect is the problematic circumstances under which the post-merger legislative assembly of 1979 was dissolved by the center, purportedly to "pre-empt a reported move by a large group of MLAs to table a motion in the House to countermand the merger" (*EPW* 1979, 1737). These conditions provide proof of strong-arm tactics used by India to nationalize this frontier space¹⁵.

After the merger, the outlook towards Sikkim, as with the rest of the northeast (Baruah 2005) has been one of nationalizing space through development. At the time of the merger, special concessions were made to Sikkim under article 371F. This provision, among other things, allowed Sikkim to preserve the "parity system" wherein fifty percent of the seats in the state legislature were reserved for the autochthonous Bhutia-Lepcha ethnic groups, and to prohibit the sale of land to outsiders. This article has over the years become a matter of deep affective investment in the state, seen as the source and only political means of preserving Sikkim's distinctiveness and history¹⁶. In 2002, Sikkim formally joined the North East Council. Initially envisaged as an advisory body concerned with law and order and security, it eventually became a

¹⁴ Datta-Ray (1984, 291-294) documents a memorandum, signed by twenty-nine legislators of the Sikkim Legislative Assembly, dated March 12, 1975, addressed to the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. It demanded the reverting of home, finance and establishment portfolios from the Indian Chief Executive to the Sikkimese Chief Minister, curtailing of the powers of the Chief Executive and Indian officers on deputation and called for a dialogue with the Chogyal. This memorandum was declared illegal, and repudiated by the signatories, Datta-Ray argues, under duress from the Indian administrative representatives.

¹⁵ Various political conjunctures contributed to India's display of militarized nationalism. Given India's 1962 war with China, the popular national and international perception, as a *Time Magazine* article gave voice to, was that "it is India's army that has thus far kept Peking from making another Tibet out of Sikkim" (*Time* 1963). The 1971 war against Pakistan had given Indira Gandhi the popular legitimacy to ride a wave of nationalistic triumphalism, that was linked to India's defiance of American hegemony. At this time Sikkim's ties with the USA, albeit cultural in the form of connections made through Hope Cooke, an American who married the Chogyal to become the queen, raised further suspicion in Delhi (Das 2014).

¹⁶ This is evident when any new legislative measure introduced or contemplated in the state, over diverse matter such as industrial regulations or affirmative action, have had to allay public anxieties about the dilution of the provisions of the article.

planning institution under the Union Ministry of Development of the North Eastern Region (DONER) that was created in 2001 (Baruah 2005). The cunning in the mode of governance, as Baruah points out, is that while DONER is a special development agency signaling preferential development funding and programs for the region, in being under direct control of the central government, it also ensures a more direct mode of governance than that enforced over for the rest of the country. Furthermore, while the burden of development funding is distributed fifty-fifty between center and state for the rest of the country, for Sikkim the center takes ninety percent of the onus of funding. Critics have debated whether this creates a development dependency in such states. The indisputable scenario is that in Sikkim, given the lack of other big industries except for tourism and a recently growing pharmaceutical production industry, the government is the seen as the biggest and most secure employer in the state. This ranges from full-time employment within the government, to finding work as unskilled labor through the central government's minimum employment guarantee schemes, to being contractors for carrying out government development projects. However, this has also led to a substantial proportion of the state's population having to look for employment outside the state. Large sections of the young labor force flock to service sector jobs in malls and restaurants, or to other blue-collar jobs in metropolitan cities; where, as described above, they face a number of prejudices.

The Nepali outsider in the Sikkimese imaginary

Deleuze and Guattari (1987,23) argue that "history is always written from the sedentary point of view and in the name of a unitary State apparatus, at least a possible one, even when the topic is nomads". Sikkim's volatile politics of indigeneity can be largely attributed to such a selectively sedentarizing mode of history writing. The particular historiographic narrative which has hegemonic purchase in and about Sikkim goes thus: the Lepcha ethnic group is the earliest

known inhabitants of this mountain region. Living in the lower reaches of the mountains, they were cultivators who used the slash and burn technique and adhered to some form of naturism and animism. The Bhutias, who were herders and followers of Tibetan Buddhism, are said to have entered this region from the south, settling in the higher reaches. They established the Namgyal dynasty in Sikkim, initiated by the exiled Nyingma-pa sect of Tibetan monks (Balicki 2008, Sinha 2009). A loosely organized feudal monarchy was established, where it was not necessary for the *Chogyal* to act as the supreme ruler, but only for the subjects to recognize him as such (Mullard 2011, 59). The Lepchas were integrated as subordinates in the social order, with their naturism giving way to pan-Sikkim Buddhism. Part of this integration included the emphasis retained on the sacrality of the landscape, manifested most prominently in the continued reverence of Khangchendzonga, the third highest peak in the world, as a mountain deity (Balicki 2008; Vandenhelsken 2011).

The Hindu Nepali/Gorkha community then migrated into Sikkim starting in the nineteenth century, encouraged by the British as cheap agricultural labor to cultivate what colonialism deemed the “excess lands”. The encouragement was also a part of a divide and rule policy, to dilute through a Hindu presence, any strong nationalistic tendencies rooted in a shared Buddhist heritage¹⁷ (Datta-Ray 1984; Sinha 2009). Through the late nineteenth century and early

¹⁷ Risley, in the Gazetteer (1894, xxi) discussed how the British agenda was being served by “the change which is insensibly but steadily taking place in the composition of the population of Sikkim. The Lepchas as has been stated, are rapidly dying out; while from the west, the industrious Newars and the Goorkhas of Nepal are pressing forward to clear and cultivate large areas of unoccupied land on which European tea planters of Darjeeling have already cast longing eyes. The influx of these hereditary enemies of Tibet is our surest guaranty against a revival of Tibetan influence. Here also religion will play a leading part. In Sikkim, as in India, Hinduism will assuredly cast out Buddhism and the praying wheel of the lama will give place to the sacrificial implements of the Brahman. The land will follow the creed; the Tibetan proprietors will be gradually dispossessed, and will take themselves to the petty trade for which they have an undeniable aptitude. Thus, race and religion, the prime movers of the Asiatic world, will settle the Sikkim difficulty for us, in their own way. We have only to look on and see the operation of these causes is not artificially hindered by the interference of Tibet or Nepal”.

twentieth century rich Newari businessmen from Nepal also established themselves as landlords in the state (Sinha 2006). This pattern of migration has led to a scenario where the Bhutia-Lepcha (BL) community got clubbed together as the autochthonous people of the region; and over a period of time became a numerical minority in the state.

In terms of classes of citizenship (Baruah 2005; Rosaldo 1997), the Bhutia, Lepcha and Sherpa, communities are considered autochthonous, given the legal status of Scheduled Tribes (ST) in 1978¹⁸, and are guaranteed a reservation of half of the seats in the state legislature to ensure their cultural survival, under article 371F. The article also gives “Sikkim Subjects” the exclusively right to own land and hold government jobs (Arora 2007). The Bhutias and Lepchas were automatically granted citizenship under the Sikkim Subject Regulations of 1961. Nepalis who owned land and were paying revenue to prove the fifteen-year domicile as was demanded in the regulation were also considered Sikkim Subjects. This process of preferential citizenship then casts a shadow of exclusion on those Nepalis who, despite ancestry in the state, lack the Certificate of Identification (CoI), because their ancestors, being laborers, did not own land in 1961 (ibid). Furthermore, a long suspicion of the production of fake COI documents by recent migrants (*Sikkim Now!* 2013) culminated in a 2015 writ petition for re-verification of such suspected cases (*Sikkim Express* 2017). This leads to a general aspersion of illegality of residence to be cast on Nepalis in general, thereby engendering misrecognition. The focus in tourism discourses on the state’s Buddhist monastic character, with easily-recalled iconic images of the prayer wheels and lamas, further fuels fears of invisibility among the Nepali population.

¹⁸ As Arora (2007, 199) elaborates, “the Scheduled Tribe Order of 1978 expanded the Bhutia category by including other Tibetan groups such as the Sherpa, the Dukpa, the Tibetan, the Dophthapa, the Kagatey and the Chumbiapa”.

The last point about the fraught politics of recognition for the Nepali population is the current fork in the road in terms of routes for redress. On one end, the quest for esteem and dignity for a consolidated Nepali/Gorkha identity in the state continues to be important to the population. Yet while expressing an allegiance to the Gorkha identity, Sikkim's Nepalis have also maintaining their distance from the homeland movement by Gorkhas in the neighboring district of Darjeeling. Claiming distinction from their neighbors is as much about recognition as redistribution, given that article 371F guarantees protective measures that would be jeopardized if the Gorkhas of Sikkim demanded statehood¹⁹. On the other hand, a quest for inclusion in the Scheduled Tribes list necessitates the splitting of the larger Gorkha identity into specific ethnic groups that need to prove their tribal distinctiveness. Along these lines, the Tamang and Limbu communities worked towards being certified as Scheduled Tribes in 2002, moving from their previous recognition as Other Backward Classes. This quest for a ST status, by other Nepali groups such as Gurungs and Magars, has been described as the politics of tribalization in the region (Sinha 2006; Vandenhelsken 2009). The impact of this pull between a consolidated Gorkha identity and a divided tribal identity, seen also in the neighboring district of Darjeeling, has been described by Middleton (2016) as a source of a fragmentation of identity. However, consolidating a Gorkha identity has its own stress, in terms of the need to reconcile the interests of the elite Bahun, Chhetri and Newar groups with the more socially and economically disadvantaged groups such as the Bhujel or Magar (Balicki 2008; Sinha 2006). And the recognition gained by the newly included Scheduled Tribes is caught in a further conundrum, in terms of protection owed to them by the state. The Limbu and Tamang groups have demanded to be included in the parity system of the state legislature, with reserved seats. The BL community

¹⁹ Shneiderman, and Tillin (2015) highlight how this lack of special status is acutely felt by the resource-deprived state of Darjeeling, whose various residents often share heritage and familial connections with Sikkim Subjects.

has resisted the inclusion of Tamangs and Limbus within the 50% seats reserved, arguing that the seats are marked for BL in particular under 371F, for preserving the culture of the kingdom, and not for Scheduled Tribes in general as the term is used in a pan-Indian context²⁰. The regional state's way out of the impasse has been to seek an expansion of the number of seats in the state legislature, which has so far not been centrally approved (and given the state's small geographic and population size appears unlikely).

WALKING IN THE FORESTS – ASSEMBLAGES OF BIOCULTURAL BELONGING

In this and the next two segments, I discuss my ethnographic approach, corresponding to the three main concerns of the dissertation. In January 2015, I began my fieldwork with the Forest Department in the capital, specifically with the ecotourism division of the Sikkim Biodiversity and Forest Management Project (SBFP) – Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) Assisted. I followed the project to the three Protected Area-adjacent villages of Pangthang, Kitam and Okhrey, whose nature-culture it promoted during the fifteen months of my stay. All through this period, walking through the three forest areas emerged as one of the main components or methods of my ethnography.

I walked through sections of each of the PAs on reconnaissance tours with forestry officials stationed there, with the ecotourism and biodiversity science experts coming from Gangtok, and with the village 'stakeholders'. The aim of such treks was to carve out trail routes

²⁰ The question of the universality of meaning of indigeneity and whether the term tribe can be synonymous to the term indigenous has become a contested topic in India. Scholars have pointed to the ways in which the global validation of indigenous movements has invigorated tribal politics in India (Middleton 2016; Shneiderman and Turin 2006). However many have also objected to the application of a term from a settler colonial context, which they fear will foment 'sons of the soil' movements that misdiagnoses causes of marginalization (Beteille 1998; Van Schendel 2011); or engender elite internationally-oriented tribal positions that fail to form alliances with struggles waged by tribal actors within the constraints of the nation-state (Ghosh 2006). What the contest between the BL and the Limbu-Tamang indicates is the rub between two different emphases on tribal identity, one rooted in prior residence and historical cultural distinction, and the other in the history of marginalization from the mainstream.

that would be attractive to ecotourists and apt representations of the biodiversity of the landscape. My first foray was in the Pangthang forest block of the temperate Fambang Lho Sanctuary, which lies at an altitudinal range of 1524 to 2749 meters, spread over a total area of 51.76 sq. kms. Similar SBFP reconnaissance tours took me to the fringes of Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary in the West district, a 104 sq. km subtropical and temperate forest located between 2110 to 4100 meters above sea level, famous for its resplendent bloom of rhododendrons. Near the village of Okhrey, I trekked with forestry staff and village guides, scanning prospective routes, while sometimes worrying about wild boars known for being a menace in the area. The third target of the project was the Kitam Bird Sanctuary, all of 6 sq. kms, with tropical and subtropical vegetation spread between the altitudes of 320 to 875 meters. Over the course of my fieldwork there was very little of the sanctuary I had not walked through: across known trails that were more than a century old, across precarious short-cuts (fascinatingly called *chor bato* i.e. thief-road in Nepali), and to dead-ends of dense understories or slippery mountain precipices. These more adventurous forays occurred with villagers and non-governmental conservationists from Gangtok who were planning a parallel ecotourism initiative, as part of a central government-initiated model village scheme. Then when ecotourism festivals occurred in each of the three villages, as a result of the planning, I walked the same trails with the ecotourists who came to the destination. On these particular walks, I was able to observe how the narratives and claims made during previous walks – about the forests, the people and the relationship of the two – were presented to the tourists as the main intended audience, and the reception thereof.

Lefebvre (1974, 109) wrote of space that “as locus of production, as itself product and production, [it] is both the weapon and the sign of...struggle”. My interest through the nature walks was to attend, in this vein, to the production of the forests and to the signs of struggle in

their production as contested assemblages of belonging. Assemblages, writes Donald Moore (2005, 2) in his “spatially sensitive” ethnography of cultural politics in Zimbabwe,

displace humans as sovereign makers of history [in favor of] nature-culture hybrids.

Assemblages arrange provisionally, giving emergent force to contingent alignments of social relations, material substance and cultural meanings...foreground multiplicities irreducible to a single sense, structure and logic. They span the divide between human and non-human, symbol and substance, marking the imbrication of the semiotic and the material. ...History and politics are inflected with consequential materialities of milieu of non-human entities and artifacts (23-24).

On one of the reconnaissance walks, to the Rangeet riverbed through the Kitam sanctuary for the model village project, Ujwal, a leader of the village ecotourism committee remarked, “there were two war trenches here”. The NGO member in the party guessed that the trench might date back to the early nineteenth century Anglo-Gorkha war. Ujwal told us that based on his documenting of the oral history of the village, the trenches were from a war between Sikkim and the British in 1850. Given the arrest of JD Hooker and Darjeeling’s District Magistrate around this time, the date seemed plausible. He claimed that the Magar king who lived in Kitam had supported the Sikkim Chogyal in the war. One of the ruins of the many *magarjongs* or Magar forts in Sikkim lies in Kitam. From where we stood, this multi-ethnic Sikkimese army had fired canons on to the opposite side of the Rangeet River, into what is now West Bengal. This legend of the Magar king, not entirely subjugated by Sikkim’s erstwhile Buddhist dynasty, has been used in recent years by the Magar ethnic group to articulate indigenous distinctiveness and make claims for a Scheduled Tribe status. Ujwal however was using the narrative to claim a general history of Gorkha presence in the landscape, avoiding this fragmentation of the Gorkha identity.

“Unfortunately”, he carried on, “now we can only tell where it was, what was there we cannot show. Now there is only wood from natural regeneration”.

While Ujwal sought to make the “consequential materiality” of the war trench a way of sedimenting Gorkha/Nepali belonging in the landscape, the “naturally regenerating wood” also hindered his position as “sovereign maker of history” (Moore 2005, 23). It is these material and symbolic entanglements, not only with the landscape in general, but certain species in particular that the dissertation attends to, in critically examining the cultural politics of inclusion and exclusion on the frontier. Jane Bennett (2010, 23-24) argues that “bodies enhance their power in or as a heterogeneous assemblage... The effects generated by an assemblage are emergent, in that their ability to make something happen [is] distinct from the sum of the vital force of each materiality considered alone”. In cannily perceiving this increased effectivity of the collective or confederate agency, as Bennett terms it, the quest for belonging of the Nepali population of Kitam is inextricably entangled with the belonging of the sal forests and the peacock as companion species or messmates (Haraway 2008). Bennett (2010, 24) also underscores that any one node of an assemblage does not have “sufficient competence to determine consistently the trajectory or impact of the group”. The ethnography draws attention to this limit of the potency gained in the field of recognition by the various assemblages, which becomes apparent when the peacock’s behavior or the sal tree’s characteristics set back the aspirations for recognition that the Nepali actants have for such multispecies knots. The aim here is to analyze nature, incorporated into politics, as more than simply foil or metaphor that serve specific claims for human belonging. Yet, even in using the Latourian term actants, the agenda is not to attribute a radically equal agency to human and non-human entities of the assemblages. As highlighted earlier, the dissertation also illuminates the different demands made on the confederation,

coming from the different valences of diversity at play. The result – of the divergent agendas of the actants of the assemblage²¹, and of the divergent demands made of them – is a terrain of struggle and negotiations, without guarantee (Moore 2005, 22).

The “naturalization” of cultural politics has been one way for social scientists to describe this imbrication of the non-human in political claims of belonging. The description is usually of a phenomenon where a turn to nature ‘out there’ allows for articulation of inclusion or exclusion that can be legitimized as transcendental truths rather than contingent claims. Radhika Govindrajan (2019, 94-95) for example writes about the ways in which the Pahari (hill folk) of Uttarkhand represent the monkeys terrorizing the landscape as rapacious outsiders, “to produce a critical commentary on the growing presence and power of human outsiders. [In doing so they] naturalize pahari claims to belonging [that are] dependent on the exclusion and othering of human and animal others”. In this usage, naturalization appears to be close to its deployment in critical theory, which sees it as a process of eliding historical, cultural genealogies of an idea/ideal in order to make it appear incontrovertible. Denaturalizing concepts and ideas, by historicizing them, becomes the critical intervention. As Jean Comaroff (2017, 45) remarks, “denaturing [is seen as] key to unmasking the commonsense workings of domination, abstraction, and exploitation”.

My attempt in this dissertation is to attend to the rub between this meaning of “naturalization” and naturalization as understood in ecology and in everyday citizenship

²¹ Jean Comaroff (2017) points out the irony of the “flattening [of] the social world as it were” (30), in the post-human turn, that seems to give rise to an “urge to move beyond the human per se [and] view [the] species as merely one among many” (29) at the very moment when the Anthropocene is being acknowledged as “an epoch in which human action is having unprecedented effects on the earth’s geology and ecosystems, dramatically accelerating the rate of species extinction” (29). Even in drawing attention to the more-than-human actors in the ethnopolitics of Sikkim, my aim is not to decenter or downplay the centrality of human agendas in the conjuncture I analyze.

parlance. In the latter to be naturalized into a landscape or a nation-state is not to have elided the weight of history towards a transcendental achievement, but to have been granted recognition of belonging through the acknowledgment and foregrounding of this history. The opposition in ecology is between naturalized and native belonging. Even as species can be naturalized in landscapes, their non-native origin can never be taken out of consideration. Thus, even as Ujwal sought to naturalize Gorkha belonging in Sikkim in the broad sense of turning to nature, a naturalization of the Nepali population (akin to other species) in the landscape, in ecological reckoning, nonetheless keeps the tension of their non-native character open to discussion. This ethnography dwells on this tension in the meanings of naturalization and the politics engendered therein. This tension encompasses not only the ‘out-of-placeness’ of humans but also of non-human species such as the Japanese cedar, whose naturalization, my Sikkimese interlocutors understand all too well, has implications for the larger politics of placemaking on the frontier. Attending to naturalization then, as a reflexive, strategic, and sometimes melancholic process of ‘rooting’²² in territory, I argue, helps us see a politics of belonging with its varied modes of accommodations and imperfectly negotiated coexistence, that remains undertheorized unless we focus on the cross-pollination of ecological and political paradigms of boundary-making.

TOURISM PLANNING MEETINGS – AND THE PHANTASMIC TOURIST GAZE

After the forest walks, the most prominent aspect of my ethnographic practice was attending the pervasive tourism planning meetings, at the state and village level. Lasting for hours, involving villagers, non-governmental personnel and government representatives, such

²² Here I am especially drawing on James Clifford’s (1997) critical reflections of the ways in which there has been, in general and anthropological thinking, a binary between the privileged routes of cosmopolitan travelers and the expectations of rootedness of indigenous people. The latter are incarcerated in place, their histories of travel denied or devalued [see also Malkki (1992) and Appadurai (1988)].

meetings were opportunities for the actors to interject on logistics and planning of upcoming tourism festivals, share general expectations and advice for tourism promotion, and air grievances about the developments so far. Such discussions often exceeded the immediate agenda of the meetings pertaining to particular brochure designs, cultural performance line-ups or trail planning. In the village of Kitam, I attended numerous such meetings in the Panchayat (village assembly) office, housed above two shops in the village square that served as a taxi-stand. When these meeting involved SBFP consultants from Gangtok, the venue shifted to the restaurant in the square run by two members of the village ecotourism committee.

In Okhrey the numerous meetings were similarly divided between the community hall in the recently-built Sherpa Cultural Center of the village and the dining room of one of the homestay-owning families who were also Panchayat leaders. The meetings in Pangthang occurred in a relatively modest setting. We often congregated around the kitchen of a log hut of a stakeholder. The hut was on the opposite end of the spectrum from the sanitized and futuristic conference hall, with up-to-date audio-visual facilities, in the multi-story Tourism Department headquarter, where all the state tourism policy consultations took place. Many in the state believed Pangthang to be a forest encroachment. However, bureaucrats in the FD informed me that much of the village had been resettled there prior to the declaration of the sanctuary, when the military took over their original settlement. For an official associated with the FD to be sitting in a hut in Pangthang and mapping out “festival flow” through the village on a chart paper was therefore perceived as a significant act of recognition for the village. This mundane activity indicated the legibility of the village within the development state apparatus, thereby overriding some of the deficit of cultural belonging experienced by the villagers in other contexts.

In this dissertation these meetings serve as sites for an analysis of the “tourist gaze”. The concept as developed by Urry (1990), and extended over the last few decades, tends to focus predominantly on the power of a global scopic regime to mold people and places according to the desires and presumptions of capitalist consumers (Bruner 2005; Stasch 2011, West and Carrier 2006; West 2008). Included within the broader critique of the neoliberalization of nature and culture (Castree 2008; Dressler et al 2014²³; Heynen and Robbins 2005), the analysis has focused on ways in which tourism can disenfranchise host communities through accumulation by dispossession (Munster and Munster 2012; Schmid 2015), and by putting the needs of wildlife as per bourgeois conservation priorities²⁴ above local livelihood needs²⁵ (Büscher 2012; Guha 2006; Jalais 2010). My argument is that often, such an approach, in privileging the ways of seeing, leave under-theorized the modes and experiences of being seen and operating under the tourist gaze. It also leaved undertheorized the aspect of ‘giving-oneself-to-be-seen’ and, in doing so, anticipating a gaze. Analyzing the tourism planning meetings helps theorize this aspect, by ethnographically asking what differently-situated tourism practitioners make of the gaze.

My aim is not to offer a story of resistance to global/elite power through local strategies. Nor is it only to call for more ethnographic particularity beyond a totalizing theory. Rather it is to

²³ This edited volume argues that “Nature™ Inc stands as an apt metaphor for conservation in our times [characterized by] the interrelated dynamics of commodification, competition, financialization, and market disciplining that were less dominant in earlier management regimes” (246).

²⁴ While the distinction between “environmentalism of the poor” (Martínez Alier 2005) and exclusionary conservation efforts of bourgeois elite has been the central distinction drawn in the conservation landscape of India, recent writings have also sought to unpack the latter category. Mawdsley et al (2009) for example argue that all visitors to protected areas are not elite conservationists, and this segment of the middle class, and its sympathies in the conservation versus people debate have largely remained unexamined. The well-known conservationist Ullas Karanth (2012) has expressed similar views.

²⁵ This debate has been most pronounced in the ongoing court case about restricting tourism in Tiger Reserves in India. On one hand some famous conservationists like Valmik Thapar have supported tourism, arguing that the revenue generated from tourism will compensate the rural populations that have in recent years anyway been experiencing loss of agricultural productivity. Those speaking against it either make a case for the rights of wildlife, or argue that such compensation accrues not to disenfranchised forest communities but to the landowning class of frontier capitalists (Munster and Munster 2012).

push back on interpretations that emphasize either the loss of authenticity or more neutrally the creation of a hyperreal identity mirroring touristic desires (see for example Vicanne Adams' theorization of "virtual Sherpas" (1996), or Dean MacCannell's writings on "staged authenticity" [2018]). My contention is that the ways in which the tourist gaze is experienced by tourism hosts needs to be understood less as an all-seeing panopticon and more as one gaze among a multiplicity of gazes that hosts perceive as the recognizing agents, all of which have an imputed and phantasmic character. Writing about the gaze of the apartheid state in South Africa, Thomas Blom Hansen (2012, 14) argues that citizens as objects of the gaze are involved in "a constant second-guessing of the gaze of the state, produc[ing] fine-grained readings, mostly imaginary in nature, of different degrees of freedom and physical security in different locations". It is this second-guessing of the gaze, and its opacity – where seeing and being seeing leads to less than perfectly transparent visibility – I argue, that remains undertheorized in the different studies of the impact of tourism.

The effect of this second-guessing, and therefore of the tourist gaze then needs to be understood as much in terms of the anxieties of recognition it induces, as in terms of the binary of capture and freedom. The tourism planning meetings in Sikkim were caught in a bind, where tourism promoters sought to present the state's nature-culture for validation by the tourist gaze, and yet were constantly unhappy about the content of these presentations. This bind, I show, can be traced to anxieties about judgements under the tourist gaze arising not only because Sikkimese citizens fear that they will fail to meet the expectations of tourists as consumers but because contradictory meanings, and therein also demands, are often imputed to the tourist gaze. Thus, a significant question for Sikkim's tourism promoters and performer was: will the tourist gaze seek exotic otherness and therefore enjoy the indolent culture of the hills, where various

village fairs (*melas*) serve as an occasion to “eat, drink and make merry”? Or will the mainly middle-class Indian tourists judge such presentations from the gaze of the hierarchically superior caste-society, deeming such fairs as a sign of the frontier’s backwardness? And will the appreciation of exotic otherness be entirely free of an implicit judgment of backwardness? It is the negotiation of this inability to reduce the tourist gaze “to sets of eyes that can be known” (Hansen 2012, 12, drawing on Merleau-Ponty); and which therefore operates in sometimes difficult to discern relationships with other regimes of recognition linked to the state and to the national liberal multicultural ethos, that is explored in the chapters. The aim is to arrive at a better understanding of ethno-politics-as-tourism-practice.

CULTURAL FAIRS, POLITICAL PATRONAGE AND THE NEOLIBERAL DEVELOPMENT

The final pervasive object of ethnographic interest during my fieldwork that I want to discuss are various tourism fairs, which became the immediate end goal of the two most prominent conservation and development interventions in the state at that time, namely the SBFP and Sikkim’s Organic Mission. Ecotourism planning in Pangthang culminated in a tourism festival in the spring of 2015, coinciding with the Hindu festival of Ram Navami. It was repeated in spring 2016, though this time without any overlap with the religious calendar. The three-day SBFP festival at Okhrey in the Fall of 2015 occurred at the start of the Hindu festival of Dussehra, hoping to attract tourists who travel during this holiday season. In the next festival in Okhrey, organized without the support of the SBFP, the local political apparatus gave the village’s Tibetan New Year celebration in winter 2016 a touristic orientation.

In being packaged as tourism events, the festivals were presented as income-generating development initiatives. Yet the rituals and practices of the festivals remained close to the idiom of local cultural fairs, which are a prominent expression of religious and political sociality in the

landscape. Spread over two or three days, the *mela* is an occasion for residents of the nearby villages to visit the various stalls selling traditionally barbequed meats, locally-brewed liquor and handicrafts. While other *melas* usually include games with elements of gambling, the SBFP project stuck to darts, archery etc. Simultaneously, on the cultural ground one can watch various performances, which usually mix typical ethnic song and dance routines with some more contemporary fare. These performances are interspersed by political speeches from the chief guests, who are usually state ministers from the various government departments. Their position as patrons of the mela is a significant occasion for them to assert their political authority. With the SBFP, the Forest Minister served as the chief guest. In the SBFP-led fairs, I was roped in as a volunteer, assigned to odd-end roles, such as informing the performing troupes about their position in the roster at the “cultural ground”, or relaying messages between the department personnel and the villagers who had set up the various food and handicraft stalls. Without the SBFP, my role in Okhrey’s second festival was more purely of an observer. What I observed in all these festivals was the ritualistic staging of an engagement between politicians, village residents, bureaucrats. The tourist was the newly-added actor in this milieu whose presence some actors perceived to be the upending of the extant meaning of the cultural-political engagement.

Ferguson’s (1994) seminal work led the way in turning from the question of why development interventions fail (Scott 1998), to highlighting the disciplinary regime put in place through which the state extends its reach, irrespective of the success or failure of particular interventions. Similarly, the governmentalization of conduct as an effect of development (Agrawal 2005; Li 2007) has been another way in which scholarship has moved beyond the success-failure issue. My aim in centering the *mela*, as illuminating of the politics of development, is to underscore the spectacular dimension of development that gets sidelined in

the emphasis on routinized subjectivation. Mosse (2005) argues that representational cohesion is more important in development than the consideration of minute planning objectives.

Development interventions seek to keep donors, recipients and governments engaged in the project. Taking a Latourian approach, he highlights the role of development professionals as tiding over breakdowns in the network, a suturing that is mainly performed in the textual representations of the projects. I take seriously the call to attend to this aspect of the politics of development, where the need to demonstrate engagement, and demonstrate success goes beyond the reliance on statistical outcomes. However, unlike Mosse's emphasis on development texts, this ethnography examines public spectacles as the locus of this aspect of development politics.

Writing of everyday rituals of the state, Hansen and Stepputat (2001, 37) characterize them as "continuous state spectacles asserting and affirming the state. These spectacles only occasionally succeed in producing the specific social effects they aim at, but always reproduce the imagination of the state as the great enframer of our lives." Within neoliberal development, reproducing the imaginary of the state as the enframer of life, I highlight, comes to rely on spectacular events like the *mela*. The fairs become occasions of representative publicity for the state. In demonstrating its ability to organize a public event by commanding people and resources effectively, the state makes it possible for engaged publics to see it i.e. to "see the state" (Roy 2006). This ritual function of the *mela* for the state becomes all the more pressing because state functionaries now perceive the complex as beginning to be re-oriented to the tourists as the new sponsors, and thus patrons.

I theorize spectators not as passive audiences, but rather as citizens who actively engage with and therefore contribute to the meaning-making of the event and by extension of state power (ibid; Werry 2012). My aim is not to highlight a purported hollowness of power that

spectacular displays of state authority or state presence obfuscate (Mbembe 1992; Žižek 2002). Nor is it to read the spectacularization of conservation as a reliance on the circulation of fetishized images that are alienated from the relations that produce them (Igoe, Neves, and Brockington 2010; Igoe 2017). Drawing on Guy Debord, this line inquiry does not pay adequate attention to the performative and interactional aspect of a spectacle. Rather, I begin with Geertz's insight about the aim of the theater state being to "present an ontology and, by presenting it, to make it happen – make it actual" (1980,104). My suggestion therefore is that it is by adding an understanding of this theatrical, spectacular dimension of development and conservation interventions to the analysis of the governmentalizing aspects that we get a more holistic understanding of the contemporary contours of neoliberal development. Spectacularization of development, this ethnography highlights, is both a response to new challenges to state authority that arises from the market as its ambivalent complement-but-also-nemesis, the emergent need for states to be agents of branding for their constituents (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Graan 2013) and also a continuation of older rituals of authority.

This attention to the spectacular dimension of development is especially pertinent in understanding the organic agriculture program in Sikkim, which when evaluated in terms of production output, capacity for income-generation and decentralization of decision-making to farmers appears to have severe limitations. I focus ethnographically on the ways in which the Organic Festival captured the public imagination in the state, for months leading up to and following the event. The event took a carnivalesque dimension, with three venues displaying the organic output of the state, arranged as a two-story tall Ganesha made of mandarin oranges, a Buddha shaped from bananas, a lentil red panda and so on. Thousands of citizens visited these venues, and lined the roads to wave at the Prime Minister's passing motorcade. I argue that the

intersection of these spectacular performances of state authority, with the affective and critical engagements of citizens in these performances is where the value of organic production or marketized biodiversity conservation (as effective development intervention) is created and contested.

To end the introduction, let me very briefly recapitulate the plan for the ensuing chapters, centering the conundrum that is analyzed in each chapter. Chapter one begins by asking why villagers of Kitam themselves sought the declaration of a sanctuary, that would curtail their access to forest resources, and why they emphasized the protection of the peacock, as opposed to any other species, as the reason for the sanctuary demarcation. In answering these questions, the chapter follows the biocultural people-peacock assemblage, asking why it comes together and how it negotiates the complex and sometimes contradictory parameters of recognition in the landscape. Chapter two asks how the recognition given to the non-native Japanese cedar forests, and the validation denied to the native sal forests is reconciled within the biodiversity discourse. Beyond an easy characterization as either xenophobia or cosmopolitanism, the chapter sheds light on the ambivalences in the process of naturalization on frontier that are as influenced by cultural, political, economic considerations as by ecological one. However, in pointing to such ambivalence, the focus is also on the toll this seeking of naturalization takes on the non-native Nepali community, in terms of the power and position the community comprises in its quest for validation of belonging. Chapter three asks why state and non-state tourism promoters who see the tourism festival as the desired manifestation of promotional activities in Sikkim, are nonetheless almost always dissatisfied with the content of such festivals and end up denouncing them in whole or part. In asking what these anxieties are indicative of, the chapter scrutinizes the *mela* or tourism fair as the site where the unstable relation of host, guest and patron is

negotiated, causing communities to be caught in a bind between the imputed gazes of state politics, of consumer capital and of the liberal nation. It probes how both community hosts and political patrons work through the *mela* to neutralize the perceived threat from the capitalist guest as the destabilizer of hierarchical state-society relations, and the repercussions of the inability to completely achieve this neutralization. Chapter four asks what the regional state does when its ability to derive sovereignty by classifying subjects as CoI or non-CoI holders and accordingly denying or granting benefits to, is compromised in the rise of tourism as a private enterprise. Similarly, it asks about the run between exclusionary environmental imaginaries of endemic nature known by native people with biodiversity conservation as a global paradigm implemented by non-local environmental practitioners. The chapter then traces how exclusionary political imaginaries are nonetheless articulated through other means in these arenas, leading to uneven consequences for different economic classes on native and non-native citizens. The last chapter asks firstly why the regional state chose to pursue the development objective of becoming fully organic, when it could not guarantee adequate income generation, self-sufficiency of production or democratic participation of farmers in decision-making process; and how does the populist state's local legitimacy endure in the face of these limitations? The answer to both these questions, I argue, lies in examining the organic mission of Sikkim as a political brand created by the state, whose political value as a development initiative it struggles to retain against ethical consumers and pioneering farmers as perceived competitors for credit. The chapter assesses the successes and failures of the state's discursive strategies to this effect, which in turn sheds light on the anxious position of the development state that promotes and yet finds itself threatened by neoliberalization.

CHAPTER ONE
OF INDIAN PEACOCKS AND NEPALI PEOPLE: ASSEMBLAGES OF POLITICAL
RECOGNITION IN A HIMALAYAN BIRD SANCTUARY

INTRODUCTION

The village of Kitam in Indian state of Sikkim, inhabited predominantly by the ethnic Nepali community, faces a deficit of belonging as a group whose name itself indexes foreignness. While promoting ecotourism in its adjacent bird sanctuary, the villagers have sought to forge a strong material-symbolic association with the peacock as the central attraction of the sanctuary. What are the stakes for the villagers in “living intersectionally” or “getting on together”, as a multi-species knot (Haraway 2008; 2016) with the peacock? And what are the difficulties in getting along? This chapter argues that environmental stewardship has emerged for the marginalized Nepali ethnic group as an avenue for seeking recognition of their belonging. It helps avoid some of the demands of recognition faced when ethnic diversity has to be rendered legible according to specific criteria of the ethnographic state (Dirks 2001), i.e. its “ethno-logics” (Middleton 2011; 2016). The chapter traces the ethno-logics that can be avoided in the natural turn in the politics of multiculturalism. Concurrently, it also highlights the “eco-logics” that demand that the diversity of the nature-culture assemblage of Kitam be made legible in particular ways. The emergent politics, of what I term as bio-cultural recognition, gives rise to its own forms of symbolic violence. New anxieties arise, I argue, with the need to make the diversity of the people-peacock knot legible along three non-isomorphic registers of value. The chapter details these struggles: of simultaneously meeting the criteria of nativism of the peacock as per the parameters of ecological diversity, of justifying the belonging of the Gorkha identity in India to meet parameters of valuable cultural diversity, and of meeting the market-mediated demands

of exoticness of diversity, made by visiting Indian ecotourists as granter of recognition. The aim here is to explore of an emergent avenue of contesting ethnic marginalization in northeast India, opened up at the intersection of environmentalism, state politics and the market, and shed light both on its possibilities and its limits.

The chapter begins with the declaration of Kitam as a bird sanctuary in 2006, born out of the initiative of the community living on the fringes of what was earlier a reserve forest. It unpacks why the peacock emerges as the species through which the Nepali community seeks to perform its stewardship. This helps us attend to how endemism as an ecologic comes to bear on the articulations of nature-culture, but is also engaged with creatively in these articulations. The aim is not to read these engagements with an ecological parameter as a corruption of the ideal, but rather to point to the ambivalences in the way that endemism is conceptualized which then generates the space for negotiations of biocultural belonging. The ultimate question then in the chapter is about the scope for and dimensions of potency that the opening out of liberal recognition into a broader politics of biocultural recognition engenders, following Patchen Markell's (2003) call to see the possibilities for potency that can be gained by subjects in not being singularly bound to the state for recognition.

A SANCTUARY IS BORN

In 2001, the residents of Kitam village in South Sikkim wrote a petition to the Chief Minister. The petition stated, "with a view to preserve flora and fauna of Kitam forest we are very much eager to settle Birds Sanctuary if your kind honour may approve. Specifically, we have to preserve peacocks thereof. There may be 30 to 40 peacocks in the Jungal and they prefer to perch in [this] particular place. They do not migrate from place to place. So, we can choose this particular place where they prefer for their perching" (sic). The "file" containing this

petition, accompanied by other ecological reports about the forest, moved through the Forest Department's bureaucratic hierarchy for a few years till in 2006 the reserve forest became a bird sanctuary. To anyone familiar with the environmental politics of South Asia, this seems to be a counter-intuitive scenario. The more common narrative is one of environmental resource conflicts between the state and various marginal communities. Yet here a village community with some level of dependence on the forest for daily livelihood needs was seeking to voluntarily scale back its access to the forest and its natural resources. Asking for a sanctuary meant asking for more oversight and control by the state's Forest Department. How do we understand this unusual form of environmental politics?

The answer lies in seeing this move as a form of politics of recognition. In the ethnopolitics of Sikkim, the Nepali community faces a deficit of recognition of belonging, inasmuch as their "name itself indexes a foreign country". In hegemonic historic narratives, the Lepcha community is considered to be Sikkim's earliest inhabitants. The Bhutias were Tibetan Buddhists who settled in the territory from the 13th century CE¹. In 1642 they established the Namgyal dynasty, subsuming the nature-worshipping Lepchas within the Buddhist fold. The Nepali/Gorkha community's presence in Sikkim began with the Gorkha invasion in 1774. It sped up during the British rule in the region, who saw Nepali migrants as cheap and "hardworking" agricultural labor for Sikkim and Darjeeling (Besky 2013). Nepali Hindu migrants also served a colonial divide and rule policy aimed at diluting any strong Sikkimese nationalistic tendencies arising out of a shared Buddhist heritage (Sinha 2006, citing the Sikkim Gazetteer). Mid-20th century road constructions and introduction of cash crops brought more laborers (Balicki 2008).

¹ Even as the migration pattern from Tibet into Sikkim is said to have started from the 13th century, linguistics scholars have argued that it can be dated as far back as 9th century, discernable from the genealogy of regional dialects (Mullard 2011, 194).

Subsequently, the Bhutia-Lepcha community got clubbed together as the autochthonous people of the region and over a period of time became a numerical minority in the state. Today they make up about 20% of the state population². Yet in affective imaginaries of sub-nationalism, and in Indian mainstream depictions, the Nepali community is positioned as outsiders with less legitimate claims of belonging.

Meanwhile, since the late 90s Sikkim has positioned itself as a “green” state within the Indian nation. With concern over climate change, there is a global sense of urgency regarding environmental conservation. Sikkim offers itself as a pioneer and trendsetter in this domain. In 1999, a well-known Delhi-based conservation NGO, the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), honored Sikkim’s Chief Minister as the ‘greenest’ Chief Minister, leading to a national validation of these claims. The state’s 82% forest cover, of which about 36% is under the protected area network, as per the Forest Department website, provides a ready visual proof of its “greenness”. Its reputation as a premier ecotourism destination was boosted by Lonely Planet ranking it as the best region in the world to visit for “responsible travel” in 2014 (Lonely Planet 2014). In 2016, with all 74,000 hectares of its agricultural land certified as organic, it became India’s first fully organic state, receiving much national and international attention. With all these campaigns, the primacy Sikkim gives to market-based conservation is now well-acknowledged.

² This 20% also includes the Sherpa and other more recent Tibetan migrant communities, who were given the tribal status soon after Sikkim’s merger into India in 1978. As one of my Sherpa informants remarked wryly, “we went to sleep as Sherpa one night and woke up as BL [i.e. Bhutia-Lepcha as a Scheduled Tribe category] the next morning”. The relatively easier acceptance of the Sherpas as legitimate residents in the state can broadly be attributed to their Buddhist identity and common descent from Tibet, like the Bhutias. A detailed analysis of the Sherpa people’s position in Sikkim though relevant in understanding the comparative position of the Nepali/Gorkali ethnic groups, is beyond the scope of this chapter.

In this context, the letter petitioning for the sanctuary can be read as a way of articulating a claim to “green citizenship” within this green frontier. The demand for the sanctuary is now posited by villagers of Kitam as proof of their environmental stewardship, on the basis of which they seek acknowledgment of their “green citizenship” to assuage some of their anxieties of belonging. I deploy the term green citizenship to highlight the claims for substantive cultural citizenship (Rodalso 1997) that are being made through articulations of environmentalist subjectivities, by the Nepali community, who in the process also offer an implicit criticism of the misrecognition or lack of respect that experience as formal citizens of the country. As the letter shows, the legitimacy of the sanctuary and the narrative of its distinctiveness rests on the peacock. The story of the politics of belonging unfolding in Kitam that I wish to trace then, seems to be a story of a peacock-people multispecies knot. Or a peacock-people assemblage inasmuch as it is “a contingent alignment of social relations, material substance, and cultural meaning [spanning] the divide between nature and culture, humans and nonhumans, symbol and substance” (Moore 2005, 24) This chapter elaborates on why and how belongingness is articulated in this multispecies assemblage. The peacock’s story, I hope to show, is representative of an emergent avenue of ethnopolitics in the region that has not been adequately interrogated. Studies have looked at the binds the recognition-granting state puts Nepali subjects in. Townsend Middleton (2011; 2016) uses the term “ethno-logics” to describe the various hard-to-meet criteria Nepali ethnic groups have to conform to in order for their cultural diversity to be validated by the liberal state. The symbolic violence of such ethno-logics has been the object of inquiry (Arora 2007; Roy Burman 2008; Shneiderman and Turin 2006; Subba 1999). In this chapter, I ask what are the pitfalls of the conventional modes of seeking recognition that are avoided by the route of “green citizenship” – what are the possibilities opened up? What are the

limits to such recognition? And to what imposition of specific criteria, specific eco-logics, if you will, can we trace the limits?

The next section begins by discussing the landscape of conventional state-derived recognition in Sikkim. This scenario calls for a fragmentation of the larger Gorkha identity into smaller ethnic group identities, which need to meet various rigid criteria for proving their marginalization that the state may then deem as deserving of remedy. In the turn to environmentalism as an alternative avenue for seeking recognition, as a response to these binds set by the state, the following section shows, the Nepali community has to confront the parameters set by the biodiversity discourse. The prescriptions this ecological paradigm sets for nature to be legible as biodiversity and for culture to be positively associated with this narrowly valued species diversity, the chapter argues, gives rise to a form of biocultural recognition which calls for a careful assessment. Accordingly, the chapter elaborates the significance of endemism within the biodiversity regime, and how endemism is understood and implemented in the everyday ecological practices on the frontier. The efforts of the peacock-people assemblage to articulate into this slot of idealized environmental subjects and the characteristics of their migratory identities that challenge their fit into the slot are then analyzed. The efforts made to overcome this rub and the implications and outcomes of these negotiations for the recognition-seeking subjects is discussed in the last section, from which we can then draw conclusions about the contours of this emergent mode of multispecies politics.

ETHNOPOLITICS OF TRIBALIZATION AND THE LIMITS OF RECOGNITION

Sikkim was a protectorate of the British from 1888, and then of India till 1975. It was incorporated as the 22nd Indian state under special provisions of the Article 371F of the Constitution. This preserved an old parity system of representation whereby in the thirty-two-

seat Legislative Assembly, twelve seats are allotted for the Bhutia-Lepcha community and one seat is reserved for a Buddhist monk to represent the interest of the various monasteries in the state. Another two are reserved for Scheduled Castes and the remaining seventeen seats are marked 'general' (Sinha 2006). Under article 371F, old Sikkimese laws in the state are protected. This includes "Land Revenue Order No. 1 of 1917 that precludes the sale of Bhutia and Lepcha land to any other ethnic community" (Balicki 2008, 8). Further government jobs, property acquisition and other citizenship benefits hinge on being a "Sikkim Subject" since 1961 when this provision was introduced. As landownership was the basis of feudal citizenship, this creates modes of exclusion³ not only those not domiciled in Sikkim since 1961, but also for descendants of older Nepali landless laborers (Arora 2007⁴).

Amidst this scenario, the hills have witnessed, what A. C Sinha (2006, 1) terms as a "politics of tribalization", especially in the wake of a global proliferation of indigenous movements since the 1990s⁵. The applicability of the concept of indigeneity in India⁶, beyond

³ Sanjib Baruah (2005) characterizes a similar scenario in Assam as the distinction between citizens and denizens.

⁴ The original Sikkim Subjects Regulation 1961, issued by the then monarch required the residents of Sikkim to either prove birth in the kingdom, or domicile in the territory since the previous fifteen years. However, as Arora elaborates, in "1961, the early Nepali settlers who paid land revenue were recognized as legal settlers and given Sikkim subject certificates. The Bhutia and the Lepcha were automatically granted citizenship irrespective of their status as owners or cultivators of land". [Then], "according to the 1975 Sikkim Citizenship Order, every person who immediately before 26 April 1975 was a Sikkim subject under the Sikkim Subject Regulations of 1961 [was] deemed to have become a citizen of India on that day" (Arora 2007, 205)

⁵ UN declared 1995 to 2004 the "A Decade for Indigenous People. In 2007 it adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

⁶ Beteille (1998) has prominently raised objections to the use of the term indigeneity for tribes in India. Citing the complex migration histories of the Santhal tribe for example, he argues that marginalization of tribes has no causal link to original residence. Van Schendel (2011) echoes Beteille's fear of the rise of a blood and soil form of territorial chauvinism in the discourses about indigeneity. Especially with reference to the northeast, he warns against an exclusionary politics created through a moral position that compromises conceptual clarity. Xaxa's (1999) response to Beteille was to highlight how the term *adivasi* literally translates to indigenous or first people. He is therefore suspicious of the criticism of the claims of autochthony by tribal groups inasmuch as they arise only when tribes begin seeking empowerment through international coalition-building. His argument corresponds with Karlsson (2003) who emphasizes that there is already a widespread strategic deployment of the term in the country, that does not await the expert's ratification. In these indigenous movements, Van Schendel fears the rise of inter-ethnic conflict, and the undermining of state sovereignty through the legitimization of parochial, extra-legal political authorities. Karlsson dismisses these fears, stating that "asserting the right to self-determination need not imply the

any settler-colonial context⁷, has come under debate. Yet as Shneiderman and Turin (2006, 55) observe, in Sikkim and Darjeeling the “cultural capital of tribal distinctiveness” has increased. Thus, a growing number of ethnic groups, pulling away from their boarder Gorkha identification are petitioning the state separately for tribal status, to overcome their political marginalization. Disaggregating the umbrella category of the Nepali/Gorkha, the Tamang and Limbu groups were granted schedule tribe status in Sikkim in 2002. By a 2003 notification the Bhujel, Dewan, Gurung, Jogi, Kirat Rai, Magar, Sunuwar, and Thami ethnic groups had the Most Backward Classes status. The Bahun, Chhetri, Sanyasi and Newar groups, seen as the high caste Hindu elites in the community were also labelled Other Backward Classes (Sinha 2006).

Scholars have highlighted the anxieties induced by the need to articulate ethnic diversity according to the specific normative epistemologies of difference that inform the Anthropological Survey of India’s tribe adjudication process. Middleton (2016) terms this matrix of measurable difference – i.e. the criteria of primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact etc. – “ethno-logics”. These ethno-logics can be traced back to the colonial “ethnographic state’s” institutionalization of ethnology as its administrative bedrock (Cohn 1987; Dirks 2001). Skaria (1999) calls this a process of arbitrary primitivization. Middleton follows Elizabeth Povinelli (2002) in underscoring the cunning of liberal recognition of otherness

exclusion of non-indigenous, ethnic others, but can as well facilitate peaceful inclusive alternatives” (418). Perhaps the parity system of Sikkim is one such alternative that he would advocate.

⁷ Even within settler-colonial contexts there have been criticisms of the rise of the politics of indigeneity. Kuper (2003) criticizes the process of granting of land claims to indigenous groups based on “essentialist ideologies of culture and identity... [that].. “suit the Greens and the anti-globalization movement” (395). He compares such “concessions” to the anti-immigrant movement in Europe, since both legitimize the sons and soil ideal of citizenship; even as his willful ignoring of the difference in the power hierarchy of the two scenarios has been questioned. In another context, Bessire (2014) has pointed to forms of hyper-marginality produced in Latin America due to “the culturalization of legitimate indigenous life” (276). His critique is of new forms of governance that allow “a limited schema of cultural difference [to] stand in for the sanctity of life as a core moral value within secular democracy” (278).

entailed in the process. Each ethnic group has to perform their distinctiveness in particular legible ways. They are then judged both on the official criteria and on the unofficial criteria of radical alterity from caste society⁸. Both successes and failures of meeting such “demands of recognition”, as Middleton terms them, can be anxiety-inducing. Problems include the creation of inter-ethnic tensions, especially between successful and unsuccessful petitioning groups. Tribalization leads to the unmaking of the historically built Gorkha identity. And it creates a desperation over self-described “lack of identity” for those failing to prove their tribal distinctiveness⁹. The politics of tribalization makes other demands in other contexts. Alpa Shah (2010) for example has highlighted the consequences in Jharkhand, of having to fit the noble savage slot, leading to what she terms as eco-incarceration¹⁰. If indigeneity has emerged as cultural capital for seeking recognition, what benefit does environmentalism now promise? And, what are the normative epistemologies of this “green” discourse?

ECO-LOGICS OF RECOGNITION

Paralleling and intertwined with the global acknowledgment of the “cultural capital of tribal distinctiveness” is also the acknowledgment of the purported proclivity of indigenous

⁸ For Povinelli, radical alterity as a criterion or recognition is the basis of the cunning of liberalism. Radical alterity, of practices such as female genital mutilation, is taken as proof of a non-western ontology that indexes indigenous authenticity. Yet the content of such practices invokes an a priori moral repugnance or moral limit of recognition among liberal subjects, while the allusion to such alterity is the basis on which genuine otherness is judged. Povinelli’s concern is for the melancholic subjects engender through such double binds of recognition, who internalize these failures of recognition as their own shortcomings.

⁹ For the Gurung community, studied by both Middleton (2011; 2016) and Shneiderman and Turin (2006) the main lack is in the ability to extricate tribal distinctness of their ethnic practices from the syncretic Nepali cultural practices that have emerged historically. Even for the Tamang community that gained tribal status, the presence of such syncretic practices and habitual return to them remains a source of anxiety about the lack of ethnological coherence. The illustration Middleton provides of a “divided subject” (2016, 105) is of a Tamang man’s sense of shame and discomfort at having shaved his head after his mother’s death. While the practice was in keeping with a common hinduized ritual that made his grief legible to his village, the community in claiming a Buddhist ethnological subjectivity has however sought to distance itself from such expressions.

¹⁰ See also Malkki (1992), Clifford (1997) and Appadurai (1988), for discussions of the problem of fixing indigenous subjects in territory and essentialization of their rootedness.

peoples towards environmentalism. Corresponding to this global intersection of the increased valuation of indigeneity and of the environment, in 2006, the Indian Ministry of Tribal Affairs developed a new policy. This policy highlighted community consciousness, harmonization with nature, and distinctive culture, over “primitive traits” and “backwardness”, as criteria for adjudicating tribal status. Worship of nature appeared to be the legible subjectivity associated with the criterion of harmonization of nature. This criterion has since then been substantially incorporated in the politics of tribalization in Sikkim (Acharya and Ormsby 2017; Roy Burman 2008). As Acharya and Ormsby (2017,240) elaborate, “the Government of Sikkim constituted the B.K. Roy Burman Committee in 2005 to push for recognition of all resident ethnic groups of Sikkim as Scheduled Tribes (ST). The government asked for an ethnographic report from each ethnic association to be submitted to the committee, which would lead them to substantiate their claims to ST status¹¹. Most of these reports ... attempt to establish 'nature worship' as a significant claim to 'tribal' culture”. Middleton (2016, 42), in his ethnography of Darjeeling details a performance of “tribal becoming”, where his interlocuter explains the “ethno-logics” of tribal religion. “Our ancestral religion...This kul ritual is animistic. Bon means animism. The shilā is animism, nature worship”. Middleton (ibid) reads this as “the absolute dichotomy between tribes and Hindu castes [as] an ethnological fact in the public imagination”. That this dichotomy also rests on emphasizing a proximity to nature is not emphasized in his analysis.

¹¹ Based on this groundwork, when the Prime Minister of the country undertook an official tour of Sikkim in January 2016, to mark the occasion of Sikkim becoming India’s first fully organic state, the Chief Minister in a public address raised this demand for tribalization. Addressing the PM, at an agricultural conference, he stated in Hindi, “A population of three lac [300,000] Sikkimese Indians have been deprived of tribal status. I pray [to the central government], just as the people of Jaunsari district in Himachal Pradesh have all been given recognition as tribals, so also the people of Sikkim should be recognized as Scheduled Tribes” (using the term *janjati*). The demand is yet to be met.

My argument here is not that tribes have not been discursively framed as being closer to nature in the longer trajectory of local, national and global ethnopolitics; or that this tribe-nature articulation has not been studied at all. In India being described as “noble savages” and slotted as being physically and morally close to nature has long marked essentializing depictions of tribal distinctiveness. This has endured through colonial ethnology, at the moment of decolonization (especially with Verrier Elwin’s influence on post-independence state policies towards tribes¹²) and in contemporary environmental discourses. However, just as the longer history of Adivasi politics in India is impacted by the turn to indigeneity in global cultural-political conjunctures, my aim is to ask about the particular momentum gained through the increasing global value of environmentalism and its positive association with indigeneity. Therefore, the question is, if primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, etc. (Middleton 2016, 9) comprise the “ethno-logics” of liberal recognition by the state, what are the “eco-logics” that come to bear on the recognition of environmental stewardship as a means of articulating cultural diversity? What demands of presentation of measurable diversity does it make on the subjects – both human and non-human?

The eco-logics of this new avenue of ethnopolitics I focus on is the parameter of *biocultural diversity*. The term biodiversity was coined in 1986, when a National Forum on Biodiversity was organized in the USA, sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution and the National Academy of Sciences (Takacs 1996, 35). The neologism was used to refer comprehensively to a diversity of species, genes, ecosystems and landscapes (ibid, 51). Since the first Earth Summit in 1992, biodiversity has been sought to be positively associated with

¹² See Archana Prasad’s (2003) work, for a detailed critique of the ecological romanticism perpetuated by Elwin and her recasting of the Baiga tribe as historically integrated into larger political economic networks.

indigenous cultural diversity, with an understanding that “indigenous peoples [are overwhelmingly the] stewards of the world's genetic resources” (Cocks and Wiersum 2014, 727). Accordingly, international conservation policies, like the Convention on Biological Diversity emphasized the need to respect indigenous knowledge about biodiversity and ensure equitable distribution of benefits derived from it (Maffi 2001; 2005; Hathaway 2013). This concept of biocultural diversity was thus another way to move away from “fortress conservation” (Brockington 2003; Fletcher 2010) towards inclusive and people-centric approaches that were emerging around that time. For example, Hathaway (2010) highlights how in China, the state in its drive towards modernization historically devalued cultural diversity, and posited indigenous populations as backward. In such a scenario, the bio-cultural diversity discourse serves as a way for particular scholar-activists to use science to create an authoritative account of the positive value of cultural diversity of marginal populations.

As biodiversity is now a ubiquitous concept globally, its imprint on the environmental discourse and practice in Sikkim is also as pervasive. Firstly, the state is part of the eastern Himalayan mega-biodiversity hotspot (Mittermeier et al. 2011), as designated by Conservation International. Any conversation about the environment in Sikkim begins with this reference. One of the biggest conservation and development projects underway here is the “Sikkim Biodiversity Conservation and Forest Management Project - JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency) assisted”. As a sixty-two-million-dollar project in a state of 650,000 people spread over an area of mere 65 kms. by 115 kms., the project, commonly known by the acronym SBFP or simply as JICA is rather prominent in the landscape. The component linking biodiversity and cultural diversity is 22% of the budget outlay earmarked for developing ecotourism. The aim is to showcase the conjoined biological and cultural diversity in eleven zones in Sikkim and use

tourism income to incentivize conservation in the communities. During my fieldwork the ten-year project was focusing on Kitam.

Secondly, also underway in Kitam was the *Saansad Adarsh Gram Yojna* (SAGY – Parliamentarian’s Model Village Scheme) wherein Sikkim’s sole Member of Parliament (MP) had selected Kitam as the “model village” to be promoted. Again, the marketization of biocultural diversity through ecotourism became one of the routes of village development. The MP roped in two environmental NGOs to guide the village in articulating its nature-culture for touristic consumption. The central question to ask, in order to understand the specific opportunities and limits to recognition offered within this environmental discourse is, what criteria does “nature” have to meet to become legible as biodiversity?

Articulating endemism

If biodiversity were straightforwardly the “valuation of the degree of variation of life” as is sometimes stated, it would “simply [be] about numbers” (Fall 2013, 168-169). Valuation of numbers would then lead to a simple celebration of the multiplicity of species in any geographic expanse. This is however not the case. The parameters of biodiversity hinge on two main criteria - of endemism to a particular geographic region and of threat to this endemism (Bruchmann 2014, Choy 2011, Lamoreux, et al 2006, Lowe 2006, Morrison and Lycett 2014, 148). My focus here is on the negotiation of this eco-logic of endemism by the villagers of Kitam, in order to articulate themselves into a green citizenship slot¹³.

¹³ As Tania Li (2000, 151) has highlighted with reference to the indigenous slot in conservation and development discourses, coming to occupy a valued position is a product both of sedimented repertoires of meaning and contingent engagements and struggles.

A biodiversity hotspot as Morrison and Lycett (2014, 148) highlight “must contain at least 1,500 species of endemic vascular plants and have lost at least 70% of their original habitat”. Tim Choy in his ethnography of Hong Kong (2011,30) shows how in “ecological circles”, “endemism” is taken as “the failure to appear anywhere else”. One of Sikkim’s most valued forms of biodiversity, for example, is the red panda (*Ailurus fulgens*), that fails to appear anywhere else beyond a narrow stretch between Nepal and China’s Sichuan province. It is currently listed as a vulnerable species by the IUCN¹⁴. The ecological reasoning for emphasizing endemism is that unique biota in specific landscapes need to be protected, to preserve the overall biological richness in the world (Van Driesche and Van Driesche 2000). The protection sought is mainly from introduced species that as colonizers may impact the native species of a region and compromise the uniqueness and health of the existing ecosystem (Reichard and White 2003, Simberloff 2003).

An ambivalence arises in the “ecological circles” in defining the geographical “here” to demarcate the boundary of endemism. I use the term ecological circles, throughout this dissertation, to indicate the larger ambit of ecological practitioners such as foresters, community-conservation agents, environmental NGO personnel, who implement the prescriptions of ecological science. Often a binary imagined between science and its publics does not take adequate account of these intermediary agents who do the science *in situ*. The ambivalence about endemism however begins prior to reaching this phase. Inasmuch as biodiversity conservation is a matter of national agreements for species enumeration and protection, usually the scale implied is the nation-state (Fall 2013). Ecologists however have argued for looking at ecosystem-level or

¹⁴ The International Union for the Conservation of Nature Red List of Threatened Species categorizes species as Extinct (EX), Extinct in the wild (EW), Critically endangered (CR), Endangered (EN), Vulnerable (VU), Near threatened (NT) and of Least concern (LC) according to level of threat.

community level biodiversity, even as they do not agree on what comprises a bounded ecological community (Anderson 1994; Simberloff 2003).

How does this eco-logic impact the Kitam villagers' articulation of green citizenship? Even as the term endemism may not be used in the village, this is the criterion they speak to in attributing significance to the peacock. As evident in the letter addressed to the chief minister, the sanctuary status demand was legitimized because the "30 to 40 (Nos) of peacocks in the Jungal prefer[ed] to perch in [that] particular place [and did] not migrate from place to place". A chat with Mr. Dahal, one of the forest guards of the village, further clarified this reasoning. Mr. Dahal lives next to the northern gate of the sanctuary, and as a side business runs a small convenience store that caters to locals and motorists on the highway. One day, as I sat talking with him outside his store, he invoked the peacock fondly. "Earlier, we used to go up to the paddy fields, to see the peacocks. People used to come from far to see them. They were found only in Kitam...", he reminisced. The implicit discursive move here is a claim for valuing the endemic character of the peacock. The "here and nowhere else" logic of endemism is now scaled down to the scope of the state of Sikkim, bracketing off the peacock's habitat elsewhere in the nation.

In the understanding of villagers like Mr. Dahal, the uniqueness of the peacock in the landscape gives the village a claim to distinctiveness in Sikkim. The first negotiation with the eco-logic of biocultural diversity is the dilution of the criterion of endemism to one of a valuation of uniqueness. The next step is the linking up of the uniqueness of the peacock to the uniqueness of the village creating a multispecies knot as the object of recognition. The peacock becomes the vehicle for seeking affirmation of belonging of a village whose ethnicity is otherwise undervalued. Choy (2011), in his ethnography of Hong Kong, argues that concern for protecting

unique species, especially if invoked on the register of nostalgia, can serve as code for a cultural politics seeking preservation of a way of life in a territory, in the face of perceived threats to its continuity. In Kitam, the stakes were not only about preserving a way of life but in first securing an acknowledgment of its diversity and significance. Therefore, even as Kitam’s biodiversity is more broadly articulated in official representations, tabulated as “100 species of birdlife...more than 20 species of wild animals and more than 40 species of non-timber forest products” (Kitam Village Development Plan 2015), the peacock is centrally mobilized in popular discourses.



FIGURE 1.1: Billboard greeting visitors as they enter the sanctuary from the south side.

The endemism to uniqueness slippage draws attention to the ways in which ecological ethics and liberal cultural-political ethics “cross-pollinate” each other, if we were to use another ecological metaphor. In Sikkim, both conventional ecological interventions and popular

representations such as tourist brochures prioritize its “hill-station” quality, focusing on snowcapped mountains, temperate forests and high-altitude misty towns. The demand made for the sanctuary emphasized this internal marginalization. A 2002 Forest Department report highlighted how “there is a pressing need to incorporate all the diverse ecosystems of Sikkim within the protected area network”. Here the tropical ecosystem around Kitam is slotted as unique but under-represented within Sikkim’s conservation outlook. This legitimation of the sanctuary status through a claim of underrepresentation was especially significant as a response to certain insinuations that the notification of the sanctuary was politically motivated, to channel central government funds to the village. These insinuations were made particularly by certain members of Sikkim’s ecological circle who conformed to hegemonic ideas about which bioregions in Sikkim should be valued and prioritized for conservation.

My claim here is not that the sub-tropical landscape of the sanctuary is not a biodiversity rich area according to conventional ecological estimates, nor that everyone in Sikkim’s ecological circles is averse to recognizing its biological richness. However, inasmuch as various environmental interlocutors in private conversations expressed various degrees of skepticism about the sanctuary, we have to take cognizance of the fact that there is a popular mental association of Sikkim as a Himalayan terrain, that gives certain conservation projects more popular appeal than others. Here it is not the lack of biodiversity of Kitam which makes it less appealing, but the lack of uniqueness, since subtropical landscapes are also objects of conservation in various other parts of the country.

In the narrative that is built in the report and beyond, the liberal “unity in diversity” paradigm of cultural representation of minorities, that has been the mantra of the Indian postcolonial state since decolonization, comes to intersect with an ecological paradigm of

conserving minority biogeographic regions within a designated landscape. The term cross-pollination, I argue, is an apt term to describe this intersection, given the two-way traffic between political and ecological ideals about representation, legitimate belonging and boundary-making. It is such a cross-pollination of ecological and political ideals that creates an opening for the Nepali community to articulate what I am calling here its *biocultural belonging*.

POTENTIALS OF BIOCULTURAL RECOGNITION

What are the possibilities opened up in seeking this form of belonging, as opposed to the conventional avenue of ethnopolitics described above? For one, the Nepali population of Sikkim has to walk a fine balance in making overt claims for recognition. Sikkimese Nepalis are sympathetic to the more explicit and sometimes violent struggles by Gorkha inhabitants in Darjeeling for securing separate statehood from West Bengal. However, overt identification with such a cause could be interpreted as a readiness to contravene Sikkim's special status related to article 371F, which has today become a symbol of the state's distinct identity¹⁵. The stakes in the retention of article 371F, and in the process of recognition in general are equally cultural and political-economic. Recognition and redistribution go hand-in-hand in Indian politics. Even as the article is often cited by Sikkimese citizens as a source of their distinctive identity, it is also a source of economic protections granted to the state. This brings greater economic security to Sikkim, than, for example, the hills of the neighboring state, with similar ethnic composition and state of industrial development (Shneiderman and Tillin 2015). Any seeking of parity and representation by the Nepali community has to therefore not arouse suspicions of jeopardizing

¹⁵ For example, when the Gorkhaland agitation flared up again in Darjeeling in 2017, various Sikkimese Nepali interlocutors took a sympathetic position on the issue, expressing themselves on social media. Someone wrote about the hypocrisy of changing one's Facebook display picture to the French flag in the wake of terrorist attacks there, while ignoring the loss of lives in Darjeeling. Yet, as the agitation continued, a denunciation of expressions of excessive sympathy ensued. The waving of the flags of political parties from Darjeeling was the threshold. Such actions were seen by many as beyond the limit of Sikkim's interest as a separate state with its own pressing issues.

the sanctity of the concessions made to Sikkim on the eve of its merger. Secondly, in the neoliberal era, brand-building has become a significant part of the political function of the state, and of political self-identities of its subjects (Brown 2015; Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Graan 2013). Nepali politics for recognition cannot be seen, in this scenario, to be fracturing the branding of the state as a peaceful and united northeastern state, contra its insurgency-prone neighbors. At stake in such political-economic positioning is income generation through greater tourism footfalls, secured development aid, and an enticement to non-local business investments¹⁶.

Given this context, the written representations of biocultural diversity, as the paraphernalia/output of conservation and development projects, have emerged for Nepali political claimants as an unusually strategic medium through which to contest the symbolic violence of existent ethnopolitics. Such outputs include development project reports, ecotourism brochures and other interpretive and promotional materials about the state's nature-culture. Such conservation and development documents are avenues not only for staking claims from non-privileged ethnopolitical positions, but also of consolidating existing ethnopolitical stakes¹⁷. It was in this context that Ujwal, the Ecotourism Committee Secretary, compiled a write-up about the history of the village by speaking to the village elders. This was to serve as the basis for the

¹⁶ Thus in 2017, when the Bollywood actress Priyanka Chopra made the faux pas of describing Sikkim as being “very troubled with insurgency”, along with the public outrage, the political administration in Sikkim went into panic, convening various emergency meetings to strategize on response and damage control. The Sikkim state's outlook, in formulating development as a brand is taken up in greater detail in chapter five.

¹⁷ Take the nomination filed for declaring the Khangchendzonga National Park as a World Heritage Site of natural and cultural significance for example. This document consolidates the popular historiography of Sikkim in terms of the landscape's sacral significance in Buddhist cosmology and the authentic, prior claims of the Lepcha community over the landscape. In presenting this hegemonic narrative, and successfully imbricating it with global biocultural recognition (KNP became a world heritage site in 2016), it renders invisible other communities that reside in the designated territory, and their dynamic history and claims on the landscape.

ecotourism brochures being developed under the SAGY and SBFP initiatives. The material was also to be used for training guides who would conduct village walks.

In this history, Kitam is presented as a marginal village that was subject to feudal exploitation under the monarchy. The document stated that, “the monarch had appointed tax collectors locally called Thikadaars to collect the taxes from the subjects in different parts of Sikkim. The Thikadaars were said to be cruel and inhumane and exploited the subjects with their own rules and regulations. Thangro-Mungro, a corporal punishment tool installed in Kitam Kothi (a residential bungalow of Thikadar Baburam Kasaju), reminds the people of the tyranny of the thikadaars under the monarchy (sic)”. The Thikadar’s *Kothi* was to be as an attraction during the village walk. Thereby, telling stories about the landscape, with ecotourists bearing witness, emerged as an avenue of ethno-politics¹⁸, as a way of spatializing political claims through ostensibly non-political, marketized citizen-to-citizen encounter.

Nationally, marginality is a central parameter of official tribal status. The moral legitimacy of tribal cultural distinctiveness, as evident in much of the scholarship (Xaxa 1999, Karlsson 2003; Shah 2010) often rests on highlighting the marginalization and oppression of tribal groups by mainstream society. Kitam’s performative claim-making through the story of the thikadaar challenged the marginality of the officially designated tribes in the state. Van Schendel (2011) discusses this as the problem of the imposition of one administrative category across all

¹⁸ A close parallel is Besky’s (2013) description of the role of tourism in performing terroir or taste of place of the Darjeeling tea. However, tea tourism seems to be performed in ways that simulate colonial nature, eliding the history of the plantation’s political economy and its contemporary complex, gendered labour relations. In Sikkim, the “tourist gaze” is engaged by village communities in ways that seek to unsettle the hegemonic historic and contemporary renditions of the non-legitimacy of the Nepali ethnic group in the landscape. In doing so, the reliance is not only on making claims about a primordial relationship to the place, but also on presenting a dynamic and critical history of mobility in the region, that implicates the political and economic ambitions of colonial and precolonial rule. This aspect is further elaborated in the next chapter that discusses the material-social history of the Sal forests of Kitam as significant commercial timber in imperial economies.

of India. In the northeast, he points out, unlike in central India, many of the tribes are ethnic elites in the historic and current political landscape. The Bhutias of Sikkim, as the erstwhile ruling elite, are more likely to currently own land and be employed in government service in the current regime. The national ethno-logic also emphasizes non-hierarchical social relations as an essential tribal ethos (Roy Burman 2008). When the write-up quotes an octogenarian that because of the “suppression and persecution of Thikadaars...now we feel heaven in Sikkim (sic)”, it is therefore launching a critique of these exiting modes of tribalization, only through a less confrontational platform of tourism-oriented ethnopolitics.

Another impasse or anxiety avoided is the unmaking of the larger united Nepali identity. In the demand for the sanctuary and the subsequent rendition of nature-culture of the village for touristic consumption, the cultural diversity of the village is presented as a whole, eliding the fragmenting politics of tribalization. For example, one of the cultural attractions in the village is the presence of two traditional mud-and-thatch houses, which were in everyday conversation referred to as the Limbu traditional houses. Yet when the brochures were being finalized, sitting in the NGO office in Gangtok, the ecotourism committee secretary, raised an objection to the naming of the Limbu houses. He explained, “all traditional houses in Kitam were of similar architecture, you know... and it just now so happens...the ones that are remaining no...now they belong to the Limbu community”. Tellingly, at this time, the Limbu community in the state was agitating for reservation of seats in the state legislature for itself, building on its 2002 Scheduled Tribe status. Ultimately the attraction came to be listed in the brochures as “traditional village house” or “Gorkhali traditional houses”.

Thus, even if in the space of state recognition the Gorkhali identity is fragmented towards a process of tribalization, in the non-state space of informal recognition from tourists who would

read the brochures and undertake the village walks, a sense of integrated Gorkhali material and symbolic culture was to be presented. Subsequently some of this information compiled for ecotourism promotion also made its way into the Village Development Plan (2015) submitted nationally as part of the model village scheme. As a document that is now available on a national governmental portal, this articulation of Kitam’s biocultural belonging is sedimented through a paper trail in the realm of the nation’s bureaucracy. This gives the claims of belonging made in this document the potential to, at some later stage, appear to be official data, especially if taken up as a source of information in any future governmental writing.

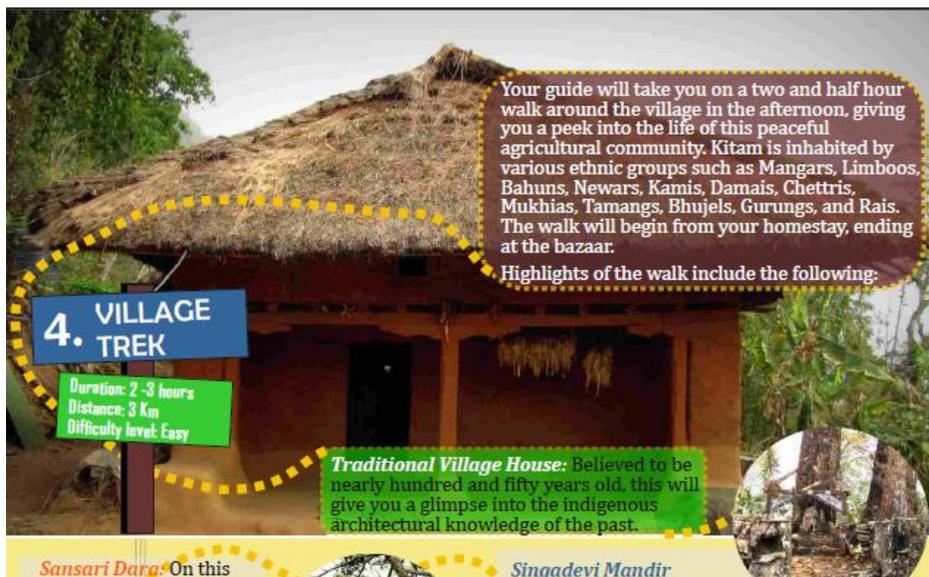


FIGURE 1.2: Ecotourism brochure detailing the village walk in Kitam.

LIMITS OF BIOCULTURAL RECOGNITION

I have highlighted how in Kitam, the parameter of endemism is stretched out to stand for a limited formulation of uniqueness to the landscape. Yet inasmuch as this is a stretching of an ecological term, there is also a limit or pushback to this articulation. Foresters and environmental NGOs at the helm of the various biodiversity conservation initiatives often use the term endemic

species and native species interchangeably. In such everyday parlance, native species are ones that are “originally” found in the landscape, with less emphasis on the limited distribution of the species. So long as it is “from here”, there is less concern about its occurrence anywhere else. The bottom line however is that native species are valued and introduced species are not, especially if the latter has become invasive¹⁹. Invasive species are ones that were introduced in recent memory and cause harm to an existing unique ecosystem and its native biota. Feral dogs, for example, have become a menace to high altitude wildlife in Sikkim. This “invasion” has grown out of the Indian army’s practice of bringing strays and abandoning them at these high-altitude patrolling outposts.

The rub with the peacock is that it is native to India and the national bird of the country. Peacocks are said to have been procured from Haryana and introduced in Kitam in the 1970s. Kitam was seen as an ideal tropical ecosystem where they would thrive²⁰. Therefore, for foresters and environmentalists who conceive of nativism with respect to the boundary of Sikkim, the peacock as an introduced species falls on the wrong side of valuable biodiversity. The narrative of preservation of the uniqueness of the peacock in Kitam’s tropical Sikkimese landscape does not quite square with the ecologic of biodiversity as a measurement of geographic origin of a species²¹.

¹⁹ The rule of thumb is that 10% introduced species become invasive in a landscape, thwarting the survival of native species and ecosystems through aggressive colonization (Simberloff 2003; Van Driesche and Van Driesche 2000). Control of invasion has been a central concern for conservation science, in turn drawing charges of using militaristic metaphors to fan xenophobia (Comaroff 2017; Raffle 2017; Warren 2007; Uekötter 2007). I get into these debates in greater detail in the next chapter when contrasting the social lives of the native tropical Sal tree with that of the introduced temperate Japanese Cedar.

²⁰ While this history was corroborated by multiple people in the village and the Forest Department, my efforts to find documentary evidence of this did not bear fruit. Inquiries for Forest Department records were stalled with claimed that old files had been disposed off.

²¹ Coates (2006, 7) draws a parallel with human citizenship rules, that may depend either on *jus soli* or right of territory where citizenship is based on being born in a territory; and *jus sanguinis* where citizenship is determined by that of one’s parent’s irrespective of one’s place of birth. As he highlights with the case of the English sparrow in

Nativism as the criterion to value biota however has not always been the hegemonic ecological discourse. Before the primacy given to nativism, improvement was an acceptable ecological paradigm. “Adding chosen species to particular landscapes was specifically encouraged and institutionalized within acclimatization societies, particularly as part of state-sanctioned colonial projects [for] improving the supposedly defective colonial landscapes and rendering the metropolis exotic and cosmopolitan” (Fall 2013, 169) This epistemic history however cannot be reduced to a simple teleology, moving from favorable sentiments towards non-natives to an unfavorable one. Both sentiments have been the object of debate and dispute throughout the last few centuries²².

In Sikkim’s ecological circles too, the recent absolute insistence on nativism associated with the biodiversity discourse has its more vocal advocates and as well as more conciliatory positions. In a review of the 2002 executive summary, the Additional Principal Chief Conservator of Forest, Mr. Poudyal, wrote, “in browsing through the notes prepared by field officers, I find that the principal focus of protection viz. the PEACOCK introduced about 30 years early which is still thriving and which the local people have developed a propensity to protect is awfully missing from the list. Jungle fowl is one species which predominates this forest (sic)”. For Mr. Poudyal and his contemporaries who steered the Forest Department before the

the USA, “there is no unambiguous point at which a naturalized (nondomestic) species becomes eligible for floral or faunal citizenship or honorary native status”.

²² Current ecological assertions from invasion biologists and their penchant for restoration ecology meets with charges of heightening xenophobia and fueling the moral panic over the current global refugee crisis. Concerns for nativism before the age of restoration ecology, which took off in the 1980s (Reichard and White 2003) met the charge of paralleling Nazi Germany’s obsession with a national nature. Going further back in history, Coates’s (2006) study about twentieth century ecological introductions in the US links the concern for native species with changing attitudes towards human migrants in the wake of changing immigration policies that modified quotas based on the country of origin. Further, some see this nativism-improvement divide as one between biologists and horticulturalists, with the latter being in favor of improvement. Further back in history, Koerner (1999) highlight’s Linnaeus’s philosophical take on the issue. His economy of nature, she argues, was based on an improvement of the national landscape through various introductions. Koerner terms this a philosophy of “local modernity”.

predominance of the biodiversity discourse, nature was the site of improvement and exchange. His note however, also implicitly signaled the biocultural diversity discourse. The community having developed a propensity to protect the peacock gives greater legitimacy to the declaration of the sanctuary, indicating better chances of successful community-based conservation as a paradigm of the times. Bracketing off the issue of nativism, in Mr. Poudyal's assertion, the association with the peacock makes Kitam's villagers good green citizens.

The peacock's introduction is not its only quality that makes it a less than stellar candidate as the iconic species for a biodiversity conservation landscape. The narrative of biocultural diversity rests on positing a harmonious relationship of co-evolution or co-constitution between nature and culture. Riffing on the Latin root of the word companion Donna Haraway's analogy for "companion species" is one of different guests eating together at a table. However, "living intersectionally", in a multi-species knot, as she (2008, 18) shows, "can [generate] messmates at table who do not know how to eat well [together]²³". Despite the Nepali community's stakes in becoming-native as a multi-species knot, "getting on together" (Haraway 2016,26) with the peacock has become particularly testing since the latter in recent years has become a crop raider. In a group meeting about human-wildlife conflict organized by some NGOs in 2016, a farmer named Bikram described his elderly father's efforts to outsmart the peacock. The strategy was to cover up the freshly sown seeds with jute gunny sacks weighed down by rocks. Bikram laughed about the peacock still getting the better of his father. In the laughter however was a sense of resignation – about the pervasive human-wildlife conflict in

²³ In tracing the etymology of the term companion, Haraway highlights its Latin root, where 'com' means 'together', and 'panis' means 'bread'.

Sikkim, about the increasing untenability of small agricultural landholdings in withstanding these animal raids and about the meagerness of the compensation provided by the Forest Department.

Yet, during my time in Kitam, a well-circulated news report stated that Goa, an Indian state of the west coast, was seeking to classify the peacock as vermin. My interlocutors in Kitam, including Bikram, resolutely found this proposition to be unconscionable and immoral. “Staying with the trouble” (Haraway 2016) however was as much a political necessity as it was the realization of post-humanist²⁴ ethic of multi-species worlding. Questioning the peacock’s significance and its scaled-down endemism-qua-uniqueness are perceived as tied to the questioning of the community’s own situatedness in the landscape. Even as the peacock’s behavior makes this multi-species knot particularly troublesome, the affective investment in its signification makes a disavowal unthinkable.

The stabilization of its quasi-ecological value of uniqueness has also run into other problems in recent times. In light of steadily rising annual temperatures, the peacock has begun to migrate to Sikkim’s higher altitudes. It has been spotted in Pakyong, near the state capital of Gangtok, and in the northern Lepcha reserve of Dzongu. Hence the claims of the peacock’s uniqueness to Kitam has become increasingly problematic and untenable. Climate change and its disturbance of expected habitats now creates a literal “line of flight” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). This deterritorialization of the material-symbolic position of the peacock then necessitates

²⁴ While usually associated with the post-humanist stand, Haraway rejects the label for herself. In *When Species Meet* (2008, 17) she writes, “I never wanted to be posthuman, or posthumanist, any more than I wanted to be postfeminist. For one thing, urgent work still remains to be done in reference to those who must inhabit the troubled categories of woman and human, properly pluralized, reformulated, and brought into constitutive intersection with other asymmetrical differences. Close to Haraway’s position, this dissertation centers the troubled category of the non-native human on the margins of the nation-state. However, in highlighting how a genuine concern for the well-being and welfare of non-human subjects also emerges as a result of these political stakes, my aim is to stay attentive to the possibilities of interspecies conviviality and care in ethno-political processes

a fresh quest for its reterritorialization and gives rise to a fresh set of anxieties about expressing bio-cultural belonging²⁵.

These impasses about the ecological value of the peacock has precipitated an ambivalence about the ideal representation of biocultural diversity of the village. During a frenzy of ecotourism development activities under SBFP and SAGY, I visited a pottery studio in the village charged with designing curios to offer as souvenirs for sale to ecotourists. Rekha, our host, had left a lucrative job in the city to start this studio. Her workshop, taking up half her bungalow, was filled with clay spoon-rests, tea-pots, trays etc., in different stages of completion, many of them displaying an image of the peacock. “We were preparing for the SBFP festival in the village²⁶....so as you can see all the peacock motifs ...” she said, as she ushered a group of us into her house.

Hesitating over these displays, she continued, “that day I was taking these guests to the *allé-khet*, you know. Kitam...I was excited to show them the peacocks. But they said... We don’t want to see peacocks. Can we see something else ... something indigenous?”. “They came from the plains...” she emphasized. Mr. Dewan, the head of the Gangtok-based NGO who had come to the village to survey the progress of the ecotourism initiatives chimed in, “in a sense they are not from here... and now they have become pests you know. We can continue along this peacock concept”, he said referring to the souvenirs we were discussing. But given Rekha’s provocation,

²⁵ Celia Lowe (2006) presents a somewhat similar scenario in her ethnography of the Togean Islands of Indonesia where the narrative of endemism of the macaque to the region is retained, despite evidence of its introduction. However, her central concern is with its implication for post-colonial science, as she traces how Indonesia’s national scientists in their ability to categorize species and protect them, can make a claim to knowledge production and modernity at par with global scientists. In using the terms ecological circles more broadly, my concern is with the imbrication of scientific discourses in regional cultural politics. In the process, it highlights the need to attend closely to how ecological science is ‘done’ on the ground in various places, where forestry officials and environmental NGOs are more visible than ecologists.

²⁶ The festival was subsequently postponed, due to the inadequacy of funds in the Forest Department’s coffers.

the discussion went on to other potential birds that could become emblematic of Kitam, which could adequately be rendered on key chains and fridge magnets for tourists to take back as commemoration of their journey. The coordinator of the other international NGO supporting the village suggests the hornbill or the broadbill, which were “her favorite birds”. “Yes, the hornbill is rare”, Mr. Dewan asserted. Another ecologist proposed “the small kingfisher”, which is “gorgeous” and has “simple coloring”. Rekha added the black-crested bulbul to the list, provided the ecologists could tell whether it is “indigenous” or not.



FIGURE 1.3: *Preparations for the ecotourism festival In Rekha’s pottery studio in Kitam*

The aim of the people in Rekha’s studio that day was to seek recognition of Kitam’s multispecies diversity in the “tourist gaze” (Urry 1990²⁷), augmentable through a commodifiable

²⁷ In his seminal work that popularized the term, Urry is centrally concerned about the recursivity of the tourist gaze, whereon tourists, flocking to eminently photographable places as popularized through existing media undertake tours to replicate those photographs and insert themselves in those vistas. He depicts it as an appropriation of the object being photographed, a taming of the object of the gaze, be it a place or an “exotic” culture. Inasmuch as the tourist gaze has an “ability to naturalise, to make innocent its cultural messages and connotations” (Urry and

icon of the landscape. The icon therefore had to meet the parameters of rarity and charisma – both in its lively and ceramic materiality. The demand made of legible diversity then reaches an impasse not only in terms of the ecological parameter of endemism/nativism/uniqueness. The underlying concern was also of pleasing the tourist gaze. In the tourist gaze however, the quest for uniqueness was not only about ecologically justifiable belonging. It was about an aesthetic parameter of exoticness. The people in the pottery studio understood tourism to be a liminal activity. Like theorists of tourism (Adams 1996; Graburn 1977; Nash et al. 1981; Ortner 1999), they saw it as the search for something out of the ordinary that counters the daily routines and sights the tourists encounter back home. The anxieties they expressed that day about the demanding gaze of tourism were reinforced after the first group of ecotourists from Mumbai had passed through the village under the SAGY initiative. The feedback, as one of the guides recounted, was that tourists enjoyed the village stay, they enjoyed the hospitality and the serenity of the forest; but were disappointed at seeing only the peacock and other common birds like the Red vented bulbul. Thus, the Nepali community's material affective investment in the peacock revealed a weakness in the strategy of political interspecies alliance-building, because from the perspective of the tourists, the peacock lacked the local specificity to be seen as an iconic representative resident of the region.

Countering such disappointments however have their own pitfalls. 7th February 2016 was celebrated as “Big Bird Day” in India, an environmental event of recent provenance started by an organization in Delhi. On this day, amateur bird-watchers across the country go birding and put up a checklist of their sightings on the national website. The international NGO celebrated this

Larsen 2011, 196), it dooms the gazed upon into conformation of the partial, stereotypical, decontextualized rendering. I critique the concept more extensively in chapter three.

day in Kitam. It bore the cost of mostly college-going environmental enthusiasts (many of whom were out-of-state students) to come and stay in the various homestays in the village.

Environmental education and ecotourism promotion went hand in hand.

After an evening of cultural performances and ornithological expositions, the next morning, I accompanied one of the four birding groups on a designated trekking route in the sanctuary. We were led by two local guides, recently trained by the Forest Department. On our way, before the forest became dense, the first bird we encountered was the peacock. Eager to highlight the extraordinariness our excursion, our guides opened the bird book they were carrying to explain the significance of this bird to us. On the page, they identified the bird as the Green peafowl (*Pavo muticus*), rather than as the Indian peafowl (*Pavo cristatus*), which is actually found in the landscape. During the check list tally at the end of the walk, united with senior birding experts, the mistake was corrected. A closer look at the peacock plate in the book revealed that while the green peafowl is marked as possibly found in this area, it is also marked as most likely extinct, without any sightings in recent memory.

We might chalk this up to the mistake of novices. Yet the mistake is revealing of the anxiety about the lack of the peacock's uniqueness – now the concern stemming both from the vantage point of ecology and of tourism. In looking at the birding handbook, our guides chose the rarer of the peacocks listed in it, caught in the bind of the ordinariness of species that may not be valued in the tourist gaze which seeks an out-of-the-ordinary encounter with palpable diversity. Unfortunately, their attempt to overcome this anxiety only further compromised the claim to intimate knowledge of nature as the basis of the villager's quest for positive recognition of their green citizenship.



FIGURE 1.4: *Guided walk through the sanctuary on the occasion of Big Bird Day*

Hence, the informal spaces of touristic and environmentalist encounters allowed the villagers an expanded scope to stake a claim to political-cultural belonging through an articulation of their bio-cultural diversity. However, the rub in this expanded field of recognition arose from the very multivalence of diversity as a value. The limit of recognition was the emergence of three registers of diversity that needed to be positively articulated/represented. Biodiversity with its emphasis on nativism; cultural diversity that needed to prove its belonging and worth in the landscape; and market-diversity that had to meet the consumer's desire for variety. The inability of the peacock-people assemblage of Kitam to fulfill these hard-to-meet criteria gave rise to the necessity of continuous, anxiety-induced negotiations.

CONCLUSION

In closing, let me recapitulate the story told in this chapter. It is one of the induction of the peacock into the ethnopolitics of the Nepali community of Kitam. Faced with a deficit of belonging, the community has sought what I have termed as a form of bio-cultural recognition –

i.e. recognition of their unique culture through its articulation with what the group perceives is a valued species within the biodiversity conservation paradigm. The question I posed was about the possibilities opened up and the limitations of this quest for biocultural recognition in para-state avenues. As an informal site of recognition, the turn to environmentalism and tourism circumvents various drawbacks of conventional ethnopolitics oriented towards the state, which as Markell (2003) has pointed out, derives its very sovereignty from this ability to grant or withhold recognition from its subjects. In at least momentarily skirting the demands of making one's cultural difference legible according to set official criteria (Cohn 1987; Dirks 2001; Middleton 2016), the Nepali community gains the potency to avoid the fragmentation of the Gorkha identity that occurs while seeking a disaggregated tribal status. Also avoided is the need to articulate into the tribal slot by performing an artificially-bounded culture. Informal biocultural belonging doesn't challenge the existing claimants of autochthony in explicitly political ways, and thereby Sikkim's branding as a peaceful northeastern frontier is not compromised.

Yet there are limits to this new avenue for ethnopolitics. A destabilization of this articulation occurs in the rub between the ecological discourse of endemism and its stretching thin to mean "uniqueness in a landscape" in the applied-ecology practiced by the villagers and their sympathetic environmentalist interlocutors. Not everyone in the "ecological circles" is as sympathetic to this eco-politics. The agency of the peacock itself, as one actant in the assemblage, pursuing its own agendas of survival and niche-creation, further challenges the narrative of harmonious multispecies green citizenship. The challenge comes both from the peacock's literal line of flight (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) from Kitam and its behavior as a hostile crop-raiding "companion species" (Haraway 2016; 2003). And lastly, the crisis of this

articulation of biocultural diversity comes from a challenge to the value of the peacock's uniqueness by tourists seeking exotic, aesthetic, marketized diversity.

This story is significant in being representative of an under-analyzed avenue of ethnopolitics, made possible at an emergent intersection of ecology, politics of indigeneity and the market. The key to understanding this fraught politics, I have shown, is to understand the articulation and disarticulation of the three registers of diversity – ecological, cultural and market-based – each with its own criteria of valuation. The focus on the anxious steps taken to overcome these disarticulation and reterritorialize (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) the value of the biocultural assemblage, I argue, limits the pleasures of potency, that Patchen Markell (2003) argues can be achieved by the ability to not submit to the sole authority of the state in the granting of recognition.

Dipesh Chakrabarty (2006) has characterized the globalized politics of tribalization underway in India as “politics unlimited”, where the power of terms such as indigeneity derive from their rhetorical rather than referential value. The chapter does show that the term biocultural diversity also draws its power by freeing itself from the exactitudes of its referential value. However, my emphasis here has been on attending to the consequences of the chaff between what I have termed as the “eco-logics” of the biodiversity discourse and their modifiability. In doing so, more than as politics unlimited, I see the quest for biocultural recognition as a politics of precarious negotiations without guarantee, based on strategic yet unstable political alliances between unlikely inter-species “messmates” (Haraway 2008).

CHAPTER 2

FORESTS OF CEDAR AND FORESTS OF SAL: POLITICS OF NATIVISM AT THE INTERSECTION OF ECOLOGY, MARKET AND CULTURAL-HISTORY

INTRODUCTION

In an ideal articulation, biodiversity is conceptualized as global patrimony – diversity of life to be saved by everyone for everybody’s benefit (Agrawal 1995; Ehrlich 1988; Wilson 1992, 2016). Yet most policy statements and conservation initiatives, taking sovereign countries as the contract/pledge-honoring agents, convey a stronger sense of nature as national patrimony (Fall 2014; Head and Muir 2004; Heise 2016). In this context, the foregrounding of endemism as the criterion for a species’ ecological value becomes especially conducive to particular quests towards expressing nationalistic or sub-nationalist imaginaries through conservation discourses. Ecologists have sought to frame their advocacy of endemism as protection of an optimally diverse eco-system at the level of a bio-region, often to be saved from introduced species that purportedly threaten this diversity. Yet the operational framing of nature as national patrimony allows for ethnonationalist aspirations to find ecological expressions and therefore ideological legitimacy. This is sometimes the case with Sikkim, where, to counter the demographic minoritization of the acknowledged autochthonous ethnic communities, the ruling dispensation of the state seeks recognition of an essential connection between a well-conserved Himalayan landscape and a Buddhist sacred geography (as the religion of the officially recognized indigenous ethnic groups). In Sikkim’s status as a biodiversity hotspot, and as a natural-cultural

UNESCO World Heritage Site¹, nature is articulated as sub-national patrimony, and a politics of exclusionary nativism can then take an ecological route.

Globally such a phenomenon has given rise to particularly charged debates between ecologists and social scientists over the implications of “nativism” as an ecological discourse with significant social consequences. Ecologists justify the focus on native species as a response to the harm caused by introduced species. Often becoming invasive in new landscapes, they threaten the survival of native species, and contribute to the loss of overall diversity in the world (even if adding variety in the zone of introduction). Critics accuse this focus on nativism of fomenting xenophobic tendencies and nationalist sentiments, by demonizing the “alien” other. The vilification slips dangerously from flora and fauna to human non-natives. Questioning the paradigm’s scientific soundness and neutrality, the objection also is that “designating some species as native and others as alien draws an arbitrary historical line based as much on aesthetics, morality and politics as on science” (Raffle 2017, 178). This chapter is a systematic inquiry into this purported arbitrariness, seeking to understand how the ecological prescriptions of nativism are negotiated towards a contested politics of biocultural recognition. Drawing on Besky and Padwe (2016,14), I ask: how are specific trees “enrolled in material [and] representational projects [of] territorial practice”, in Sikkim’s fraught multi-ethnic political landscape? I look at the role of two particular species of trees, the Japanese cedar (*Cryptomeria japonica*) and the sal (*Shorea robusta*) in mediating claims and counter-claims about human belonging, as negotiated at the site of the state’s marketized biodiversity conservation arena.

¹ In 2016, the Khangchendzonga National Park (KNP), in Sikkim was inscribed as India’s first “Mixed World Heritage Site”, meeting the nomination criteria set by The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). Both agencies had to deem KNP as a conservation-worthy natural and cultural heritage “property” (Government of India 2016).

The Japanese cedar is a particularly visible species in much of Sikkim's temperate forests, that are usually seen as iconic of the state's identity as a picturesque erstwhile Himalayan Kingdom. The popular imaginary of Sikkim, cemented in touristic representations, comprises of temperate and alpine landscapes, coniferous forests, and colorful silk or plain red robe-clad, prayer-wheel-spinning Buddhist communities. In this hegemonic socio-natural landscape, the Japanese cedar however is an introduced species, brought in by British colonizers as a timber crop. The cedar thus punctures a neat articulation of socio-natural nativism. Looking at ecotourism promotion in two biodiversity conservation zones being developed by the Sikkim Forest Department I ask: how do foresters, local nature/tour guides and ecotourists (as amateur naturalists and capitalist contributors to biodiversity conservation) negotiate this conundrum – of the most visible biota of a biodiversity conservation landscape failing to meet the nativism criterion? How does this impact the hegemonic ideal of Sikkim's natural patrimony?

On the other hand, the sub-tropical sal forests of Kitam, also part of the biodiversity conservation project, while meeting the native, non-introduced criteria in ecological terms, is not endemic per se. It does not meet the criterion of belonging "here and nowhere else" (Choy 2011). Moreover, like the peacock, in being a common Indian tree, the deficiency in the value of the sal run along an aesthetic parameter. It is often considered too ordinary/generic to be seen as central to Himalayan conservation discourses. How are these deficiencies of value negotiated in the everyday practice of ecology, by the extended "ecological circles" (ibid) operating in the state? And through what particular historical, moral, ecological and aesthetic discourses – if we want to substantiate Raffles' critique of the arbitrariness of ecological nativism – is the socio-natural belonging of the more-than-human community of Kitam sought to be cemented?

Between the two extremes of the debates among ecologists and social scientists about either the need to reset and restore “nature out of place” (Van Driesche and Van Driesche 2000) or the call for the abandonment of the quest for purity since nativism begets xenophobia (Raffle 2017; Subramaniam 2001), this chapter explores how the out-of-placeness of the cedar and the sal (each for different reasons) is reconciled. Such everyday negotiations, I highlight, fall somewhere short of restoration of purity, yet don’t quite reach the pure celebration of mobility and messiness of belonging that critics of nativism idealize. The point is to ask what such strategic accommodations that entangle politics, ecology, religion and colonial histories, may reveal about situated processes of “naturalization” of belonging within this polarized ideological terrain. If we were to frame this in Tsing’s terms, (2017, 34) beyond the academic debates about ecology, what “troubled stories” about “contaminated diversity” do the ecological circles of Sikkim tell; and what insights do such stories give us about multi-ethnic, multi-species co-existence? Let us begin thus with an elaboration of the contentious paradigm of ecological nativism, which provides the ground on which the biocultural politics of belonging described in the chapter takes place.

CONTESTED DISCOURSES OF ECOLOGICAL NATIVISM

The concept of ecological nativism predates the biodiversity discourse, sharing its language, since inception, with modes of qualifying national belonging of human citizens. As Davis et al (2011, 153) explain, the English botanist John Henslow first coined the term in 1835. Soon after, British botanists adapted “the terms native and alien from common law to help them distinguish those plants that composed a ‘true’ British flora” from others, even as there was not much consensus on the need to actively remove non-natives from the landscape. This concern about harm caused to native flora and fauna by introduced species – a process

accelerated by the Columbian exchange (Crosby 1972) – became pronounced more than a century later, with the publications of *The Ecology of Invasions by Animals and Plants* by the British ecologist Charles Elton in 1958. Elton is now taken as the founder of the subfield of invasion biology, which became an established discipline or field in the 1990s (Coates 2006; Davis et al 2011; Fall 2013). Within the hegemony of the biodiversity conservation paradigm i.e. conservation of endemic species threatened by extinction (Choy 2011; Morrison and Lycett 2014), the discipline concerns itself with analyzing how “introduced species threaten the existence of native species [through varied] mechanisms [such as] predation, parasitism, herbivory, vectoring of pathogens, modification of critical habitat, hybridization, and competition” (Simberloff 2003, 180). The task the discipline sets for itself is to diagnose these threats accurately, and find means of reversal wherever possible, so as to avoid the loss of local diversity and the homogenization of plant and animal life across the globe. It also seeks to predict colonializing and invasive behavior of introduced species, in order to take preemptive action against the “mindless horsemen of the environmental apocalypse”, as E. O. Wilson (who coined the term biodiversity) has called them [cited in Baskin 2002, 71].

This distress about the loss of biodiversity precipitated purportedly by “nature out of place” (Van Driesche and Van Driesche 2000) – as the title of the popular book trying to familiarize the public with the problem framed the issue suggests– in turn engenders a general suspicion of “introduced aliens” (ibid). “While the vanguard of the anti-immigrant crusade is found among the likes of the Minutemen and the Tea Party, the native species movement is led by environmentalists, conservationists and gardeners. Despite cultural and political differences, both are motivated — in Margaret Thatcher’s infamous phrase — by the fear of being swamped by aliens”, wrote Hugh Raffles (2011) in his critique of the concept, in a much-discussed New

York Times op-ed. Jean Comaroff (2017) similarly reads the concern with alien plants, especially in South Africa, as a form of Lacanian “metonymic displacement” (39), which allows for the “unconscious transferal of emotions, ideas, or wishes” about racial and national purity onto “more susceptible substitute[s]” (ibid) such as horticulture and forestry, a process she describes as “horticultural ethnogenesis”. The vilification of certain introduced species in South Africa, she argues, is an indication of anxieties about “preserving heritage, in a would-be post-racial age” (37). Further, globalization and the subsequent undermining of the nation-state, she writes, also adds to the anxieties about economic opportunity-seeking “aliens” eventually overrunning the country. The response then is displaced into “paramilitary gardening” (39), which she argues is a way to find “new lines of difference... to spur the possibilities of the political”; if we take Carl Schmitt’s friend-enemy distinction as its defining feature (33).

We may be circumspect about Comaroff’s characterization of the dissolution of borders in “late capitalist” globalization, and therefore the novelty of the transposition of anxieties about immigration onto horticultural subjects. A longer and more diverse history of ecological nativism and its contemporaneous social anxieties has been traced, be it at the moment of increased immigration into early twentieth century United States (Coates 2003), the much-contested association of nativist ecological projects with Nazism (Gröning and Wolschke-Bulmahn 2004; Pollan 1994), or heightened fear of the Africanized bee in the US, corresponding with existing racial prejudices (Tsing 1995). It can also be argued that the slippages in the emotions and anxieties about human and non-human aliens – as the “other”, that is “everywhere, taking over everything”, while “silently growing in strength and number”, by “reproducing rapidly”² (Subramaniam 2001, 28-31) – also display continuities across such

² thereby revealing the particularly gendered nature of this nationalistic suspicion of the immigrant.

different moments. Another caveat is that critiquing the social biases displayed in invasion biology is not to therefore entirely deny the problems to healthy ecosystems that can be caused by the 10% of introduced species that are likely to become invasive (Simerloff 2003).

In response to such charges, nativist ecologists reiterate the extent of ecological and economic harm caused by alien invasive species (Burdick 2005; Cassey et al. 2005; Richardson et al 2000; Rodda et all 1997; Sax, Stachowicz, and Gaines. 2005; Van Driesche and Van Driesche 2000), that have “crowded out native species, brought and spread new diseases, damaged crops, threatened drinking water supplies” (Simberloff 2003, 185). The contention against social scientists and ecologists who criticize the nativist paradigm is that the “burden of proof should be on the accuser when claims of racism and xenophobia are advanced” (ibid, 188); because among other things, “nationalism is not equivalent to xenophobia” (ibid, 182), and “protecting the threatened and oppressed groups from extinction” is not comparable to Nazism³ (Jordan 1994, 113). In the absence of easy global comprehensive quantification of threat from introduced species, Simberloff (2003, 180) states that as of 2000, of the total number of threatened species in the USA, as listed in the Endangered Species Act, half of the species for whom the cause of threat is known are threatened by introduced species. The idea is for readers to deduce the extent of threat from this circumscribed data. Such figures are meant to counter the claim that “displacement of blame onto foreigners does not solve the problem of the extinction of species and the degradation of habitats” (Subramanium 2001, 36).

More moderate ecologists now argue that especially in the rapidly changing environmental conditions of the Anthropocene, the effects of particular species on landscapes

³ He compares the project instead to the creation of Israel. Written in 1994, the article however does not discuss any further the problem with this analogy.

will vary over time. Both natives and non-natives that don't cause harm in the present may do so in the future, such that "nativeness is not a sign of evolutionary fitness or of a species having positive effects" (Davis et al, 153). Invasion ecologists counter that since reversing introductions is difficult, the policy towards introduced species should entail an outlook of preemption, whereby non-natives are "guilty until proven innocent" (Mack et al. 2000; Simberloff 2003). The use of such militaristic metaphors has especially been objected to, the import of which such ecologists have sought to deny. Even as on one hand, some ecologists themselves have been critical of the use of terms such as invasive which they deem as carrying much social and ideological baggage⁴, others have advocated that all non-native species be termed as invaders. Richardson et al (2000, 99-102) for example, want all non-natives to be termed "benign invaders", with the approximately 10% harmful non-native plants being reconceptualized as "transformer species" that "change the character, condition, form or nature of a natural ecosystem over a substantial area". Their reasoning is that such an expansive use of the term invader will simply refer to the "biogeographic/demographic status of a species" (ibid, 102), even as they refuse to acknowledge the ideologies of belonging and out-of-placeness that such terms are imbricated in.

A further problem with claiming nativism to be a value-free factual statement of "biogeographic status" is the arbitrariness of the temporal and spatial demarcation of this parameter. The preoccupation with finding "a date before which nature was natural" (Warren 2007,431), i.e. undisturbed, is characteristic not only of the biodiversity paradigm specifically, but of ecological discourses in general, as Kathleen Morrison (2017) in her discussion of the ideal of the primeval forest in South Asia has shown. As Warren (2007, 431) laments, in

⁴ As if ecology can ever exist in a value-free vacuum above society.

valuing biodiversity as ideally that which pre-dates a time of significant human modification, in Scotland this time can be taken to be the pre-Neolithic, i.e. some six millennia ago, while in other parts of the world the chosen baseline can be the date of European colonization going back a few hundred years. Therefore, “there seem to be no objective criteria for deciding how long a species has to be a resident before it is ‘given a passport’ and defined as native” (ibid). Morrison further points to the lack of rigorous ecological research in such “baseline thinking”, (260) that constructs the pre-colonial period as a time of a prelapsarian past, with colonialism being taken as the point of crisis. As she illustrates with a particular study of Sri Lanka, “in order to create a baseline, older agroforestry plots are re-cast as ‘nature’ (natural forest), their human histories erased, while more recently abandoned agroforestry plots stand in for degraded ‘culture’. The long-term, complex history of planting, fallowing, replanting, and abandoning specific locations is thus re-cast as (older) nature and (younger) culture, the former pristine and the latter degraded” (263). The point is that the category of nature is “constructed by carving away the human contribution to this socio-natural landscape” (ibid)⁵. Equally arbitrary, critics argue, is the spatial dimension of demarcating native from non-native, which now has mainly come to correspond with national borders. As Head and Muir (2004, 199 cited in Fall 2014) point out, “in the European context, the nation may be too small [and] in the Australian context, it may be too large” to make nativism a meaningful guiding principle of global conservation.

Such a range of problems in defining the parameters of nativism, Raffle (2017, 178) argues, arise because of the effort to deny “the dynamism and constant change of both

⁵ Morrison’s point is not about natives delineated from non-natives, but rather a primeval nature delineated from human intervention. Especially for the South Asian region this remains a particularly inaccurate ideological construction, glossing over the long history of human habitation in the subcontinent. However, this critique of ecology’s preoccupation with stability disrupted, and therefore with an implicit return to purity is also applicable to the biodiversity discourse.

ecological and social processes”. As Fall (2014, 169-170) points out, even as the notion of biodiversity accounts for nature’s “capacity for change”, the focus on harmoniously restored nature freed of “unworthy” species seems to center “order and permanence”. This despite the fact that the ecological evolutionary theory of climax vegetation arising out of plant succession has long been discarded (Lélé 1991; Morisson 2017).

The argument for a more inclusive, non-reactionary ecological paradigm then calls for the “manage[ment] [of] the damaged, cosmopolitan nature that our global, cosmopolitan society has helped produce” (Peretti 1998,190); where conservation would entail “flourishing for all”, instead of the “defense of a vaunted species” (Choy 2011, 72). The “particular senses of integrity and the wholeness and stasis”, that the discourse of nativism presumes, writes Raffles (2017, 181) rather poetically, “run counter to a raggedy world in which all kinds of beings and phenomena—humans, animals, plants, landforms—refuse to hold still or keep pure. As if they ever had. As if they ever could”. The question then in this chapter is: if human and more-than-human beings refuse to hold still, how is this lack of stillness and therefore of purity reconciled and narrated? When is the mobility and impurity of species celebrated, when is it denied or elided? And what are the specific stakes of, following Jean Comaroff, arboreal ethnogenesis in such negotiations and reconciliations, that meet with differing degrees of success and failures?

An ethnographic study of the negotiations of nativism in frontier India also helps push the conversation beyond the emphasis on a late modern anti-immigrant sentiment as the central anxiety to which the horticultural/arboreal ethnogenesis is a response. As Fall (2013, 173) writes the “postcolonial guilt and anxiety about identity” in particular settler-colonial contexts have “end[ed] up orienting ecological debates in ways that still need fully examining in contexts with very different ecological and social histories”.

In the following sections, in unpacking the arbitrariness of nativism, I systematically inquire into the criteria set by ecological science, aesthetics and cultural history. Each of these criteria make particular demands of the cedar and the sal, and present particular opportunities to stake claims about the belonging of these species in the landscape, and by extension about the belonging of their human protectors. In the context of settler colonialism, the discourses of ecological nativism have particularly sought to purge the impact of colonial history on the landscape (Van Driesche and Van Driesche 2000), even as the non-nativism of the settlers themselves is elided in the remaking a purer nature (Davison 2010). This chapter explores the ways in which colonial history is engaged with more creatively in the post-colonial scenario, where the impact of colonial botanical practices on people and plants is read both as a source of improvement and of declension.

An ethnography of the negotiation of the parameter of nativism between forest guards, tour guides, environmental NGOs and amateur naturalists also helps shed light on ecological discourse not as a binary of experts and the publics of science, but as an everyday practice engaging different ecological agents. What these differently located practitioners make of these ecological prescriptions seems to get underplayed in the charged debates between different sets of academics who presume the nature of the uptake of the discourse, either by xenophobic nationalists, by conscientious environmental purists or by equally conscientious liberal cosmopolitanists. My aim here is rather to read the politics of ecological nativism as a set off practices that do not entirely square with scientific prescriptions, but rather transform the ideal itself, through circumscribed, strategized implementations.

As Besky and Padwe (2016, 15) write about territorialization through botany, “efforts to impose legible social and environmental relations are best understood as projects of rule rather

than as fully formed systems, especially where they meet with practices of resistance, subversion, or appropriation, or contend with alternative territorial imaginaries that are often rooted in identity, memory, and belonging”. This chapter, in looking at various such appropriations and subversions also then recuperates the open-endedness and incompleteness of arboreal ethnogenesis from the somewhat flattened out debates between the botanical purists and the botanical cosmopolitanists. Let us then explore these avenues of negotiation of nativism along the three registers of ecology, aesthetics and cultural history.

THE CONUNDRUMS OF ECOLOGICAL VALUE

Living with an “enemy of biodiversity”

In October 2015, the Sikkim Biodiversity Conservation and Forest Management Project (SBFP) organized an “ecotourism festival” to incentivize conservation in Okhrey, as a fringe village of the Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary. Okhrey is inhabited mostly by the Sherpa community, a Buddhist ethnic group recognized as a scheduled tribe in the state. It is often clubbed with the Bhutia ethnic group who are seen as the legitimate autochthons of the state. Okhrey’s biocultural diversity, the Forest Department felt was ideally suited for the conservation and development initiative. This was the second festival/village being promoted by the department that year.

On the second day of the festival, a crisp, sunny early winter morning, a group of foreign “delegates”, i.e. tourism industry professionals from France, Australia, Hong Kong, Thailand, Russia were taken on a forest walk. The walk was led by one experienced local guide and other “stakeholders” in various stages of non-standardized training. On loan from the Tourism Department was a freelance Gangtok-based guide, Maanik Chettri, who had been in the profession for twenty-five years. Gathering the delegates scattered in homestays across an

elevation range between 7500 to 8000 feet, the guides led us towards the crest of the hill behind the village monastery. SP our local guide, a soft-spoken middle-aged Sherpa man, was now dressed in his casual, well-worn western trousers and grey jacket. Unlike the other local guides, he had discarded the ill-fitted Bhutia silk vest, given to them by the Forest Department as part of their “ethnic”, “professional-looking” guiding uniform. He identified various things on the way, such as the “*Paris formosa*⁶”, a “plant poisonous to animals and intoxicating to people”, the pug-marks of a barking deer and so on. Finally, he pointed to one tree asking “do you know this plant name?” “No, is this some pine?”, Bess, the tall travel-writer from Australia answered. “This is *Cryptomeria japonica*. This plant was introduced”, SP trailed off. “From Japan”, a chorus of Sikkimese, Australian and Peruvian-French voices chimed in, using their deductive powers. “This is an evergreen; it is a selfish plant. In Japan this plant is known as *tutiko*⁷”, SP added. Maanik, with greater showmanship and a louder voice, chimed in, “you wonder no, why this plant was in this area.” He compared the cedar to mandarin oranges which was another “fast growing” and “commercial” tree that was introduced by the British. “Does it cause problems then?”, Bess asked. “Animals eat and die” she stated, not asking. She had transferred the traits of the *Paris formosa* as had just been described, onto the Japanese cedar. Maanik clarified that it does not give shelter to any animals. “Nothing grows underneath. Some birds, they may find some food. But nothing for animals. It is the enemy of biodiversity”, he told the group. “Enemy of biodiversity”, Bess repeated almost instantaneously, as we kept climbing, now upwards of 8000 ft., with the *C. japonica* prominent in our field of vision, both on the hillside we were on and on the opposite hills which we were told is the Singhalila National Park of West Bengal.

⁶ The closest entry I find is *Paris polyphylla* var. *chinensis*, a flowering shrub originally found in Taiwan.

⁷ I was unable to find corroboration about the name from any other source, as another publication identified the Japanese name as *sugi*.

This was similar to my first encounter with the Japanese cedar earlier in the year, in the conservation-tourism landscape of the temperate Fambang lho⁸ Wildlife Sanctuary in East Sikkim. About 20 kms. On my first foray into the Pangthang Forest Block⁹, a reconnaissance trek had been organized to determine the viability of trekking routes in the sanctuary. The aim was to finalize the “nature products” to be showcased during the upcoming ecotourism festival. Two ecotourism managers, two junior research fellows [JRFs] as biodiversity experts, a Block Officer¹⁰, two watchers and some “stakeholders” i.e. villagers who had time to spare to make the longish climb away from the village, embarked on the unfinished trail.

Beginning at the open plateau by the forest barracks, we first made our way through a bamboo grove, before entering a thicker forest of tall equidistant trees that turned out to be Japanese cedars. The tangled uneven understory had given way to soft earth, with a slight growth of moss, and a rhizomatic mosaic of roots and semi-dried, bristly conifer leaves, interspersed with what appeared to be dried pine cones. Mr. Adhikari, the young Block Officer in a military camouflage jacket and forester’s beret, was not too enthusiastic about the forest as

⁸ *Fambang lho*, I learnt, meant wild avocado fruit in the Lepcha language.

⁹ In the Forest Department everyday speak, it was ecotourism being promoted at Pangthang. Pangthang is the name of the village closest to the forest barracks, by the highway, and also the name of the Forest Block. However, in the SBFP project it featured as Nampong-Lindok ecotourism zone, known by the official Gram Panchayat unit within which it is counted. Nampong and Lindok are two villages further down the slope, almost half an hour’s drive on a semi-paved road, in the direction opposite to the forest barracks/nursery/tourist trails. Strategic location-wise this made them unsuitable beneficiaries of Forest Department interventions. Ultimately the festival in “stakeholder consultations” came to be known as the “Tinjurey Ecotourism Festival”. Tinjurey was the end point of a three-hour trek uphill from the range office. Literally meaning the joining of the three, it is a common Nepali term to describe a particular geological formation – the meeting point of three ridges. Thus, looking over a map, one would find more than one place marked as Tinjurey between Sikkim, Darjeeling and Nepal. In our Tinjurey, there was also a Hindu shrine and since the festival was to coincide with Ram Navami, during which many villagers undertook this trek up to the shrine, the ecotourism festival came to share the name. Soon after the festival, the Nepali community lost its majority in the Eco-Development Committee. (The EDC is to the Forest Department what the Gram Panchayat is to the Revenue or any other state department). The EDC, under a Lepcha representatives from Nampong and Lindok, dropped the name Tinjurey. The Festival next year was called the “Nampong-Lindok Ecotourism Festival”.

¹⁰ The Block Officer in Sikkim is in-charge of a Forest Block, employed by the Forest Department. This position differs from the Block Development Officer familiar in the Indian bureaucracy elsewhere.

a tourism product. Neither were the two research fellows. He told us that this was a plantation in “British times”. Earlier when there was extraction of commercial wood, the range office was located where we were standing. The terms around which his condescension of the forest seemed to revolve were “introduced species” and “plantation”. He further elaborated, how it “eats up all the nutrients” and therefore does not support a vibrant understory, nor does it attract birds which would have made the trail more species-rich.

Yet, despite such strong reservations about the cedar’s ecological value, when Bess asked the tour guides if the trees are culled, like how “in Australia introduced species are burnt and their roots are pulled out”, the guides responded with an emphatic no. “When they die, they die, we don’t plant new ones”, they responded, rejecting the hegemonic model of restoration ecology. How then does Sikkim’s ecological circle reconcile both its adherence to the paradigm of devaluing introduced species, and its rejection of popular modes of managing and responding to such introductions; especially given the stakes for the hegemonic environmental dispensation in making certain claims about Sikkim’s nature as subnational patrimony?

Cross-border biodiversity conservation initiatives have emerged as the answer to criticisms that the integrity of bio-regions is compromised in taking nation-states as the functioning unit of environmental action. One such initiative is the “Kangchenjunga Landscape Conservation and Development Initiative (KLCDI)”, a transboundary conservation program involving Nepal, Bhutan and India. Yet, as a participant in the project told me with a sense of frustration, the priority for the Sikkimese delegates appeared to be to change the spelling of the initiative to “Khangchendzonga”, as the culturally authentic iteration of the name. The mountain peak is the central motif in the origin myth of Sikkim as a sacred Buddhist landscape. As Balicki (2008, 87) explains, “as in Tibet, Guru Rinpoche is said to have tamed all the

supernatural beings of the land, including the mountain God *Kangchendzönga*, during his eighth century visit to Sikkim and to have bound them through solemn oaths into being protectors of the faith”. However, “it is only in the seventeenth century, following the establishment of the Buddhist kingdom and the consecration of the first *Chogyal*, that Kangchendzönga became the object of veneration and pilgrimage in a Buddhist sense within Sikkim (ibid, 89). This reverence of the mountain by the autochthonous people of the landscapes, and its subsequent encompassment within the Buddhist religious and political cosmology has a central significance in conceptualizing Sikkim as distinct cultural-political territory, now subsumed within India. The draft nomination of the Khangchendzonga National Park (KNP) for a UNESCO world heritage site status similarly emphasized this signification of the mountains as a sacred geography, in seeking to list it as a site for natural and cultural conservation. The document explained that “Khangchendzonga” literally means the “abode of Gods, consisting of five treasure houses” (2012, 65), since “*kang* means snow, *chen* means great, *dzö* treasure and *nga* five” (Balicki 2002, 5). Claiming natural heritage as cultural patrimony for the autochthonous ethnic groups of Sikkim has therefore remained significant in the ethno-politics of the state. I will return especially to the concept of *beyul* as sacred hidden land and its significance for conflicts over environmental knowledge about the state in chapter four. The immediate concern is, how then does the out-of-place non-native cedar find a place in this narrative?

Creating sub-national patrimony: one rhododendron at a time

On the reconnaissance walk in Pangthang, we eventually emerged out of the cedar forest, onto the edge of the ridge, overlooking the valley on the east. The vegetation by then changed, with rhododendron trees growing on the slopes. The Block Officer pointed to one red flower which had bloomed unseasonably in early February. Unlike the cedar, the rhododendron

excited him. He assured the ecotourism managers that by the time the festival came up, there would be many more flowers on the trees. The rhododendron (*guras* in Nepali, *gurasey* in plural) in being the state tree of Sikkim, checked the box of biodiversity as (sub)national patrimony (Heise 2016; Lowe 2006), which could be better aligned with the hegemonic stakes of arboreal ethnogenesis. However, even the rhododendron in Pangthang was not without its limits, in meeting the natural patrimony criterion. An inquiry into botanical specificities reveals another slight rub. Sikkim's state tree is the *Rhododendron niveum*, which grows at an altitude of 8500 to 11,500 feet and bears lilac colored flowers. What Mr. Adhikari was pointing to that day was the *Rhododendron arboreum* (*lali guras*). While native to Sikkim, it also happens to be the national flower of Nepal, its shared substance therefore limiting its claims of being uniquely Sikkimese. Yet given its limited distribution in the Greater Himalayan region (Bhattacharyya and Sanjappa 2008), the "here and nowhere else" claim of the *lali guras* was much stronger than the Japanese Cedar's.

Thus, the rhododendron could be mobilized as subnational patrimony to elide the contradiction of a non-native pin-up, as it were, of Sikkim's biodiversity. The cedars are not culled, allowing them to die-out without replacing them. However, active planting of rhododendrons in the Pangthang Forest Block sought to balance out the cedar's presence. As the Block Officer acknowledged, much of what we saw of the rhododendrons that day was born out of forestry plantation efforts in the recent past, bringing sapling from north or west Sikkim, where it grows abundantly in the higher altitude. In its flowering season, in April, the Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary in West Sikkim, where the second festival was held (albeit in October) and the Yumthang valley in North Sikkim turn into a sea of red, interspersed with lilac and white; drawing tourists from all over India to these vivid landscapes. When the Pangthang

festival was held, the flowering season had not started. The one bud we saw on that early February day had turned into a handful by the end of March. Yet the trail, through the predominantly cedar forest, had been named the “*Gurasey* trail”

On the day of the festival, I accompanied two touring families, one a Mumbai-based couple with two young children, and the other a mother-daughter duo from Gangtok, on the *Gurasey* Trail. A forest watcher named Sangey joined us intermittently, pointing to various features of the cedar forest. As the forest grew dense and a bit darker, the man from Mumbai asked, “you have black bears in this forest?” The Sikkimese visitors, ostensibly to set themselves apart from the casual tourists, began describing their encounters with bears and pythons¹¹; which seemed to worry the latter. “Do we have to go back the same way?”, the lady from Mumbai asked, as they sat down on the log benches that had been built for the festival. With tall trees, moss covered pathways, large fallen, overgrown logs and cicadas heard in the background, the tourists were adequately enchanted with the forest. They stopped to take numerous photos of the scenery and of themselves, praising the “beauty and peace” of the place. When told of the end of the trail, a few hundred meters way, they appeared to not be particularly keen to carry on, happy rather to stay or turn back.

Eventually, along with the mother-daughter duo, we ended up at the edge of the hill, where the trail ended with the rhododendron trees, and a newly-constructed log bench positioned beside them. A few flowers were now visible. “So, that is the rhododendron?”, the tourist from Mumbai asked. Sangey and the Sikkimese lady both emphasized that this was not

¹¹The conversation helped associate an element of danger with the walk, and thereby indexed the Sikkimese visitors’ adventurous frontier life, distinctive from that of the national citizen. In this aim towards claiming distinctiveness, they glossed over the fact that pythons are only found in dry deciduous forests, in the lower altitudes of the state.

yet the flowering season, offering an implicit apology for the landscape not living up to its true potential. Nonchalant about the qualifying statements, the family took some photos with the rhododendron in the background – a trophy shot with Sikkim’s iconic flower, before heading back through the same route. I met them again at the end of the day, as they sat watching the village cultural performances. Immediate exhaustion overcome, they praised the trekking experience and expressed a desire to come back. The appreciation appeared to be largely for the walk through the cedar forest, with indifference towards the titular *gurasey* of the trail. The touristic-aesthetic parameter for valuing biodiversity, that is indifferent to nativism, is discussed in the section below. What I wish to underscore in this section is the discursive centering of the rhododendron in the promotional narrative of the Forest Department. Such a centering underplays both the physical constitution of the landscape, that is predominantly cedars, and the touristic engagement with the landscape, where too, the cedar is the central character.

Making claims about the naturalization of the cedar in the landscape appears to be a particularly fraught issue, given that in all its traits as a “selfish” species, it appears to fit the profile of a diversity-thwarting “alien”. Yet while the cedar itself appears to be a “messmates at table who do[es] not know how to eat well [together]” (Haraway 2008, 18), in being discursively framed as a multispecies knot with the rhododendron, a semblance of co-existence is sought to be presented, scaled down to the microcosm of the Pangthang forest. A similar allusion to the rhododendrons of the Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary was made while promoting the cedar forests of Okhrey. Ostensibly the ecological circle in Sikkim does not profess an ideology of ecological cosmopolitanism. Yet, the practice appears to be reconciled to a compromised “flourishing for all” (Choy 2011), inasmuch as it sought to manage a damaged nature produced by a cosmopolitan society (Peretti 1998,190) i.e. “compromised diversity” as

Tsing (2015) terms it. However, as the next sections will show, the cedar is also accommodated within a Buddhism-oriented natural patrimony, thereby not also creating the grounds for a broader rejection of exclusionary ideals of nativist bio-cultural politics.



FIGURE 2.1: *The cedar forest (left); the rhododendron trees at the end of the trail (right).*

The not-so-iconic Sal and the iconic Chir Pine

Meanwhile, a similar discursive move of presenting valuable nature as a combination of species, rather than individualized representations also occurred in the sal forests of Kitam. Albeit, it was to overcome the out-of-placeness of the Sal along a rather different register. The previous chapter has discussed how the declaration of the subtropical forests of Kitam as a sanctuary faced charges of corruption from certain quarters, given their hegemonic idealization

of the need to prioritize the conservation of Sikkim’s more iconic temperate and alpine landscapes. This sense of a lack of an under-defined, under-specified value in Kitam’s forest is then reinforced through the responses of ecotourists (as biodiversity conservation-financers), who visit the sanctuary.

“I think [the] Western Ghats [are] better no?”, a middle-aged ecotourist remarked to me, as we trekked through the sal forests, as part of the ecotourism itinerary that has been designed for the members from the Youth Hostels Association of India (YHAI) who visited Kitam in Spring 2015, as part of the Parliamentarian’s Model Village (SAGY) initiative¹². I was accompanying a handful of tourists, led by Randeep Kami, a young village guide. We began in the village, at about an elevation of 2,500 feet and made our way down to the bed of the river Rangeet, at approximately 800 feet, ending our trek at the natural boundary between Sikkim and West Bengal. We had been walking for a few hours since 7.00 a.m. The rather hot sal forests, and the sighting of all the red-vented bulbuls, that could be found easily anywhere else in India¹³, were subverting the tourist’s expectations from a Himalayan holiday. Even as our enterprising guide tried to offer captivating information about the *sakua* – the performance of the Nepali name itself being an effort at distinction – most trekkers were too familiar with the sal to be adequately captivated. Another tourist, who was the YHAI coordinator, told the group that the forest reminded him of his farmhouse in Titwala, in Maharashtra. Further on, as we

¹² The chief secretary of the Rural Management and Development Department, Mr. Tambe had liaised with the YHAI to facilitate this opportunity for Kitam as part of the model village scheme. The tourists arrived in ten batches of twenty, covering Darjeeling in West Bengal, then Pelling in West Sikkim, then Kitam and finally Dzongu, the Lepcha Reserve in the north. Darjeeling and Pelling were conventional tourist destinations. Kitam was the “model village” where tourists were to experience homestays, forest treks, village walks and cultural programs. Dzongu, being the Rajya Sabha (Upper House) MP’s SAGY-adopted village, also pitched its tourism output as a means for conservation and development.

¹³ There were a lot of justifications offered for not spotting more uniquely Himalayan birds – we came late, we are making too much noise, it rained yesterday and so on. Despite these consolations, the villagers despaired about tourist feedbacks. Lukewarm feedback they feared would hinder a positive recognition for Kitam’s nature-culture that hinged on successful monetization of diversity.

began sweating in the midday heat, another ecotourist began reminiscing about his days volunteering for the tiger censuses in the tropical Tadoba National Park, located literally in the heart of India, in eastern Maharashtra.

The hosts of Kitam therefore had to overcome this deficit of ecological uniqueness, that seemed to be the implicit criterion among the amateur environmentalists for adjudicating natural value along an unstated hierarchy. In response, the ecological practitioners strategized to highlight the fact that the sal in Kitam occurs in “unique combination” with the chir pine (*Pinus roxburghii*). As a subtropical conifer, the chir pine with a smaller distribution range across the Himalayas (Mukherjee et al 2004) is closer to the expectations a typical Sikkimese landscape. After the first batch of tourists had come and gone, I was walking across the forest with two budding guides from the village, discussing the progress and prospects of ecotourism. Bhushan, one of the part-time guides remarked in Nepali, “you know, once I took some professor from outside [implying a foreigner] to the forests. He told me that this chir pine and sal combination is so unique. You will not find it anywhere else. He told me you should really highlight this about your forest”. I had heard the use of this description of the “unique combination” in other walks with forest personnel, even as the extent of this uniqueness was never specified. It was one of the reasons cited by Dr. Tambe for the selection of Kitam for sanctuary status, both in his reports and in an interview with me, especially when asked about the allegations of political motivations in the declaration of the sanctuary from some quarters.

Therefore, in subsequent touristic encounters, when guides were faced with a lukewarm response to Kitam’s familiar-looking forests, they sought to play up the aspect of the chir pine-sal association. An aspiration of flourishing for all, it appears, could not be expressed without qualification. In the forests of Kitam, it manifested as a flourishing of a particular assemblage

which could then stake a claim to being from here and nowhere else. If the sal-Nepali people assemblage, mirroring the peacock-Nepali assemblage discussed in chapter one, did not allow for an idealized articulation of biocultural belonging – both appearing to lack the quality of iconic Sikkimeseness – the sal-chir pine-Nepali assemblage offered a greater ability to connote a unique socio-natural substance, to overcome the deficit of recognition. The potency of the assemblage, the villagers reckoned, increased by bringing in more participants into the alliance.

What the negotiations towards articulating an ecological legitimacy for the cedar and the sal reveal then is not an attestation of an unbridled cosmopolitanism or a complete disregard for the implicit value of purity in acknowledging belonging. “To create a better, more inclusive world, one that allows difference to flourish, it seems we would be better off acknowledging our world as contaminated, and letting that be the site of new political emergence”, writes Ticktin (2017, xxxiii). Not quite as radical, the practice in Sikkim seems to rely on establishing a story of co-existence where it is important to nonetheless reiterate that the species or forms of life that have been adjudicated as purer or more unquestionably native thrive *despite* the presence of less pure forms of life. Between xenophobic, exclusionary, nationalist nativism and celebration of messy unfixity of life, what we find then are accommodations that tread a compromised middle ground. Even an archetypically colonizing cedar can be narratively folded into a story of co-existence, in such management of “contaminated diversity” (Tsing 2015) by non-purist foresters, the connotation of guilty-untilproven innocent is not completely overwritten. The thriving of the rhododendron adjacent to the cedar forest is key to holding at bay the suspicion of the ‘alien’.



FIGURE 2.2: *Sal to the left; Chir pine to the right*

NEGOTIATING THE AESTHETIC PARAMETERS OF BIODIVERSITY

As the previous section, and also the previous chapter begins to indicate, for the ecotourists who are interpellated as financiers of Himalayan biodiversity conservation, the value of biodiversity presented to them for their consideration is evaluated by an implicit criterion of uniqueness. This idealization of uniqueness draws as much or more from aesthetic considerations, as from ecological discourses. The place of aesthetics has come to be debated between the proponents and opponents of the nativist discourse. The former deny the role of aesthetic considerations in their advocacy of a well-policed nature ‘in place’ (Simberloff 2003; Stokes 2007; Van Driesche and Van Driesche 2000), seeking instead the elusive panacea of ecological terminology purged of social-historical meaning and value (Colautti and MacIsaac

2004; Richardson et al 2000¹⁴). The latter argue that the prioritization of aesthetic judgements about nature is not a corruption of a purer ecological ideal by external influences, as studies that inquire into the public's embrace of exotic species and then cogitate over what to do about such purportedly misplaced alliances (Khew, Yokohari, and Tanaka 2014; Stokes 2007) seem to suggest. The contention rather is that within the rationale provided by ecologists, the aesthetic and the ostensibly scientific considerations cannot be neatly parsed out (Raffle 2017; Warren 2007). A fact cited to support this charge is the case of the idealization of native nature in pre-World War II Germany's ecological circles. Ecologists involved at the time drew from a theory of "biological aesthetic", which claimed or at least desired that "biological harmonies of nature [be] perceived and valued aesthetically" (Gröning and Wolschke-Bulmahn 2010, 202).

What I wish to note about these debates is that pointing to the public's desire for aesthetic value, that is discordant with the ecologists' priorities, also gives ecologists a way out of difficult positions. The inability to implement nativist agendas can be chalked up to pragmatic limits set by public sentiments. In Pangthang, the imperative to appeal to ecotourists with their non-scientific criteria for valuing nature gives the ecological practitioners a mode of externalizing the impasse of the non-native species. In the lead up to the Pangthang festival, as the nature of the Forest Block was being prepared as a "product", with the construction of log benches, clearing of the trails, new signages etc., the refrain was that tourists will enjoy the "Gurasey trail" through the cedar forest. The understanding was that the same characteristics that made the forest less ecologically-valuable also made it a tourism asset. A historical plantation that had now been allowed to "grow wild" presented the right visual mix of ordered

¹⁴ "Neophyte" is sometimes offered as a more neutral term to designate the phenomenon. Some consider a return to older terms like vermin, weeds and pests, even as such words have a long history of exclusionary and value-laden landscape (and sometimes social) management.

trees and unkempt nature for touristic consumption. Amidst a few fallen trees, each two or three feet in diameter, the forest evoked a sense of wilderness, while avoiding much physical discomfort. The lack of understory because of which Mr. Adhikari and SP had qualified the cedar as a “selfish” introduced species also made for an easy trek. Without thorny undergrowth, or leeches that are common in much of Sikkim’s moist temperate forests, and with a proximity to the road, the trail was designated as ideal for “self-guided” treks.

This also took care of labor considerations in commoditizing the forest, since guides in the village were difficult to find and train, especially given the lack of regular pay, compounded by tourists’ disinclination to incur extra costs. The sparse understory also meant less investment required from the Forest Department in clearing and maintaining the route. These aesthetic and market-oriented factors made the cedar forest an ideal tourism product, such that the cosmetic naming of the trail after a native species seemed adequate in ameliorating the ecological science-derived reservations about the showcased nature. This push towards foregrounding the aesthetic value of the cedar was also noticeable in Okhrey. Questioned by an international tourist about the state’s policy towards introduced species, the tour guide Maanik insisted on using the term “exotic” to describe the cedar. The effort seemed to be to steer the conversation away from concerns about ecological nativism to connotations of desirability of the consumption of “exotic” others, that has been the staple of tourism narratives (Ortner 1999; Urry 1990). The term exotic also connoted the longer history of horticultural projects of “improvement” of the landscape (Fall 2013), that were premised on a cosmopolitan exchange of flora between imperial (and later post-colonial) botanical networks (Arnold 2006; Coates 2006; Crosby 2004; Endersby 2008; Hooker 1891; Roxburgh 1874; Worster 1994).

While for the cedar forest the aesthetic value was in abundance, such that it helped elide the question of its ecological value deficit, for the sal forests of Kitam, the problem was the obverse. The Sal's aesthetic deficit seemed to mar the recognition of its ecological value to some extent. When taking stock of the successes and failures of the month-long ecotourism initiative of the SAGY project in Spring 2015, one of the guides named Madhav Subba claimed that the predominant sentiment expressed by visitors was that "the place is good, people are good, food is great, but we only saw bulbuls!". Such a feedback, devaluing the forest on the grounds of its lack of uniqueness forecast a less-than-ideal future for successful marketization of the bio-cultural diversity of the village. How such failures in securing the claims of nativism of the nature-culture of Kitam through marketized avenues exacerbate the Nepali community's anxieties of belonging has been discussed in the previous chapter.

The insight here is that if the rub in the politics of socio-natural nativism is on account of the non-isomorphic ecological and market-oriented parameters of valuation of the landscape, the problem is understood as such within the ecological circle of Kitam, and sought to be addressed accordingly. Thus, through the rest of 2015, gearing towards a repeat of the SAGY program, and a festival organized by the SBFP project to promote Kitam, as its third ecotourism zone, the village's ecotourism committee and supporting NGOs focused on developing various forest trails, ecotourism brochures etc. The aim, in developing these "nature products" in SBFP terminology, was to make the sal forests more appealing to tourists. If this could not be achieved through its ecological characteristics alone, then the turn was towards mobilizing narrative histories and cultural significances that would appeal to the visitor's desire for an out-of-the-ordinary experience as a value-for-money touristic investment. The potentials and limits of these invocations of history and culture are discussed in the next section.

The issue that is not adequately addressed in the debates about the place of aesthetics in ecological evaluations of nature, is the ways in which the element of aesthetic marketized judgment makes a demand of nature-culture to perform a logic of 'value addition'. This demand then positions the showcased nature-culture in particular relations of precarity in a neoliberal consumer society. I discuss the hegemony of neoliberal 'value-addition' and the consequent expectation from entrepreneurial subjects to internalize risks of failure, according to the vagaries of the market, in the fifth chapter. Briefly, as Wendy Brown (2015, 22) summarizes, in neoliberal conditions, the state, the firm and the individual are "expected to comport themselves in ways that maximize their capital value in the present and enhance their future value...through practices of entrepreneurialism, self-investment, and/or attracting investors". Questions of social or ecological justice too become matter of "competitive positioning" (ibid, 27; see also Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Graan 2011), wherein a more just environment, in the broadest sense, is valuable because it then becomes an appealing investment destination (Brown 2015). The onus then, in Sikkim's biocultural politics, is on the subject to appear attractive to ecological financiers, by working on and improving themselves, i.e. striving to be value-added nature-culture. Tied to the market in this manner, the realization of ecological value (ratified economically) becomes a limited good, where assemblages of nature-culture are in competition with each other, such that the appreciation of economic value of one may diminish the economic value of the other. Especially in theorizations that see the aesthetic consumption of nature as a way for capitalism to circumvent the limits to the exploitability of finite natural resources for profit-generation (Fletcher 2011), this aspect of comparatively or competitively declining possibilities for profit from nature remains underexamined. Let me elaborate.

For the Indian tourists who came to Kitam as part of the SAGY tour, different places within Sikkim were vying for a share of their tourism spending. Since tourists have limited money and time to spend, this pits the different natural-cultural destinations against each other. The immediate comparison, in this instance, was between Kitam and Dzongu, the next destination of the YHAI itinerary. The Lepcha reserve is inhabited by an indigenous population recognized by the state schedule. Its culture in terms of attire, language and food is visibly distinct from that of the plains (and thus exotic). Thus, ostensibly Dzongu offers more ‘value for money’ as a touristic purchase of a unique holiday experience, compared to Kitam with its familiarly sub-tropical landscape and predominantly similar Hindu culture. It is this lack of competitive advantage that Kitam seeks to overcome by the historic-cultural invocation of value for the forest. Moreover, it had to undertake these negotiations without ostensibly alluding to the transactional, capitalist dimensions at work, performing hospitality as an ostensibly pure cultural act, and ecological stewardship as a purely environmental ethic. Povinelli’s insights (2002, 16) about the cunning of cultural recognition in capitalistic liberal settings is especially applicable in this context. As she writes,

[recognition granting citizens] truly desire that indigenous subjects be treated considerately, justly, and with respect, publicly, juridically, and personally. They truly desire a form of society in which all people can have exactly what they want. . . if they deserve it. They do not feel good when they feel responsible for social conflict, pain, or trauma. This is, after all, a fantasy of liberal capitalist society too simply put: convulsive competition purged of real conflict, social difference without social consequences. To provide a sensorium of cultural competition and difference without subjecting the liberal

subjects to the consuming winds of social conflict – no more or less is asked of the indigenous subject, the subaltern subject, the minority subject.

In my conversations with the tourists returning from their stay in Dzongu, after leaving Kitam, the former was usually described with superlatives. I accompanied a few groups of tourists to the bazaar in Gangtok, on their last day in the state before they headed back home. “What a place”, “truly beautiful”, “so many different birds” and other such expressions of enthralment were common in their description of Dzongu, during these conversations. Often, such comments would be followed by qualifiers. Browsing for curios with Buddhist or Lepcha motifs in the town bazaar, they would then say something positive about Kitam’s “homeliness” and “familiarity”. The unease the tourists felt, I would argue, came from their implicit understanding that the recognition they granted to either Kitam or Dzongu was a limited resource, the distribution of which had socio-economic consequences. Recognition and redistribution were understood to be linked here as well, just as it is in negotiations with the Indian state. While seeking ‘value for money’, they also did not want to be the cause of any community which they saw as marginal (compared to their own metropolitan status) not being able to advance itself in this market setting. The acknowledgement of such competition would compromise their “good feeling” as recognition-granting, income-generating liberal subjects. How then does cultural history aid a project of competitive positioning, where nativist value can be articulated without jeopardizing the good feeling of recognition for the liberal subjects involved? Colonial history, I show in the next section, is a particularly malleable reserve towards this end.



FIGURE 2.3: *Pit-stop on the gurasey trail(left), pit-stop on the trail in Kitam (right).*

ROOTS AND ROUTES OF CULTURAL HISTORY – PRECOLONIAL, COLONIAL AND POST-COLONIAL

Much of the concern about introduced species ‘out of place’ is about displacements precipitated by the Columbian exchange. A “declensionist” narrative of colonial history, as Morrison (2017, 262) highlights, has become hegemonic in theorizations of environmental transformation. In such accounts, she writes, “there is not much action before the fall from grace; a good story requires a crisis”. And colonialism is seen as precipitating this crisis of “loss of forests, traditions, innocence” (ibid), disturbing an essential harmony of nature-culture.

The first line of critique, against this form of “ecological romanticism” (Prasad 2003) is that “little effort is expended in actually evaluating the state of affairs in the prelapsarian past” (Morrison 2017, 262). Some of the evidence of equally “impure” pre-colonial environments (the temporal scope of pre-colonial itself being problematically wide) include tree invasion in the Holocene in Europe, the extinction of Pleistocene megafauna under Native American’s regimes, similar impact of Maori habitation in New Zealand, and the significant impact of early Holocene farming on the non-human world in South America, Mesoamerica, Southwest Asia, South Asia, and East Asia (Morrison 2015, 79; Peretti 1998).

The other side of the problem with this notion of a homogenized precolonial past and colonialism as the universal watershed ecological fall from grace is the implied value placed on redemption, nature and culture restored to some form of pre-disturbance ideal. Especially in settler colonial contexts, even as colonialism is posited as the cause of disturbance, an easily imagined redemption puts the onus on impacted people and landscapes to erase the history of this disturbance and emerge as purified, restored subjects. In Van Driesche and Van Driesche's *Nature out of Place* for example, there is very little reflection on the culpability of colonialism in altering the American landscape and in precipitating Native American dispossession. The efforts the book outlines and urges towards, in terms of ecological restoration, focus on removing geographic markers and impacts of colonialism, without correspondingly offering suggestions on what the "restoration of meaning" that they advocate for native nature would look like for native cultures. Davison (2010) details a similar process in Australia, where given the process of the island's species specialization through isolation, claims of a unique natural substance are mapped onto an imaginary of national-cultural uniqueness such that settlers can make nativist claims. He remarks on the irony of such a claim by a "society whose origins lie in transcontinental colonization" (2010, 9). Povinelli's insights on the repercussions of such demands of purity on indigenous human subjects are also germane to the more than human context being discussed here.

She writes about the chimera of the authentic indigenous substance, which seems to always lie elsewhere, in a time when indigeneity was uncorrupted by colonial contact and the subjects uncontaminated by settler history, and its resultant "interestedness". Thus, recognition of land claims in being contingent on demonstrating continuity with a precolonial past demands the ghosting of the colonial history through which indigenous people have come to be

disenfranchised in the first place. This impasse of indigenous interestedness in making land claims through modern liberal legal frameworks having to perform a disinterested stewardship of and belonging in the land, for Povinelli, is the source of psychic harm to indigenous groups, who internalize this failure and become the melancholic subjects of contemporary liberalism. While drawing on this insight, how history is mobilized to mediate the differing impasses of nativism in the postcolonial cedar and sal forests of Sikkim however calls for a more open-ended theorization of the relation between colonial history and contemporary recognition of primordial belonging. Turning to colonial history, as I show below, can be a way to apportion blame for “contaminated diversity” of the cedar forests, find attestation of belonging in a landscape for the Nepali actants, and yet be a source of narratives that re-inscribe the “native” as ill-informed destroyers of nature. How the ecological circle of Sikkim negotiates through this terrain of history as a double-edged resource that can both give and limit the potency of recognition-seeking assemblages is elaborated in the following section.

Historicizing the Japanese cedar

How is the out-of-placeness of the cedar discursively managed, in a biodiversity landscape? Turning to history to elide this contradiction entails opposing maneuvers within the ecological circles. While sometimes it relies on a critique of the (at least symbolically) violent and sudden transformations inflicted by colonial rule, at other times this suddenness of the transformation of the landscape is downplayed. While the colonial introduction of the cedar is well-established, the details of the introduction are not very prominent within the tourism-oriented or conservation-oriented written or verbal communication. Maanik, the tour guide, offered a brief explanation to me during a conversation. “When citrus mandarin was smuggled from China, as well as tea...Came from China. Beginning of 1900, it [*C Japonica*] was

smuggled. It was for packaging of tea”, he told me haltingly. Maanik’s explanation seems to post-date the introduction by a decade or so.

In *Flora Indica: A Systematic Account of the Plants of British India*, compiled in 1855 by J. D. Hooker and Thomas Thompson, the *C japonica* is not mentioned in the description of the flora of Sikkim. In the 1902 edition of J. S. Gamble’s *A Manual of Indian Timbers* (first published in 1881), the *C japonica* finds a mention under conifers, described as “Indigenous in Japan: cultivated in India, especially in the Darjeeling District, at 4-7000 ft” (1902, 700). The entry details how

The seeds of the *Cryptomeria* were first brought to India by Mr. Fortune in 1844. The trees about the station of Darjeeling are probably the oldest, but at that elevation, 7000 ft., they do not grow so quickly or thrive so well as lower down at 4-6000 ft. The first attempt to grow them in plantation was probably that made about 1866 at Dhobijhora near Kurseong, where in 1899 the trees had a girth of 43 in. They are now largely grown, and especially through the energy of Sir G. King and Mr. J. A. Gammie, at the Government Cinchona Plantations of Sureil, where they thrive admirably. The growth is very fast, and seeds are produced in abundance. The wood makes excellent tea-boxes, and is good as a substitute for deal (700).

This history is corroborated by Mertz (2013, 65), who also credits the Scottish plant collector Robert Fortune for giving it its common name¹⁵; and describes how extensive planting in Darjeeling and Sikkim began after 1891. Mertz also points out that while the Japanese cedar

¹⁵ Mertz (2012:66-67) elaborates, “hoping to introduce this tree also to Scotland or England, he named this tree a Japanese cedar, as the term ‘cedar’ refers to a conifer tree yielding highly esteemed timber. The European climate was not suitable for it, but in Northern India, notably in Darjeeling he found that the tree could well adapt to the climate, as well as to Sikkim, where this tree can be found all over, even as high as in an altitude of 2,900 m”.

is no longer used to make tea boxes in Darjeeling and Sikkim, since the tea comes to be permeated by the smell of the wood, the practice continues in Japan, where the box is lined by a layer of tin to avoid this issue (ibid, 66-67).

While colonialism is taken as the cause of disturbance or transformation, most actors in the ecological circles of Sikkim reject the call for restoration, espousing instead differing degrees of commitment to living in a damaged cosmopolitan nature. One recurrent response to questions about culling took a religious ethical route, alluding to principles of non-violence in the state's Buddhist outlook. As a guide elaborated, "this which is planted it will slowly go. We don't want to kill. It is not their fault also".

However, all such espousals of an opposition to restoration ecology need not derive from ethics of religious tolerance or disinterested liberal cosmopolitanism. Ethics of co-existence and multispecies cosmopolitanism may have as much to do with individual self-interest. In my subsequent meetings with Maanik for example, he talked about various other species that are not originally from the state but have now become part of its (sub)national patrimony, like the mandarin oranges, or the *Rhododendron mekongense* "originally from Mekong side"¹⁶. Maanik idealized a cosmopolitan travel of flora and fauna, framing it as a mode of cultural exchange, "the same as when I visit his sister in Mumbai and they ask me how to make momos and millet beer". His espousal of free movement of flora and fauna stemmed not only from support of those moving into the state, but also for those moving out. This became evident when he began expressing his dissatisfaction with bio-piracy laws, which he

¹⁶ This was a reference to the excitement in the ecological circles about a new species of *Rhododendron* recorded in Sikkim in 2015, in the Shingba *Rhododendron* Sanctuary in North Sikkim, as part of the SBFP project's Rapid Biodiversity Surveys. The researchers associated with the discovery noted that "R.P. Soulie was the first person to record the species from the Mekong Valley in China in 28 June 1895". The *R. mekongense* var. *mekongense* they note is found in "China (S Tibet, NW Yunnan), NE Myanmar and Nepal" (Pradhan et al. 2015, 77).

implied were contravening the process of natural “improvement” (Fall 2013) that has propelled human civilization. “This is not recent”, he remarked one day, as we sat in a café in Gangtok. “Man, since he started agriculture, taming the animals no. That time only biopiracy was there. When British take plants from other countries, after they done taking, they impose this law (sic),” he argued. In Maanik’s formulation then not only was colonialism to be blamed for benefiting most from the lack of natural purity; but the demand for purity was also framed as a metropolitan sleight of hand.

This critique of the hegemony of nativism stemmed from his immediate economic interests as an entrepreneur. For many of the nature treks he led, he elaborated, be it with foreign groups or sometimes Indian scientists, the collection of botanical samples was a key motivation for the tour. Strict biopiracy laws that police the movement of species across ecological and political borders then was directly detrimental to his livelihood. Therefore, contra Povinelli’s melancholic subjects, what we find is a creative engagement with colonial history, that challenges the purity of nature as a hegemonic demand made of messy nature-cultures. This challenge emerges out of environmental actors foregrounding their interestedness rather than letting themselves be caught in its bind.

The other mode of accommodative historicization of the cedar in the landscape is to locate it culturally in a way that its out-of-placeness appears less pronounced. Returning to the day of the Pangthang festival, Mr. Adhikari, the Block Officer, found himself in the role of an interpretive guide for some tourists outside the forest barracks. He gave lengthy explanations about species such as the cobra lily (*Arisaema tortuosum*) and the Himalayan cherry tree (*Prunus cerasoides*) growing outside his office. When asked about the Japanese cedar, he gave a laconic answer about how the *dhupi*, as it is known in the local language, is burned as incense.

If a tourist were to stay in a Buddhism-practicing homestay, she would most likely see a member of the household, at particular times of the day, carrying around a tin bucket, with this lit incense that permeates the house with thick smoke and a distinct fragrance. These leaves can also be seen burning in the white-painted miniature stupa-like structures found in the compound of the state's various monasteries. The specific term for the practice is Sang (*bsang*) or fumigation, described as an "auspicious [purification] ritual involving the burning of incense, usually juniper" (Balicki 2008). While it is the *Juniperus recurva* or *sang dhup* that is commonly associated with the ritual (Spoon 2014, Martin 1999, Terrone 2014, Balicki 2008), the proximity of the *dhupi* in appearance and fragrance allows for it to be functionally substituted for the former.

The possibility of the integration of the *dhupi* in this manner into a Buddhist cultural cosmology then makes its integration into the landscape more acceptable. As another emerging environmental expert in the state (associated with various non-governmental conservation initiatives) speculated, "you know, even though it is *japonica*, it may have come to India before the British plantation era. The culture in Tibet and Japan is similar no. So, Tibet had *dhupi* before and they brought it when Buddhism came from Tibet to Sikkim". Thus, when Besky and Padwe (2016,19) write that "human-plant entanglements, while never free from the weight of history, can afford new possibilities for imagining the future", it is worth noting that such new imaginations of the future are enabled also by new or alternative imaginations of the past.

Pitfalls of the histories of the sal forest

While for the cedar forests colonial history becomes the repository of blame for contemporary impasses of nature out of place, for the sal forests the invocation of history works as a strategy to overcome the marginalization of Kitam's nature-culture in contemporary

conservation and tourism imaginaries. The Lonely Planet guide for example discusses the subtropical riverbed stretch around the Kitam Sanctuary only in terms of the “charmless transport hub” at the confluence of the Rangeet and Ramnam river, about ten kilometers from the sanctuary, where “the lights of Darjeeling twinkle provocatively [on the opposite hills], as if taunting foreign visitors wishing they could simply cross the river and drive there directly¹⁷”. To surmount this connotation of an out-of-the-way forest, the ecological circle working in Kitam put in a concerted effort to reanimate various points in the forest’s history to signal its eco-political value. To this end, the village ecotourism committee, supporting environmental NGOs and requisite local forest officers undertook various reconnaissance treks and follow-up meetings over 2015-2016. Yet all such physical and narrative efforts to make the forests a value-added bio-cultural “product” did not yield an unequivocally easy mode of overcoming the deficit of recognition of socio-natural value, since the “native” in these colonial narratives did not always appear as blame-less or empowered subjects .

If the end of the trek in Pangthang was the rhododendron, to signal the state’s natural patrimony, the end of the forest walk in Kitam was the Majitar bridge, reached through the “Old Darjeeling – Namchi Horse Trail”. The aim in reanimating this colonial cultural route was to signal the centrality of the Kitam forests in colonial geography and by extension in Sikkim’s natural history. The brochure that resulted from the various trail-building efforts declared:

This trail is a walk through a piece of Sikkim’s history. It used to be the old horse road, serving as a trade route between Darjeeling and Namchi in South Sikkim, operational right up till the 1960s. The walk begins at the village and ends at the Majitar Bridge over

¹⁷ Requiring an inner line permit that will be inspected at the border, foreigners are not allowed to cross the Sikkim-Darjeeling border at this place. They can enter and exit only from Rangpo in East Sikkim.

the Rangeet River, on the other side of which begins West Bengal. This is believed to be the longest suspension bridge in Sikkim, the original one being of colonial provenance. Records show it was rebuilt in 1902, after having been washed away in 1899. Renovated recently, with the river gently flowing under it, the bridge provides a relaxing end to the long forest walk.

The value-addition that is written and is performed during guided walks is to connote for tourists a sense of reanimating a colonial route, where they retrace the steps of colonial explorers. Currently the Majitar bridge is a disused pathway, offering a view of the valley and a few shops selling snacks to mainly local villagers frequenting it for a stroll. Yet in the colonial literature, Majitar is the main entry point into Sikkim from Darjeeling¹⁸. In colonial records, unnamed royal subjects can be found fleeing the kingdom of Sikkim into the colonial territory of Darjeeling through the bridge, much to the royal court's ire¹⁹; and district collectors from Darjeeling show up as over-overstepping their jurisdiction by crossing the bridge to apprehend colonial subjects breaking imperial laws. While in reconnaissance treks with the Forest Department, the horse trail was described merely as a fire line, village guides made efforts to add historical patina to the route. As we would begin the walk, they would describe the bullock carts that would have been found along the route "in olden days". They would point to ostensible pit-stops, diversions and other residual meanings of the pathway along which once

¹⁸ A popular book on Sikkim's post-colonial history by Andrew Duff, a journalist based out of London and Scotland released in 2015 for example begins with his personal connection to the state. In a book reading I attended, he described his grandfather as a soldier in the British army who had toured the region in his leisure time. He presented photos of the Majitar bridge, which was his grandfather's entry point into the state, going on to elaborate about his journey onto West Sikkim. No one in the audience in Gangtok however could recognize the bridge, when initially asked by the author.

¹⁹ As Mullard (2011, 182-183) explains, Sikkim's subjects would flee to Darjeeling to escape conditions of bonded labor under the monarchy. Asylum was granted to such subjects under Britain's antislavery law of 1838. Sikkim's monarchy saw this as an affront to its sovereignty.

people and goods moved between the district capital of Namchi, fourteen kilometers above Kitam to Darjeeling, the most prominent colonial town on the other side of the river.

This narrative strategy aimed to reclaim the importance the sal forests had in colonial ecological reckoning. In the colonial extractive economy, the Sal was a significant timber, since “once thoroughly seasoned, [it] stands almost without a rival [in its] strength, elasticity, durability” (Gamble 1902, 80). It was closely monitored and harvested across the subcontinent, as evident in the extensive listing of its vernacular names in Gamble’s *Manual of Indian Timbers*. A 1907 *Report on the Forests of Sikkim* describes the “the area from Manjithar to Malli” (between which the sanctuary now lies) as having “1,100 sál trees of 7' girth [that had been] marked for felling” (Grievés 1907, 25). Listing the forests as being under a “ticcadar, Babu Lambodar” (ibid), the report goes on to elaborate how the area had been designated as reserved forests. “No cutting [was] allowed, except under the direct orders of the Darbar” (ibid). The idea was to have “an available reserve of timber on which to draw, to carry out contracts already entered into, and to furnish materials for road repair and other State works” (ibid). Thus, to reanimate the colonial routes of the sal forest was to historicize its long imbrication in a conservation discourse, and articulate a significance of the forests as being located within what was once the “most important trade route of the district” (ibid, 27). The deficit of value in the forests, as the ecological agents working in Kitam understood, derived not from being out of place, but rather from being an out-of-the way place that had lost its significance in any hegemonic geographic imaginary of the state’s landscape.

The question now is, how do such narrative value-additions to the landscape contribute to the precarity and risk-internalization among Kitam’s enterprising neoliberal residents? Firstly, it seems to play into a critique of ecotourism as a form a neo-imperialism, where

modern day ecotourists find validation as replicators of colonial expeditions and adventures. In strategically invoking the colonial history of this route, the village's ecotourism promoters are not unaware of these connotations and the positions of subordination it might lock them into. Yet this risk of reproducing colonial hierarchies with a new set of travelers into the landscape (Bruner 2005; Sodikoff 2012; Walley 2003) is one that the environmental circle takes. The lack of recognition of the bio-cultural significance of the landscape necessitates a creative and self-improving solution towards overcoming Kitam's marginalization in post-colonial market-oriented environmental considerations.

The danger in the invocation of this colonial history however exceeds the question of inequalities of touristic relations. The acknowledgement of a Nepali landlord and the sal as a valuable timber attests to the historical claims of the assemblage in the landscape, giving credence to an assertion of prolonged naturalization if not outright nativism. However, the rub lies in the fact that the Nepali natives so recognized appear not in the position of environmental stewards, but as threats to the landscape.

The history of the Majitar bridge is a cautionary tale against the 'threatening' native. It was built at a "cost [to] the Government [of] some three lakhs" (Grievess 1907, 27), because the older bridge had been swept away, due to erosion caused by forest denudation by the inhabitants of the region. The report blames the paddy-fields near the "Munpur khola" (the stream marking the eastern boundary of the current sanctuary) and grazing in general for being the cause of denudation of forests, landslides and the closure of the Melli-Jorethang road, which it saw as critical for trade in the region(ibid). The report goes on to discuss the necessity of strict enforcement of the reserved status of the forest and of controlling cultivation and grazing, to protect the economically valuable sal forest.

There is enough scholarship on the sub-continent's environmental history to warn against the ideological stakes in depiction of environmentally irresponsible native against whom colonial nature needs protection. Sutton (2009) shows how the depiction of the Badagas as unruly indigenous subjects in the Nilgiris in the nineteenth century corresponds with certain failures in the colonial forest management regime. The non-viability of acacia and eucalyptus plantations, due to the poor-quality soil, foiled the vision of a profitable "improved" colonial landscape. Subversion and belligerence of indigenous communities then emerged as acceptations explanations for the situation. There on, "forest management [came to be] ordered by a conviction that colonization of the hills had intervened in the ongoing destruction of indigenous forests by indigenous communities" (125), legitimizing colonial usurpation in the process. Whether environmental conditions were worsening in Kitam at the beginning of twentieth century is an empirical question that needs further research. However, it can be reasonably argued that the discourse of an endangered nature and endangering native granted symbolic and material legitimacy to the colonial forestry project.

Therefore, the danger of invoking colonial history to articulate nativist claims is that in the position that might be recovered for Kitam's environmental actors, they may figure as what William Mazarella (2013), describing the subjects of Indian censorship regimes, has called the "pissing man". Censorship, as a mode of performative dispensation, Mazzarella argues works on and through the figure of the pissing man – an incontinent subject incapable of self-control, in whose name authority is legitimized. In this dispensation "the present is an exceptional in-between time, of disorder between defunct tradition and deferred development" (190) that requires a strong expression of exceptional authority. This formulation can be stretched to understand projects of environmental rule. The latter too operates with this imagined binary of

time, between a past of organically-ordered nature inhabited sustainably by “noble savages”, and a future salvaged-nature peopled by rationally acting conservation-minded citizens. It is the in-betweenness of this trajectory of social development that demands particular environmental dispensations. Mazarella (2013, 214) sees the pissing man, “qua the ‘something in the way’ of a unified performative dispensation, [as an] estimate other whose reliable blameworthiness constantly fortifies the moral orders that his very existence seems to frustrate”.

It can therefore be argued that instead of a celebratory figure whose legitimacy is ratified by colonial history, the villagers of Kitam in these historical reports appear to be “something in the way” of a unified environmental dispensation; becoming the ones in whose existence ecological indeterminacies are congealed and pathologized. This is the risk that mobilizations of colonial history entail for the recognition-seeking subjects of the sanctuary. Such risks however become necessary in efforts towards competitive positioning of bio-cultural diversity that needs to be ratified by the market, where the ability to internalize risks is part of the neoliberal paradigm of entrepreneurial value-addition (Brown 2015).

Lastly, this market-oriented ratification of cultural-ecological value of Kitam requires also an ability from the current human actants in the landscape to perform their belonging according to the aesthetic expectations of tourists. This form of value-addition, to the contemporary Nepali self as the tourism product, is also caught in the same bind of blameworthiness as its historical counterpart. This became evident to me during a particular conversation with an elderly Newari couple in the village, whose life history the ecological circle sought to implicitly extract and frame as a value-added attraction in the ecotourism offering. The septuagenarian couple were our homestay hosts, serving us tea and snacks in the compound of their tin-roofed house, that now had rooms allocated for ecotourists. After a

particularly long day of trail-building reconnaissance through the sanctuary in early 2016, both external ecological experts and village ecotourism development leaders had congregated in Manohar and Bhimlata Pradhan's house, overlooking the valley, on the other side of which glimmered the lights of Darjeeling town. One of the NGO members encouraged Mr. Pradhan to tell us something about the "olden days". Mr. Pradhan obliged by launching into a story of growing up in the village, when it was "nothing like it has become now."

In the post-colonial history of the forest, the cultural meaning of the sal seemed to be associated with the charcoal furnaces that Pradhan worked in during his youth. He described the process of making and maintaining a furnace (*bhatti*) in great detail, a process that took about a month to yield the final product. His vivid recollection set up a landscape of industrious extraction, where itinerant men followed the trail of large sal trees, controlling the fire in the furnace, and transporting the charcoal for compensation of "one rupee fifty paise for each sack". "Who was the owner of the jungle", the head of the INGO helping with the ecotourism project asked. "The Forest Department" was the reply. *Sabbai sakey ta teti bela* – everything got over/was exhausted during that period", the INGO member pronounced with a conservationist's gloom. In early 2016, in the discussion of mid-twentieth century forest practices, we still hear echoes of the 1907 colonial forester's tone, ruing an ever-threatened nature.

Nonetheless, looking for narratives to cement the cultural significance of the trails, another ecologist steered the conversation to the history of the horse-trail. Invoking a value of the forests as a cosmopolitan route rather than a rooted assemblage²⁰, Pradhan emphasized the

²⁰ Here I am especially reminded of James Clifford's (1997) injunction, criticizing the anthropological impulse to see culture as bounded and self-contained in particular locales corresponding to the anthropologist's limited field site. He draws our attention to culture being "as much a site of travel encounters as of residence, less a tent in a village or a controlled laboratory or a site of initiation and inhabitation, and more like a hotel lobby, ship, or bus. "If we rethink culture and its science, anthropology, in terms of travel", he argues, "then the organic, naturalizing

historical significance of Kitam as a pit stop in the vibrant trade route between Darjeeling, Namchi and Teesta town. He talked of caravans of “twenty horses, thirty donkeys” and numerous traders, who on any given day could be found transporting rice, lentils, spices and clothes on the trail. One such trader being his mother, who walked on foot to the Namchi Bazaar to sell rice flakes in exchange for tea, jaggery and other household items. Despite the “hard life”, Mr. Pradhan painted a picture of the “good old days”, as times of rigorous physical labor, unpolluted air to breathe and copious amounts of home-brewed liquor to drink. “*Tapai hunne rahecha euta item* – you will one item” [in the tourism itinerary], the INGO head commented, half-jokingly, half-appreciatively towards the end of the conversation.

Mr. Pradhan articulated a narrative of deep engagement with the forests, that in its evocative nostalgia could signal claims of nativism in terms of a long history of belonging in the landscape. Inasmuch as tourism lends itself to forms of nostalgic engagement with other places and other cultures, it also made Mr. Pradhan an ideal “item” for touristic presentation, thereby improving his and the villages chances at competitive positioning in the marketized conservation scenario. Yet, in the extractive landscape so described, he also stood out as the nature-endangering native.

Conservation as imagined in the biodiversity paradigm hinges on the idea of threat to said biodiversity. Various problems in the conceptualization of threat in conservation discourses have been interrogated. Threat that bleeds into and borrows from militarized discourses has been problematized (Ernwein and Fall 2015; Masco 2010). As has been threat that is

bias of the term culture, seen as a rooted body that grows, lives, dies, etc. is questioned. Constructed and disputed historicities, sites of displacement, interference, and interaction, come more sharply into view” (25). Thus, he advocates for “a view of human location as constituted by displacement as much as by stasis [i.e. as] dwelling-in-travel (2).

ecologically underdefined, lacking data on extent of species-diversity and species-loss (Takacs 1996; Morrison and Lycett 2014). The idea of threat to organic life that allows for cultural conservatism rather than flourishing for all has also been critiqued (Choy 2011). Mr. Pradhan's stories and its framing within ecotourism by his audience leads us to think also of the generative ambivalence of threatened nature and its threatening user in the environmental paradigm/dispensation.

Should we think of Mr. Pradhan as Povinelli's melancholic subject of recognition, alluding to a "good old time" of the authentic indigene living in harmony with nature, only for his stories to reveal that in the time he leads us back to, this idealized nature was already elsewhere? However, figuring both as destroyer of forest but also keeper of its history, the inevitability of Mr. Pradhan's failure in being positively recognized is not as complete as it is for Povinelli's indigenous interlocutors testifying before the land rights commissions. Mr. Pradhan is both the cause of a ruing of "that time when nature was exhausted" and cause for celebration in the potential to be "one item" of the ecotourism "product". Here rather than framing the impasse of the nativism of the Nepali community as influenced by a demand for authenticity that keeps receding into a past that can never be reached by recognition-seeking subaltern subjects (Povinelli 2002), it seems germane to think of Mr. Pradhan as the "pissing man" for the environmental dispensation. For the latter, the threatening figure of the nature-exploiting native is necessary to keep alive the future horizon of optimal conservation outcome. When income accrues to the subsistence users of the forest, through ecotourism, they will be less inclined to use nature extractively. In this formulation, the environmental dispensation both of the NGOs and of revenue-giving tourists depends on evidence of these infractions, even if in this case the evidence is presented as traces from the past. To keep in perpetuity this ideological

loop – of achievement of environmental sustainability and “something in the way” (Mazarella 2013) of it that necessitates the present conservation and development intervention – Kitam’s environmental stewards have to present themselves as both potential exploiters and potential protectors of the environment. Mr. Pradhan’s narrative additions to the forest trails therefore helps negotiate this impasse, by pushing the community’s role in exploitation into the past, whose potential to remerge is still not lost, lest the environmental dispensation lose its legitimacy.



FIGURE 2.4: *Present day Majitar Bridge*

CONCLUSION

This chapter has offered an ethnographic inquiry into the practice of biocultural “naturalization” in Sikkim, attesting firstly to the longer trajectory of plant-mediated politics of inclusion and exclusion than reckoned with in some recent literature on the topic that seems to tie it narrowly to the present reactionary, xenophobic, nationalist moment. The effort here has been to ask how the rise of the biodiversity discourse in the last few decades has become the

staging ground for these long-standing anxieties of ethnic belonging, wherein this ecological discourse gives new legitimacy to ideologies of nativism. The recruitment of plants into the politics of cultural, political nativism, this chapter has highlighted, can be both reinforcing of the ideology, but also in some instances, subversive of it.

Taking Raffle's (2017) contention – that the lack of fixity in a thoroughly impure world is a fact that nativist discourse has failed to accept – as the starting point in this chapter, I have traced the historical-cultural life of two “out-of-place” species of trees in the state, namely the Japanese cedar and the sal. I have asked how this out-of-placeness is negotiated vis-à-vis the hegemonic desires of (sub)nationalizing nature, resting on the ability to articulate an encompassing Buddhist cosmological significance of the landscape. The Japanese Cedar's foreign origin, and the Sal's association in popular imaginary with non-Himalayan landscapes makes them less-than ideal-candidates for being the iconic nature of Sikkim.

One line of critique of the project of nativism, or horticultural ethnogenesis, comes from a principled stand of cosmopolitanism, that advocates for acceptance of messy mobilities in a globalized world (Comaroff 2017; Peretti 1998; Raffle 2017; Subramaniam 2000; Ticktin 2017; Tsing 2015). The other related argument made is that such quests to incorporate trees into particular projects of rule are hegemonic aspirations that are never complete, punctured as they are by subversions, appropriations and resistance (Besky and Padwe 2016). The interjection through this ethnography is to highlight not so much the subversion and resistance to plant-mediated projects of rule but rather the processes of accommodations undertaken by various ecological actors working with the nativism paradigm. Practices of impurity or stories of contamination (Tsing 2015) as it were, I show, derive not necessarily from principled resistance to xenophobic ideals, but rather pragmatic choices of co-existence that may not be quite as

subversive. For example, while the cedar as an introduced species is not culled, the legitimacy of its continued presence in the landscape is contingent on demonstrating that the rhododendron as a more valued native is still first in the soil. Thus, ethics of co-existence may not entail rejection of nativism, or of restoration ecology tout court. Perhaps an ideological desire for such a rejection is itself caught in a conceptualization of purity.

Similarly, the cultural integration of the Japanese cedar within the Buddhist imaginary, as a mode of reconciling its out-of-placeness, prevent it from being the poster-case that would unequivocally lend support to a cosmopolitanist argument about “flourishing for all” (Choy 2011). This ‘domestication’, or cultural naturalization of the cedar however does not exhaust its potential to subvert the nativist discourse entirely. Let us go back to the conversation with the local environmental expert who articulated the theory of the cedar’s gradual route into Sikkim via Tibet. While he seemed to posit a more ‘organic’ connection between the cedar and a Buddhist sacred geography, the second part of his argument challenged the presumption of any conservation ethic in the scenario. Popular, and sometimes academic discourses, assume “a potential for environmental sustainability informed by Buddhist praxis” (Terrone 2014, 461), given the ideal of Buddhism as a non-violent religion. Countering this association, he insinuated instead that since monasteries burn the *dhupi*, they were responsible for loss of forest cover in the state. He claimed to derive his data from participation in an international research project. Thus, even as he approved of the naturalization of the cedar, he used this naturalization to pose a larger challenge to the hegemonic ideal of the nature-conserving autochthonous native, in which other ethnic groups were not as easily included.

The limits to the success of the politics of biocultural belonging for the Nepali community in their entanglement with the sal demonstrated that nature’s in-placeness has to not

only be ecologically viable, but legible along an aesthetic register, where uniqueness and exoticness matters as much as endemism. The negotiation entailed in this scenario then is one of accommodating touristic desires for value-for-money experience. To meet such desires, the nature-culture of Kitam has to become a value-added product. This it does through a creative engagement with colonial history and assertions of cultural imaginaries of belonging. Such value-added performances of socio-natural belonging in the marketized conservation arena on one hand open up the otherwise narrow scope of ethnic recognition in the state. The project of restoration ecology has sometimes been criticized for ways in which it seeks to undo colonial impact, displaying an impractical demand for erasure of history, that is also made of indigenous subjects seeking recognition, especially in settler colonial contexts. In Kitam, colonial history becomes a tourist-drawing resource that is perceived as making the landscape more attractive. And it is used as a testimony for Nepali engagement with the terrain, proving their longer trajectory of naturalization in the landscape. Yet the catch in such creative, open-ended arboreal ethnogenesis is the re-entrenchment of the marginalized community into positions of inferiority. This inferiority arises when representations of nature-culture serve touristic tropes of neo-colonialist exploration of erstwhile imperial geographies. More insidiously, the Nepali community in such colonial historical testimony may emerge as the unsustainable users of the forests. i.e. as blameworthy natives who necessitate conservation interventions from above. However, given the deficit of recognition and belonging, the Nepali community has to take the risk of implicitly offering themselves as a threatening figure in the conservation imaginary, on whose potential blameworthiness rests the edifice of the environmentalist dispensation itself.

Lastly, as a way into the next chapter, the “tourist gaze” appears within this terrain of nativist politics to be malleable position, to which different demands can be attributed. For

foresters unable to reconcile the promotion of the non-native cedar within a biodiversity conservation landscape, the tourist gaze and its desire for exotic, accessible nature becomes a repository for externalizing the contradiction. On the other hand, in the sal forests, as a discerning gaze, with limited spending power, it is also the reason that the Nepali community performs the risk-internalizing maneuvers to make themselves a competitive destination. The risk of invoking a contentious history that can make them appear to be nature-endangering natives is necessitated by the specific political scenario of a recognition-deficit, and the general economic scenario where making themselves attractive for investment is seen as the onus of neoliberal subjects. Against a notion of aesthetic consumption of nature as a relatively unhindered avenue for profit generation, freed of material limits to production, this chapter has shed light on the limits to such profit and value-generation, to overcome which nature-culture has to position itself competitively. The chapter also highlights the unease felt by tourists, as precipitators of this competition, wherein they are confronted with the disjuncture of their own position as liberal, recognition-granting citizens, who want marginalized communities to thrive, and as capitalist consumers who make aesthetic value judgments about cultures as products that then have repercussions for livelihoods. The growing significance of the tourist gaze in the ethnopolitics of the frontier, and the ambivalence about its liberal and/or capitalist tendencies is taken up more extensively in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

“THERE IS A FAIR AT EVERY CORNER IN SIKKIM!”:

ETHNOPOLITICS, “ETHNOPRENEURIALISM” AND THE TOURIST GAZE

INTRODUCTION

In 2014, the Lonely Planet Travel Guide waxed eloquent about Sikkim for its sustainable community-based tourism, drive towards organic agriculture, and other “eco-friendly policies [that] have lent new vigor to the virginal Himalayan wilderness that drapes the region’s mountains”. The guide adjudicated Sikkim as the very best destination to visit that year, spiking its popularity within a certain global travelling community. This purported international recognition was taken by the regional government as a validation of its efforts, over the last decade, to position itself as a green tourism hub. As a remote, hilly and forested region, with few other avenues of economic development, the state has posited tourism income for its citizens as a way to fulfill its development obligations. The aim, as evident from various tourist brochures and websites, is to capitalize on the state’s natural attractions as a biodiversity hotspot, with “4,500 species of flowering plants, 550 species of birds, and so on”, to be enjoyed amidst snow-capped mountain peaks and verdant valleys that have been made accessible through picturesquely winding mountain roads. Concurrently, representations of culture of ethnic groups such as the Sherpa, Bhutia, Limboo, Tamang, Mangars. which have become especially pronounced amidst a politics of tribalization (Sinha 2006) also lend themselves well to touristic desires for easily legible “authentic” otherness. The State Tourism Department thus has various schemes for tourism promotion, including building homestays to be owned and run by low-income families in

a substantial number of Sikkim's 451 villages¹. Such schemes run separate from the SBFP-JICA project's ecotourism initiative run by the Forest Department, as previously described.

To attract tourists, both the Forest and Tourism departments rely heavily the promotion of tourism festivals, as a go-to (and sometimes only) marketing strategy. One of the first things one would find on the state Tourism Department website is a drop-down menu for the various festivals – classified by the department as religious and/or touristic. For 2017, a downloadable calendar listed thirty-three festivals. On one hand, existing village fairs that occur on religious occasions such as the Tibetan New Year or the Hindu Ram Navami are being reoriented and repackaged as tourism festivals. On the other hand, non-religious festivals are being added each year to promote new destinations, new activities², new off-peak travel periods³.

The central problem that this chapter explores is that despite the ubiquity of the fairs as potential tourism “products”, for both functionaries of the state and lay citizens, the fairs are also the source of deep-seated ambivalences in terms of their suitability as representations of Sikkim as a destination or brand⁴. On a nippy March morning in 2015, representatives of Sikkim's various hotel associations, tourist vehicle associations and travel agent's associations gathered for a consultation, as “stakeholders” to give their inputs on the drafting of a “green” tourism policy for the state. They met in a conference room of the Tourism Department – a relatively new, multi-story glass-façade building that would catch the eye of anyone taking the sole

¹ The 13th Finance Commission sanctioned the construction of 728 new homestays under the aegis of the Tourism Department, to be completed by 2014. The scheme also included “capacity-building training”, and “exposure trips” for the beneficiaries of the homestays (Government of Sikkim 2013-14).

² For example, from 2012, Sikkim started organizing an annual paragliding festival.

³ The Tourism Department organizes a “Winter Carnival” in the capital in Gangtok, to help boost the otherwise falling hotel occupancy in December, when tourists keep away, deterred by the frigid weather.

⁴ Comaroff and Comaroff (2009,125) have highlighted the significance of tourism branding for contemporary nation states, where having a tourism website has become a significant mode of sovereign political self-presentation. While claiming that “the modernist nation might always have been a brand- under-construction”, they argue that a successfully branded national identity is a matter of “commercial engagement with the tourist, as if it were in the interaction between here and elsewhere that [a nation] recognizes itself and fixes its place in the world (123).

highway into Gangtok. About twenty people sat around the large conference table, the projector-screen on one end and a window with a vista of the Rumtek valley on the other. Visions, roadblocks, solutions began piling onto the idea-board as the meeting progressed, steered by two NGO leaders commissioned to draft the policy and by the Additional Secretary of the department. In some time, a youngish travel agent addressed the group: “earlier [in December 2014], we had the Winter Carnival. It was good I suppose. We do not as such have many calendar festivals. [In them] there aren’t that many tourists...you see one or two at most. Mostly, it is our own people, who are hanging around. They sit around eating and enjoying (*Khaera bascha, maja-bhaja pauncha*) ...cook beef, barbeque meat...so much smoke”. Following voices of assent and collective nodding, he continued, “waste of time and energy.... everything I suppose”. The fact that people become “engaged”, and it looks like a picnic (*picnic kheleko jasto bhayo*) agitated him. Since in Nepali *picnic* is *played*, it further connoted the self-indulgent nature of the activity being disparaged. He then entreated the policy-makers, that this “idea”, this “culture” has to go (*niskinu parcha*). Another travel agent seconded the sentiment. “In Sikkim at every corner there is a *mela* (fair)”, he lamented. He narrated the exasperation of West Sikkim’s Member of the Legislative Assembly, invited to be the chief guest at two such events scheduled for the same day. When the MLA communicated his displeasure to the chairman of the Sikkim Tourism Development Commission, the meek response he received was, “*ho ni* (an emphatic yes), they keep putting up *melas* everywhere...what to do”. As this anecdote was recounted, the room joined in a collective nodding and conspiratorially shared laughter. The solution posited by the people debating in the room that day, and by various other interlocutors during my fieldwork was the same: one or more consolidated “tourism festivals” that would surmount whatever it is about the *mela* that made it an unacceptable icon of Sikkim’s tourism output.

This chapter explores this bind in which Sikkim's tourism promotion seems to be caught. Why does the promotion of tourism engender almost uncontested economic, political and affective investment, while the manifestations or fruitions of such tourism enterprise are most often characterized as lacking, deficient, embarrassing, or a perversion of the ideal? The aim is to explain both the frontier citizen's unbridled faith in the promise of tourism – a promise I show that is as much political and cultural as it is economic, and their disappointments and anxieties about most forms of existing and emergent tourism outputs that seek to realize this promise. This conundrum is analyzed here centrally through the tourism events that unfolded between Fall 2015 and Winter 2016 in Okhrey, a Sherpa-majority village lying adjacent to the Barsey Rhododendron sanctuary in West Sikkim. Sherpas, as Buddhists, are technically considered part of the B-L⁵ indigenous group. However, they see themselves as a separate ethnic community with distinct cultural and religious practices, for which they have been seeking recognition in recent years. To showcase Okhrey's Sherpa cultural diversity and its temperate and sub-alpine biodiversity⁶, the SBFP organized an ecotourism festival in the village – the second one within the project. Despite much pomp and energy expended by the villagers and the department, the festival ended in more-or-less encompassing failure, marked among other things by a lack of tourists. The nadir of the event was a prolonged shouting match between village representatives and forestry officials at the end of two days, that stopped just short of a fist-fight. Yet, in about three months' time there was another "Tourism-cum-Losar Festival" organized in the village, although this time without the SBFP. The chapter also draws on ethnographic observations of the SBFP's first ecotourism festival, organized in Spring 2015, in the predominantly Nepali village

⁵ Bhutia-Lepcha group. The history of this category is explained in chapter 1.

⁶ Ghose et al. (2014,42) list the forest types of the sanctuary as "east Himalayan wet temperate forest, east Himalayan moist temperate forest, east Himalayan dry temperate coniferous forest, east Himalayan subalpine birch *Betula*/fir *Abies* forest, birch–rhododendron *Rhododendron* scrub forest, deciduous alpine scrub and alpine pastures"

of Pangthang, lying on the fringes of the Fambanglo Wildlife Sanctuary, less than an hour's drive from the state capital. And it is informed by the various other *melas* that I saw, heard of or read about as a temporary resident of the state.

The chapter argues that the conflict of the first festival is indicative of the anxieties of the development state regarding tourism development in hills in general and neoliberal development more broadly. Analyzing the rise and fall of the ecotourism festival, I propose, provides a window into contentious state-market-society relations engendered by ecotourism as a form of marketizing conservation and development. Meanwhile, the ostensibly (at least economically) impractical commitment to tourism in the second festival, I argue, is indicative of the frontier's political-affective investment in tourism as a site of ethnopolitics and of politics of recognition, that transcends economic concerns. The analytical framework of neoliberalization of nature-culture, as is predominantly adopted in Tourism Studies, while shedding light on important impacts of tourism, may overlook these other cultural-political dimensions of the phenomenon.

The conundrum of high affective, material investment in tourism coupled with anxieties about most of its manifestations seem to pivot around the question of whether the tourism event will be read as a *mela* – a parochial village fair, or as a new-and-improved tourism festival. What is it about the cultural conduct and representation entailed in the *mela* that is of such discomfort to those seeking to marketize Sikkim's nature-culture for the consumption of the national and potentially some international visitors? Most of my Sikkimese interlocutors routinely expressed pride in the hill folk being “simple people”, not “caught up” in the capitalist and alienating regimentation of time. Why then does the indolence of the *mela* as representative of this non-capitalist sociality – where the frontier populations “eat, drink and make merry” as is often reported – lead to desires for transforming this way of being and its expression? What I seek to

show through the chapter is that understanding this tension about the *mela* and festival reveals central characteristics of the contemporary politics of development, politics of recognition and the politics of sovereignty on the frontier. The claim here is not only that tourism indexes ethnopolitics in the region and should therefore be treated more seriously in anthropological studies, but also and more centrally, that tourism is the locus of ethnopolitics.

These ethnographic observations are in conversation with two prominent modes of theorizing the politics of tourism. On one hand, the conceptualization of the “tourist gaze”, this ethnography shows, in focusing almost exclusively on the panopticism of the gaze of the neoliberal tourist, fails to situate it within geographically and historically contingent regimes of recognition. The chapter therefore discusses not so much the exercising of the gaze by the tourist, but its mobilization by state functionaries, elite tourism entrepreneurs and tourism practicing communities. The tourist, I argue, is more spectral and phantasmic than their theorization as an encompassing neoliberal imposition suggests. The deficiency of such theories, I show, is that they bury the political stakes of host communities within a story of metropolitan desires for which the hosts are merely the canvas. On the opposite end, theorizations have begun talking about the promise of tourism as a route of economic sovereignty and pluri-national recognition, where communities promoting tourism can look beyond the state for validation of their identities⁷. While this analysis helps explain some of the aspirational investment in tourism, it does not give enough attention to the many failed promises of tourism, and the anxieties about

⁷ Pluri-culturalism and pluri-nationalism, Comaroff and Comaroff (2009) argue, entails a refusal from ethnic minorities to accept the absolute authority of the nation-state in matters of cultural and traditional practices. The “polite appreciation on the part of the majority of the population for the “colorful” customs, costumes, and cuisine of one or another compliant minority in its midst” (52), which liberal multiculturalism stands for is seen as insufficient. Therefore, ethnic groups, the Comaroffs highlight, have sought in recent years to claim equality vis-à-vis the nations within which they are encompassed – in peaceful and sometimes violent ways. The Comaroffs see tourism promoted by ethnic groups as one such form of going above the state, where such groups can seek recognition from international tourists instead.

the transformation of political landscapes that such new tourism prospects engender. In discussing the tourism trajectory of Okhrey the aim is to attend to the sources of these anxieties and the costs of these failures for the frontier's tourism practicing subject.

BINDS OF ETHNOPRENEURIALISM

One way of reading the trend of proliferating tourism festivals in Sikkim might be to see it as another piece in the long transformation towards the neoliberalization of development and conservation. With Akhil Gupta (2012) we can see it as a shift in the paradigm of development from entitlement of development subjects through welfare schemes to empowerment of subjects (Sharma 2008) enabling them to generate their own revenue by selling their culture as tourism products. Comaroff and Comaroff (2009) characterize this global trend as “ethnopreneurialism”, wherein ethnic cultures become “ethno-commodities” through tourism (or the sale of indigenous knowledge). A large body of literature sees such ethnopreneurialism as a form of commodification that is alienating (Besky 2013) for the participating communities, leading to loss of authenticity of culture in its framing for the tourist as the neoliberal consumer-king (Duffy 2002; West 2006; West and Carrier 2004); or less damningly as a staging of authenticity for tourists who wield the power in the interaction (Boorstin 1971; Bruner 2005; MacCannell 2018). The Comaroffs (2009) see the corporatization of ethnic identity as a mode of consolidating economic sovereignty by indigenous groups in ways that allows them to bypass the nation-state and stake claims to forms of pluri-nationalism (52-53) by achieving economic presence in the global arena. Moreover, they argue that the commodification process dialectically acts on identity formation, making “thin” culture “thick”⁸. “Commercialization of identity”, as

⁸ Broadly, they define the “substantive...ensemble of lived signs and practices” of an ethnic groups as thick culture; and “ethnicity-as-political identity...as a tactical claim to entitlement, and as a means of mobilization for instrumental ends” as thin culture. I will return to this somewhat problematic distinction later in the chapter.

they quote a Tswana leader is “a mode of reflection, of self-construction, of producing and feeling Tswana-ness”. In the words of another Xhosa leader, “Ethnicity Inc”, is a way to empower ethnic groups, through the infusion of capital, beyond the long-drawn-out political struggle for constitutional recognition (7). The result, they argue is that in contemporary “ethno-politics”, cultural identity is as much a product to be sold to consumers through self-fashioning as it is a shared essence, and as embedded in the neoliberal political-economy as it is in a more conventionally circumscribed political sphere (45).

What happens to this framework of bypassing the state in matters of recognition and sovereignty through ethnopreneurialism when the state is the agent pushing for ethnopreneurialism of its subjects? Between a reading of ethnopreneurialism as near-complete powerlessness within a neoliberal political economy, as epitomized in many deployments of the concept of the “tourist gaze” (Urry 1990), and the reading of ethnopreneurialism as a recovery of political sovereignty vis-à-vis the historically disempowering state through the route of economic sovereignty⁹ (Cattelino 2008), what does an ethnography of various state-promoted ethno-commoditizations tell us about the power dynamics between neoliberal capital, marginal ethnic communities and the development state? In agreeing with Comaroff and Comaroff that ethnopreneurialism is emerging as a significant political horizon, this chapter also draws attention to the anxieties it produces within existing dispensations, the negotiations such anxieties beget and the toll such negotiations take on different tourism practitioners – especially those charged with the performance of “thick culture” in tourist settings.

⁹ Writing about the rise of tribal gaming i.e. casinos in the USA, Cattelino (2009) highlights how indigenous communities use the fungible character of money from tourism earnings to consolidate their distinctive identity and autonomy, for example by building a museum to preserve their heritage. Such uses of casino dividends challenge the common association of infusion of money into tribal cultures as some form of corruption that will erode tribal cultures, which to begin with is a problematic liberal cunning that demands indigenous purity and alterity.

My finding here is that the anxieties about tourism fairs and the conflicts they engender are tied to three distinct positions within/about the tourism enterprise. In promoting ecotourism as a market-based conservation and development option, the state has to concede some of its authority to conduct conduct in its geographical jurisdiction to the capitalistic tourist gaze. This presents an anxiety about retaining authority both among the popularly-elected and the bureaucratic wings of the development state. The vaguely articulated concern is that if the development state has to defer to the tourist, the consumer-king, as the true dispenser of development-qua-income, how then should it retain its position as the hegemonic authority that compels actions and subjectivities? While “Ethnicity Inc.” presents a scenario of new-found economic sovereignty of ethnic groups presenting a challenge to state sovereignty (Cattelino 2008; Comaroff and Comaroff 2009), it is also pertinent to think about the scenarios in between – where all promises of capitalist windfalls through commodified ethnicity are not fully realized, multiculturalism is not superseded by “pluriculturalism” oriented to horizons above the nation-state, and the entrenched development state doesn’t quite sportingly let the consumer-king derive authority from his/her spending power.

While for state functionaries ethnopreneurialism presents itself as both a new developmental rhetoric and a potential cause of its diminishing power, in the popular imagination ethno-commoditization is a source of prospective positive recognition from the nation. Implicit in the diatribe against the *mela*, as I elaborate below, are concerns about appropriate representations of Sikkim’s marginalized, under-recognized nature-culture to the visiting national tourist. While this point is made throughout the dissertation, the specific concern here is about the ideals of ethnopreneurialism it engenders, how these ideals differ between state functionaries, elite tourism-promoters as opinion-makers of the state, and tourism-practicing

villagers such as those from Okhrey who are tasked with actualizing these ideals in their tourism interactions. As the chapter details the execution of the two ecotourism festivals in Okhrey, it sheds light on how the villagers are caught between these competing stakes in the practice and value of ethnopreneurialism.

This bind, I argue, is best understood as an impasse of conflicting demands made of the community *hosts* – to appease and address their performance to the political *patrons* who influence every day, material village life, or to the valorized capitalist *guests* who hold the promise of income-for-services-rendered. What are the fallouts if hosts fail to mediate this patron-guest impasse? What are the strategies deployed towards a mediation? What conclusions can we draw about an emergent tourism-as-ethnopolitics from this specific contestation, so as to contribute both to the anthropology of tourism and to the political anthropology of South Asia? To explain this bind of ethnopreneurialism we first need to understand the significance of the tourist gaze in Sikkim’s self-perception and self-presentation. This in turn requires us to move beyond the usual tourist-centric exposition of the term, to think of the aspirations of legibility that it engenders.

TOURIST GAZE REVISITED

The mobilization of the concept of the tourist gaze is most closely linked to Urry’s (1990) seminal book on this topic and its subsequent editions (Urry and Larsen 2011). In this work and those following in its footsteps, the tourist gaze is presented as an overwhelmingly one-sided, essentializing imposition of power. Urry and Larsen (2011,2), drawing on Foucault and Berger, expound on the “scopic regime” of tourism whereby spaces, people and the dynamics thereof are subject to the disciplining, panoptical gaze of the tourism enterprise. Power-knowledge relations in tourism are played out at the intersection of spectacle and surveillance (173). Urry’s concern is

that tourists flock to eminently photographable places as popularized through existing media, undertaking tours only to replicate those photographs and insert themselves in those vistas. This is read as a taming of the object of the gaze, be it a landscape or an “exotic” culture (169). Inasmuch as the tourist gaze has an “ability to naturalise, to make innocent its cultural messages and connotations” (ibid), it dooms the gazed upon into conformation of the partial, stereotypical, decontextualized rendering.

Cohen’s (1972,166) critique of mass tourism was that “often the modern tourist is not so much abandoning his accustomed environment for a new one as he is being transposed to a foreign soil in an ‘environmental bubble’ of his native culture”. In Urry’s tourist gaze, the bubble is that of popularized touristic images that are experienced by tourists, rather than the destination itself. In both readings, the moral indictment comes from an expectation of travel as transformative for the traveler through contact with “other” nature-cultures, placing value also on the low impact of the former on the latter. The concern then is that while guests don’t quite have a transformative experience, being instead “amateur semioticians” looking for “a thatched cottage with roses round the door [to] represents ‘ye olde England’”; hosts become essentialized and fixed by the power of these images. “Instantaneous images overpower reality, and ‘reality’ becomes touristic, ready for visual consumption” (Urry and Larsen 2011,178).

Even as such a privileging of the effect of power may be seen as following the Foucauldian approach that Urry draws on, the interactional quality of a tourism enterprise is considerably short-changed in this theory. There is no room in this framework of a chance encounter, of a seeing into the “backstage” of a tourism encounter, if we were to use MacCannell’s (1973) repurposing of Goffman’s social interactional perspective. Moreover, like many other writings on tourism (Adams 1996; West and Carrier 2004; West 2005), the inquiry

itself offers up somewhat of a bubble, between hosts and guests, working in reciprocity, in circumstances determined at a macro-level, often through catch-all descriptors such as neoliberalism. What I hope to show in this chapter is the concurrent significance of national ideologies of multicultural recognition and local cultural political stakes through which the “tourist gaze” derives its power.

My argument against this particular conceptualization of the tourist gaze as an all-encompassing, singular scopic regime questions the underlying assumption of a perfectly unidirectional or linear model of power of the subjectness of the observer and the objectness of the observed. The looking by one and the being looked at by another is taken as a perfectly-matched process with a perfect translation of the seeing and its effect on those seen. It could be argued that this formulation of the gaze is traceable to Sartre (1956) for whom to be seen is to be made an object of the seeing subject. To be gazed upon therefore is to be made unfree. Foucault’s genealogical history of the rise of transparency as an epistemic shift heralding a new mode of normalization of power (1973), epitomized in the model of the panopticon (1977) is not then perhaps very far from Sartre. In highlighting the significance of the camera as a tool for “colonizing Egypt”, Mitchell (1991b) writes, “the photographer, invisible beneath his black cloth as he eyed the world through his camera’s gaze...typified the kind of gaze desired by the European in the Middle East, whether as tourist, writer, or indeed...as colonial power” (24). This line of inquiry continues in contemporary works critiquing the rendering visible or, more encompassingly, “rendering legible” of various objects of the gaze, be they tourism hosts or targets of the development state (Li 2007; Scott 1998).

Whether the tourist, mirroring the colonizers of Egypt, seek to “possess the same invisible gaze, the same ability to see without being seen” (Mitchell 1991b, 24) – for tourism

among other things has been criticized as a form of neocolonialism (Crick 1989; Kincaid 2000; Nash 1989) – in understanding the effect of the tourist gaze it is germane to remember Lacan's (1981,103) observation that "you never look at me from the place at which I see you". The contestations over the expressions of tourism output in Sikkim reveal that the power of the tourist gaze derives not from the actual eye of the beholder, as it were, but from the imputed tourist gaze which may or may not correspond with the circumscribed complex of infrastructure and imagery that the actual and often limited tourist presence in Sikkim corresponds to. An inquiry into how the imputed tourist gaze does still strive towards a conduct of conduct, towards producing ideal cultural subjectivities in Sikkim can perhaps still be aligned with a Foucauldian study of the effects of panopticism. However, the tourist gaze mobilized on the margins of the nation-state by various tourist interlocutors in varied circumstances for various ends, points to a certain fetishistic, phantasmic quality of the gaze. An understanding of the disjunctures and negotiations that it gives rise to should not be shortchanged for an exclusive focus on the disciplining effect of a scopic regime.

While Urry's (1990) emphasis on a unified tourist gaze has been variously critiqued, most of the analyses nonetheless do not break from the centering of the tourist as the only important meaning-making actor in the encounter. For example, Gillespie (2006) theorizes a "reverse gaze", where the photographed subject looking back makes photographing tourists uncomfortable about the essentializing nature of their gaze. He argues that this reversed gaze emanates not from the viewed subjects, but the tourists own insecurities about their behavior which they then attribute to the other. Even so, we don't get much beyond a tourist-centric view of the phenomenon. Bruner (2005, 99) similarly argues that "the tourist gaze does not have the power of Foucault's panopticon, for it is not all-seeing and all-enveloping". Yet his alternative, of

a “questioning gaze” (95), remains moored still in the power of the tourist, in which the gazed-upon tourism entrepreneurs possess the capacity to opt out of the interaction, but not to transform the gaze itself (70).¹⁰

A similar analytical limit occurs in Adams’ ethnographic interrogation of the Sherpa tourism enterprise in Nepal. For her the tourist gaze is a mimetic activity, wherein the Sherpa reflects what the “Western Other seems to want and desire in the form of cultural differences between Westerners and Sherpas” (75), and in this mirroring westerners find more real versions of themselves through the encounter with the other. Adams’ move towards a theory of the tourist gaze as a mimetic interplay is prompted by her laudable stand against perpetuating a politics of authenticity that would locate genuine Sherpa-ness somewhere beyond the tourist gaze. The analytical quest to look beyond tourism for some genuine Sherpa socio-political life, she argues, remains problematic because it nonetheless retains the power of the western onlooker or anthropologist in certifying the space or scope of authenticity/inauthenticity. While those so deemed authentic are validated only through an outsider’s power-wielding gaze, those deemed inauthentic then stand to lose their standing in the tourism economy. While commendable in its motivation, in denying the possibility of anything beyond the mutual mirroring between the western tourist and their exotic other, she seems to reify the power of the western tourist in this mountain destination, even as she sets out ostensibly to do the opposite. In not exploring other domains of Sherpa politics that influence their tourism practice, the western gaze appears monolithic and absolute, even as Adams’ work does get some of the opaque ways in which the gaze operates. Sherpa identities as mimetic end up looking like Sherpa identities as derivative. Arguing against this theorization of the mimetic Sherpa identity, Ortner (1999,58)

¹⁰ He finds Urry’s formulation “too empiricist, too monolithic, too lacking in agency, and too visual to encompass [the] varied tourist reactions”. The tourist gaze he claims is “variable, [with] seepages and doubts” (99).

posits that “sahib reconstruction of the Sherpa and something like Sherpa self-fashioning take place simultaneously, in a complex and unpredictable dialectic.”¹¹

My aim in this chapter is similarly to theorize the power of the tourist gaze not as a monolithic scopic regime, but rather as one gaze that intervenes in existent regimes of recognition. The effect it then produces, I argue, need to be critiqued as much for the anxieties of misrecognition it engenders, as for the its essentialization of people and places. More so because the effect of the tourist gaze has as much to do with the imputed nature of the gaze, onto which are projected desires of legibility based on local political-cultural concerns, as it does with desires of the discontented, alienated, modern, predominantly western middle-classes seeking meaning in “simple”, “exotic” otherness of far-out touristic destinations (Adams 1996; Comaroff and Comaroff 2009,20; Duffy 2002; Fletcher 2014). To emphasize this aspect is also to center the subjectivity of being seen, that seems to be often shortchanged in the concept of the tourist gaze. Here I draw on Hansen’s work (2012) on the operation of the gaze in everyday life of disadvantaged ethnic Indians in post-apartheid South Africa. Hansen cites Merleau-Ponty who argued that “as soon as I see it is necessary that the vision be doubled with a complimentary vision or with another vision: myself seen from without, such as another world would see me, installed in the midst of the visible, occupied in considering it from a certain spot” (12). The gaze here has a phantasmic quality because “consciousness emerges from the assumption of a preexisting gaze that comes from all sides, a strange, unfathomable force that can never be entirely reduced to the specific social or cultural context in question and can never be reduced to sets of eyes that can be known”. Inasmuch as “the eye of any onlooker is also always the gaze of the category” (14), Hansen highlights the anxieties and misrecognitions that occur when “a new

¹¹ She further writes that “[Adams] vastly overprivileged the effect of the sahib [i.e. the western master] perspective and vastly underestimates the reality of a Sherpa world that bends sahib influence to Sherpa purposes” (ibid).

and differentiated gaze” (12) gives rise to unfamiliarity and unintelligibility, especially in scenarios of changing regimes of recognition.

Through the following ethnography I am mainly making two claims about the operation and implications of the tourist gaze. Firstly, the tourist gaze operates not in a generalized scenario of global power of guests acting on marginalized hosts, but enters a field with existent regimes of recognition, which have their own agendas and power relations. Therefore, in discussing the anxieties about the mela, I highlight how the tourist gaze as an idealization of a monetized host-guest relation rubs against the scopic regime of the development state that operates through relations of patronage. Given that the state promotes tourism in this scenario, the anxiety is about whether the gaze of the capitalist guest will supersede that of the political patron. The anxiety about the mela is also a function of whether the gaze of the capitalist guest is one of a consumer seeking an out-of-the-ordinary indolent experience or that of the bourgeois middle class caste-society that while committed to liberal multiculturalism also has the power to judge the same indolence as “backwardness” of the culture of marginal frontier societies.

Secondly, the argument here is that the effect that the tourist gaze produces is not so much of disciplined subjectivities responding to the panoptical power of one particular mode of seeing, but rather anxious conduct that imputes various divergent demands, and varying degrees of power to the tourist gaze. Thus, while tourism practitioners worry about the split quality of the tourist gaze as that of capital and of the nation, the development state worries about the tourist gaze supplanting its authority. Moreover, given that often barely any tourists are present in the government-initiated tourism initiatives, the significance of the category of the tourist gaze rarely corresponds to the actual tourists wielding its power. In emphasizing the imputed nature of the gaze, my aim is to balance the focus on the disciplining power of the tourist gaze with an

attention to the anxieties it produces. Below I elaborate on this anxiety-inducing opacity of the tourist gaze, as its main feature and effect, by unpacking the cogitations over and reactions to the *melas*. In doing so I also highlight the ambivalence of the categories of host, guest, patron and hospitality, whose significance in the tourism idiom clashes with the already unstable meanings and powers they carry in the political idiom of the frontier.

ANATOMY OF A *MELA*

To understand why the anxieties about tourism as a new economy of recognition congeal around the *mela*, let us briefly outline the role of a typical *mela* in the public culture of Sikkim. Let us start with the Tourism Department website's description of the Lepcha New Year, Losoong/Namsoong, [that] "marks the end of the harvest season [in] the tenth month of the Tibetan Year. Religious masked dances...symbolize the exorcizing of the evil spirits and welcoming of the good spirits for the new year." Shifting gear towards the tourist gaze, the website states that "Losoong has now become an important festival where visitors from all over the world can get to see local sporting events like archery, climbing of greased pole. [And enjoy] local cuisine, handicrafts, floriculture and cultural programmes". The most famous Namsoong *mela* is organized in Dzongu, the Lepcha reserved territory in North Sikkim. A newspaper report about the festivities in 2014 starts with detailing the speech of the chief guest, the speaker of the Legislative Assembly. The MLA used the occasion to highlight the government's role in "the preservation and promotion of different traditions and cultures in the state". He warned against support for the opposition party, and promised to forward to the CM the *mela* organizing committee's development demands for the area. The article ends by veering away from the political to the cultural aspect of the *mela*, listing how "guests attended a puja being performed by a Lepcha Boongthing (shaman) at a traditional Lepcha house. [And] the celebration also

included games, colourful cultural programmes, Meena bazaar, Musical Nites, literary programmes and traditional food stalls” (*Sikkim Now!* 2014).

This description represents well the anatomy of most well-known *melas* in the state. The *Maghey Mela* held in South Sikkim, for example, similarly marks *Makar Sankranti* in the Nepali Hindu calendar. It too draws substantial crowds to the cultural events and significant political attention, including visits by the state’s governor and Chief Minister (*Sikkim Now* 2014). In these events, usually a mela ground is selected and make-shift bamboo stalls set up. Most of them sell “traditional” food and drinks, often under the banner of a particular community – Rai food-stall, Newari Food-stall, Bhutia food stall etc. A Nepali stall offers *sel-roti* (a rice-flour based doughnut like dessert), a Bhutia stall stocks *khapse* (deep fried biscuits) and so on. Freshly barbequed meats and momos are sold as pan-ethnic delicacies in most stalls. “Local drinks” including *tongba* (millet beer), home-made wine, *bhati-jhad* i.e. rice-liquor, and other cheap non-local alcohol are sold in the food stalls and also separately. Some handicraft items are usually available for purchase, often with booths put up by the women’s self-help groups in the surrounding areas. Here one will find woolens, bamboo products and, in keeping with the state’s various green initiatives, handicrafts made from recycled products. Groups of teenage boys and girls, and families with young children can be seen partaking in the festivities, eating, drinking, playing *tambola* and other gambling-based games that draw crowds in large numbers. As I learnt while accompanying my interlocutors to the “Red Panda Winter Carnival” organized by the Tourism Department in Gangtok, small fortunes can be won or lost in a day at the fair.

While the winter carnival occurred in the central shopping boulevard in Gangtok, in *melas* occurring outside the city, a large open ground is picked, of which a portion is marked off for cultural performances. The VIPs are seated in the front few rows with cushioned sofas, and

the general crowd gets a pick of plastic chairs, wooden benches or the strength of their own feet. Mornings are usually filled with school children and amateurs performing traditional dances (with the distinct costumes marking off the various communities), interspersed by political speeches. Evenings are earmarked for paid performers. Based on the budget, this can range from well-known bands from Nepal and the Indian Himalayan region, to local singers and dancers who became famous in the state after entering various televised national talent-hunts. These festivals, “proliferating” as some critics like to say, offer a source of mass entertainment to the state’s population and are usually well-attended. A carnivalesque atmosphere of “merry-making” as these critics term it, pervades the atmosphere, as festivities continue into the night.



FIGURE 3.1: *News-blog depicting the Jorethang mela of 2013, accompanied by the caption “Shop, dine, enjoy and fly at this year’s maghey mela” (Sikkim now! 2013a).*

So, what is it about this site of ethno-commodification that makes it both the center of Sikkim’s touristic self-presentation and the object of disappointment or dissatisfaction with the direction of tourism enterprise? What are the competing understandings of ideal

ethnopreneurialism at work here? And what larger anxieties about regional and state sovereignty do these contestations signal? Let us turn for answers to the tourism festivals in Okhrey.

THE RISE OF FALL OF AN ETHNOPRENEURIALISM PROJECT

The village of Okhrey, on the fringes of the Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary, has 373 households as per the 2011 census, scattered in little hamlets at an altitude range of 1900 to 2200 meters. In a multi-ethnic state, this region is known for its concentration of the Sherpa ethnic community. One of my interlocutors pegged it as the preference of “his people” for high altitude dwelling – a statement meant to invoke an association with Mount Everest and mountaineering as the globally recognized profession of the ethnic group. When the rhododendrons bloom in spring, the entire hillside is carpeted in hues of red and pink, drawing hordes of local and national tourists. For the rest of the year, the potato and cabbage-farming villagers are usually left to themselves, especially in the bitterly cold winter. Given this natural and cultural diversity, in 2015 the Forest Department (FD) selected Okhrey to be the second of its ten ecotourism destinations to be promoted under the Sikkim Biodiversity and Forest Management Project.



FIGURE 3.2: The village hamlet near the festival staging ground (left); A consultation meeting between the SBFP personnel and villagers, held at the Sherpa Cultural Bhavan (right).

The FD sought to cultivate a sense of ethnopreneurialism in the village by repeatedly holding consultations with “stakeholders”. The purpose of these consultations was to select various aspects of the culture and nature of Okhrey to be showcased as tourism “products”, during the two day “carnival”, which was to be held during the Hindu festival of Dussehra, to capitalize on tourist inflow in the state. While there were a handful of operational lodges in the village run by a few influential families, the FD ecotourism managers encouraged more families to prepare their extra rooms to receive commercial guests. They specially targeted families for whom the Tourism Department had built homestays, using the thirteenth finance commission funding. Lacking tourism training, business prowess and network, most such homestays were still non-operational. An unofficial grading chart of all the potential homestays, prepared by one of the ecotourism managers inadvertently prompted a frenzy of upgrades. Villagers added various amenities to their homes to avoid being at the bottom of the tourism ladder. As we sat dissecting the festival after the event, a villager described this period as one of the arrivals of “Dunlop after Dunlop”: mattresses strapped to the hood of every other shared taxi driving into the village from the nearest town about 20 kms. downhill. Unlike the cotton-stuffed mattresses used in the village, foam mattresses, as luxury items, are called Dunlops, after the brand. They are not available in Okhrey. Procuring them from the town requires substantial expenditure.

Planning and implementation of the festival proceeded with typical bureaucratic delays. Grand plans for publicity of the event at the national level fizzled into one lone standee or publicity poster cutout at the nearest airport at the foothills of the state, a few weeks before the event. In the state capital of Gangtok however, a number of hoardings, radio ads and pamphlets to local hotels announced the festival, centering the role of the FD as much as it drew attention to the event itself.

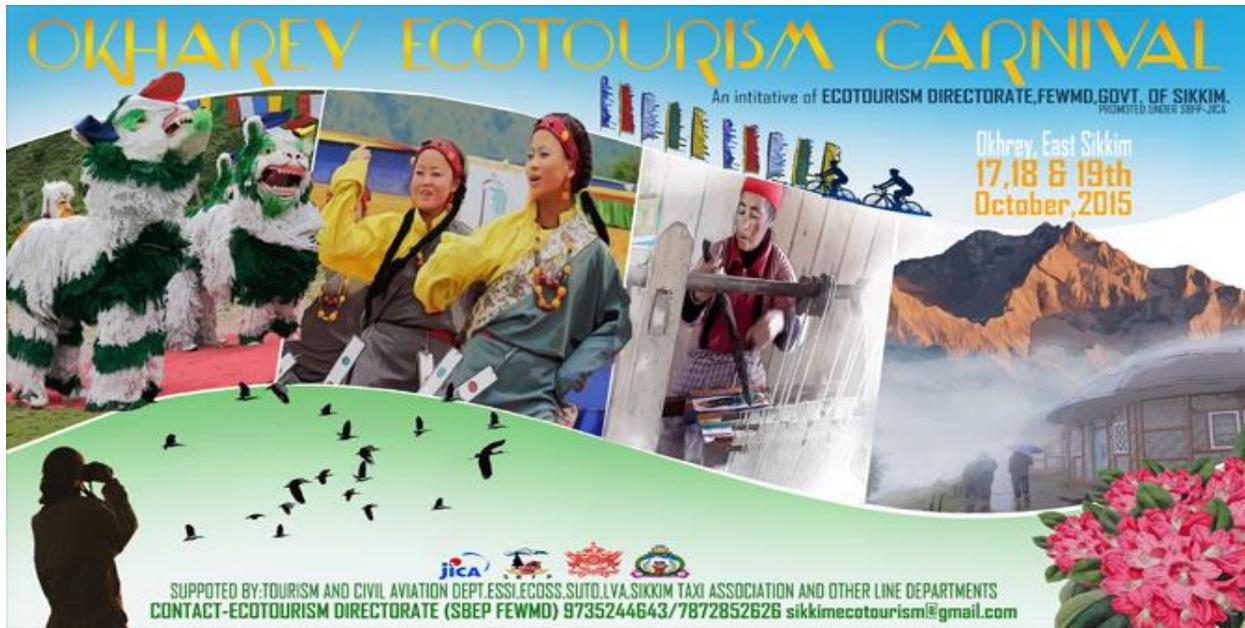


FIGURE 3.3: Poster for the Okhrey Ecotourism festival¹².

Source: <http://www.sikenvis.nic.in/ViewEvents.aspx?Id=4463&Year=2015>

If one attended the two-day festival in autumn, it differed little in content and structure from the various other village fairs familiar in the local cultural universe. The event was staged in the vicinity of the *gompa* (*dgon pa* in Tibetan transliteration) or village monastery, to index the Buddhist culture of the Sherpas. The crowning glory of this representation of Sherpa culture was the *Singhi* or the snow-lion dance, that was performed repeatedly at the fair ground and outside the monastery to give it more authenticity. Putting this performance together had entailed getting dance trainers from a Tibetan Cultural Institute from the neighboring state. The costumes had been procured all the way from Nepal by a village organizing committee member, making it one of the most significant project expenditures. One flattened compound near a newly built homestay was used as the “cultural ground”, where throughout the two days various song and

¹² I have used Okhrey, as the spelling found in government documents, census reports and common parlance. The Forest Department’s idiosyncratic spelling comes from their reasoning that the village derives its name from “Okhar” or walnut in Nepali, and this etymology should be made apparent in the spelling.

dance performances were staged. Opposite the cultural ground, stalls made of slit-bamboo sheets served traditional barbequed meats and home-brewed liquor. Handicraft stalls sold woolen and yarn bags, shawls and knick-knacks made from recycled waste. Added attractions included a few horses brought over from Darjeeling, on which tourists could take a 15-minute joyride. Local guides were available for birdwatching/trekking on the sanctuary fringes, either on foot or in the jeeps that had been hired for the occasion.

The audience for the two days were mainly people from the surrounding villages who spent the days participating in the revelries that continued well into the night. The festival served as an occasion for a generally sleepy area to partake in a form of public entertainment that is infrequent but not unfamiliar in the cultural landscape. Despite the national holiday season, the lackluster and delayed publicity brought very few guests to this remote location. Accessible only through an arduous half-day drive up a road in utter disrepair, a trip to Okhrey requires prior planning. A dozen or so foreign delegates were in the state to attend an international tourism mart were sent to the festival on an all-expenses-paid exposure tour. A few other Indian tourists found their way to the village, especially on the second day.

Various other problems plagued the festival. The previous FD festival had been held in the sanctuary next to the state FD headquarters, thereby bringing a caravan of state functionaries from the executive and elected branch. Okhrey saw very little of such valued government guests. Homestays that had spent considerable money on installing water-heaters, space heaters and “dunlops”, saw limited occupancy. Complaints about bureaucratic mismanagement of the safari vehicles, inadequate arrangements for thanking/feeding volunteers also surfaced. Yet what broke the camel’s back for the village wasn’t the low flow of guests but the charge of them being bad hosts – made by the Forest Minister, as the chief guest of the event. Long after the FD

bureaucracy that had descended on the village to implement the project had left, and any physical traces of the fair had been wiped away, my interlocutors were still ruing the minister's displeasure. Congregating in the evenings around the kitchen hearth to keep warm as the damp, cold winter crept up, village acquaintances, in charged discussions, framed the failure not in terms of a lack of profit, but rather in terms of this purported "loss of face" for Okhrey.

What exactly transpired, for this loss of face to be the main takeaway of the tourism festival? The Forest Minister as chief guest followed the social script of village fairs, wherein religio-cultural events easily articulate with electoral politics in the postcolonial state. Usually in these ubiquitous fairs, a political dignitary is invited, who in return for the ostensible honor makes a generous gift to the village monastery or other such purportedly nonpolitical institutions. The key to understanding the position of the political chief "guest", to a village that "hosts" the festival lies in understanding the position of the political guest as the "patron" of the fair and, by extension, the patron of the village as his or her political constituency.

Much has been written about the role of patronage in postcolonial countries of South Asia and other "developing" polities. Anthropologists and historians have done much to problematize the framing of patronage as a subversion of the ideal of self-sovereignty as the cornerstone of liberal democracy, which supposedly occurs when patrons exert extra-democratic influence and "buy" votes through cash payments and gifts. Gilmartin (2014) has demonstrated how "legitimate influence" in politics was adjudicated in colonial courts based on moral principles distilled from mid-19th century England, thereby questioning the third world exceptionalism of patronage. Moreover, arguments have been made about ways in which patronage increases representation by giving citizens access to the state through its mediating representatives (Hansen and Verkaaik 2009, Piliavsky 2014, Sadanandan 2012). Such studies also show that

calibration of political interests go beyond a simple money-for-votes logic, since voters don't simply vote for the one who gives them the most money or gifts (Björkman 2014). Patronage thus requires cultivating and maintaining political relationships, that are constantly renegotiated along logics of communitarian solidarity that can be vertical and horizontal (Guha 2008; Wilkinson 2014); of moral judgement about political leadership (Wenner 2015); and of judgements about the efficacy of patrons in mediating access to various kinds of knowledge, networks, and resources that will help citizens navigate their everyday life in the state (Björkman 2014,621). Björkman, following Webb Keane, sees patronage negotiations as “exchange-mediated encounters”, that are “preeminent site for naming relations, identifying actors, and specifying the nature of the relationships in play—many of which cannot be assumed concretely to preexist the scene of encounter” (627, citing Keane 1997,144). As Keane elaborates, “repeated cumulative scenes of encounter and exchange serve to give the alliance and its constituent parties a palpable form” (ibid).

The village fair is such a site of exchange-mediated encounter, where a monetary gift works both to produce and perform enduring relations and alliances (ibid,628). Beyond the public gifting at the event, the patron also makes available his or her political resources in other forms, such as getting tourism experts to help in organizing the festival, procuring bureaucratic clearances and so on. Take for example a letter that the head of a tourism NGO received from the “Office of The Minister” of a certain “Department of the Government of Sikkim” in Winter 2016. Sent by the Personal Secretary to the Minister, it informed of an upcoming Rhododendron Tourism Festival in the minister's constituency, where the ecotourism committee had “decided to orient [the] local tourism enthusiast[s] with basic skills and recent trends in tourism sector in terms of hospitality, community participation, financial management”. The letter ended in the

statement “hence, as directed, you are requested provide one resource person for the orientation programme (sic)”. Even as the word request was included, “as directed” captures the power of the letter. No scope for negotiation was presented to the NGO in sending a resource person to the village for training them in the nitty-gritties of ecotourism. No remuneration was discussed upfront. This illustrates how the patron of the *mela* can not only contribute money, but through his official position direct resources in the state towards his constituency¹³. Despite the NGO’s complaints about the entire program, both before going and after coming back, offending the political machinery by an outright refusal to go was not a viable option.

Such exchange-mediated encounters in turn have to negotiate a fundamental contradiction of patronage: of “[being] enmeshed in a world of perpetual calculation of costs and benefits [while] project[ing] an image of moral transcendence over the strategic connections and calculations on which [the] position relies” (Gilmartin 2014,126). However, following Chris Bayly (1973), one may push back on the aspersion of “projection” of selfless service to the community, and see the patron’s position as maintaining a balance between two positions. One of being a religious or dharmic patron who is concerned with social status within the community and the other of the *vakil* relationship concerned with protecting and furthering material interests. Both these positions and concerns are intertwined, yet not exactly reducible to one or the other.

Having situated what is at stake for the chief guest of a state fair, who has to negotiate it as a form of exchange-mediated political encounter with his constituents, the question that arises is: why was the encounter in Okhrey unproductive in terms of alliance building? For the most

¹³ The resources so directed can often be state funds, drawn from the political party or other such unaccountable (or at least unauditible) sources. I once witnessed a state functionary handing over a check of INR 200,000 to the organizer of a festival in West Sikkim. She complained about a lot of this money going into the organizer’s own pocket. The greater discrepancy lay in the fact that the department in question had no mandate to officially fund either the festival or the area in question.

part the minister's visit followed the script. He came, was introduced on stage, gave a speech, toured the vicinity of the fair and did make a gift to the monastery. Even his speech to the village audience was repeated in most parts from the one he gave at the previous FD festival. In both, he sang paeans to ecotourism as a mode of development and conservation that had only become possible under the visionary leadership of the state's Chief Minister and his sustained attention to green initiatives. And yet, this pontification took a somewhat sharp turn to lament the deficiency of hospitality offered to him. While praising the previous festival in the predominantly-Nepali village of Pangthang, at the other corner of the state, for its simplicity, he remarked, "there [in Pangthang] we were served organic *tongba* (millet beer) from the village. Here we don't have it. And moreover, it is colder here!" The off-hand remark saw shame-faced village organizers scampering around to bring him refreshments. The minister continued building on his own growing sense of irritation. He bellowed in Nepali again, "you know that [actually in ecotourism] you are not supposed to use this microphone [sound system]. That is how [ecotourism] happens...even this plastic [pointing to the plastic tarpaulin laid out on the ground] you should not be using". He continued taking various potshots at the "eco" aspect of the festival, pointing out all the liberties that were being taken that compromised the *naturalness* of the festival. His aim seemed to be to discredit any defense of the lack of hospitality that might take the line of the event being an ecotourism festival as distinct from a usual village fair. The credibility of the festival was lost both as true "eco"-tourism heralding a new conservation and development sensibility, and as a manifestation of extant politico-cultural public event through which reciprocal albeit hierarchical relations of patrons and clients congeal.



FIGURE 3.4: *The Okhrey festival 'culture ground', with wooden benches and a non-descript lectern (left); Tourist guests on a horse ride (right).*

The question is, in so expressing his ire at what he saw as the inadequacy of the festival, why did the Forest Minister torpedo the festival's credibility? A tourism initiative cannot be narrated as a success if the hosts fail to offer good hospitality as one of the basic demands of the enterprise. The festival had been organized by the FD under its flagship development and conservation initiative. Five of the ten years of the project had already come to pass, and this was only the second of the intended eleven destinations that SBFP needed to develop as per the project plan. This delay had already put the FD somewhat on the defensive about its development scoresheet, with murmurs about mismanagement coming from citizens in general and also other government departments. Therefore, if the Okhrey festival was deemed unsuccessful, it also tarnished the record of the FD as project implementors. Why then did the minister take this harsh stand, given the high stakes in the narrative of success of the project in his department?

HOSTS, PATRONS AND SOVEREIGNTY

Disputes over hospitality become significant because at the heart of it lies a dispute over claims to sovereignty (Candea 2012; Derrida 2000; Pitt-Rivers 2012). Drawing on his

ethnography in Jordan, Shryock (2012, S20) writes that “hospitality, karam in local dialect, is not simply a matter of offering tea, cigarettes, and pleasant conversation to guests.... The man who is karim (hospitable, generous, noble) is able to feed others, project an honourable and enviable reputation, and protect guests from harm”. In this ability to stake claims to sovereign control over a space of interaction, hospitality becomes “a quality of persons and households, of tribal and ethnic groups, and even of nation-states” (ibid). Therefore “entire political worlds collapse and rise in strategic encounters between guests and hosts” (S25). “Houses” in Jordan, he argues, have historically been involved in political maneuvering through the ability to offer karam and by “preventing subalterns and rivals from providing [it]” (S27). An anthropological inquiry into the stakes of hospitality as a historically contingent cultural complex is not usually the framework taken up in Tourism Studies, or in South Asian studies of patronage. My aim is to show the fruitfulness of this analytical path for gaining insights into both fields of study.

If the fair was a place for the patron to produce and perform a relationship with his political constituents, the ever-fraught negotiation became even more tense due to the ambivalence of the patron, in this interaction, being a guest. While a guest should not infringe on the laws of hospitality by dishonoring the host (Pitt-Rivers 2012), a patron in a religio-political public performance feels entitled to a command over the sovereign space of interaction. While some of the anthropological literature does not make a distinction between host and patron, it would be germane to think of the patron not only as the distributor of munificence, but following Mazzarella (2013), in the context of a performance space, as a kind of master of ceremonies. He posits the Hindu God *Indra* as the epitome of the “patron-police...whose banner staff is at once the umbrella under which [any] performance may take place and the weapon that crushes those who challenge its integrity” (41). The sovereignty exercised in this formulation is one that

“maintains a protected space in which a form of life can be performed, that is, lived”; and which also “decides on the exception”, in line with Carl Schmitt’s concept of the political (ibid).

The minister’s anxious outburst turns on this ambivalence of patron-guest. He was the guest at the ceremony, but he was not just another guest. As the patron, he wished to arrogate to himself the sovereign qualities of the host position. However, he found this position challenged. Further, in the turn of the hospitality complex away from its rooted local political idiom into a marketized dimension, the minister found himself treated at par with capitalist guests. Unlike him, the capitalist guests – spectral as their presence was – were not there to cultivate an enduring exchange-mediated patronage encounter. They were simply there to exchange money for service of hospitality rendered.

What led the minister to perceive such a transformation, which for him seemed to herald a threat to the political cosmology of the *mela*? Even as he was the chief guest, the festival started according to a rationalized schedule, which did not wait for his arrival. On his fashionably (and authoritatively) late arrival, he was not greeted with the usual reorientation of the entire event towards him. The organizers sought to keep the flow of cultural performances going for the rest of the audience. No special seating had been arranged for him. He sat on the makeshift log benches that had been put up the previous night for the festival. Other members of the forest bureaucracy had already given a few introductory remarks about the significance of the festival as a path towards revenue-generation and conservation. The minister was thus asked to wait for a dance performance by some elderly Sherpa ladies of the village, so that the crowds would be kept entertained. He took all these reformulations as a manifestation of bad hospitality, that compromised his honor. To recover his authority, he asked the performing ladies to wait their turn. In mock humility, he apologized for the inconvenience he was causing to everybody

and promised to take only a few minutes of their time to give his brief remarks. The diatribe that followed was anything but brief, and left an indelible mark on the rest of the festival.



FIGURE 3.5: *The Sherpa women waiting to perform (left); The Singhi dance in front of the gumpa (right).*

If the minister’s outburst can be understood as his anxiety about the loss of authority of the development state, in the face of a rise of ethnopreneurialism which sees deference-as-hospitality reoriented to the capitalist guest as the new source of economic munificence for the village, why did the villagers not simply double down on this transformation? Why was the charge of being bad hosts to the state patron so unacceptable, anxiety-inducing and disheartening to the village?

Kanchan Chandra (2004,7) defines “patronage-democracy” as one where “the state monopolizes access to jobs and services, and in which elected officials have discretion in the implementation of laws allocating the jobs and services at the disposal of the state”. Here the “power of elected officials [derives from the ability] to distribute the vast resources controlled by the state to voters on an individualized basis, by exercising their discretion in the implementation

of state policy” (ibid). In Sikkim, even as tourism has been on the rise in the last decade, the state remains the single largest employer. Moreover, with an estimated population of 644,660 and 32 members in the legislative assembly as of 2015, the representative-constituent ratio is much larger than other states. The state and its subjects are locked in an intimate, mutual, albeit unequal patron-client relation. It is not the panopticism of the tourist gaze and its demand to organize nature-culture into legible touristic vistas for easy consumption (Urry 1990) that forms the rubric of discipline for the countryside. Just as significant is the gaze of the development state which wishes to see, and in which constituents want to be legible. The mutual relation sought however is not one of high modernist transparency. It is one of an exchange-mediated relation of patronage, where the position of the patron is secured only through mutually recognized performances. The tourist gaze, as an imputed gaze of a different regime of recognition, further destabilizes the position of the patron by infusing new meanings and perceived challenges into the interactional complex. The result is the compounding of the opacity in the regimes of recognition, fueling anxieties about unintelligibility and misrecognition. Much of the tourism literature, in studying the reconstitution of tourism destinations according to desires and needs of metropolitan travelers (Adams 1996; Fletcher 2014; Nash 1989; West 2006), tends to ignore the extant scopic regimes that influence socio-political life of a destination/place. Such tourism studies then also reify the power they seek to critique. Rather than moving quickly from a depiction of touristic encounter to touristic capture – a process that is usually not as complete as is made out to be – it seems pertinent to ask about the anxieties about such transformations and the recalibrations that arise in the process. This also gives pause to the other end of the theoretical spectrum, that are keen to celebrate such transformations as an escape from the grasp of suffocating state sovereignty.

In the mutual loss of honor of the patrons and hosts in the hospitality complex, there is a breakdown of an existing political fabric, without a guarantee of transformation to new structure of development where the state recedes and economic sovereignty through tourism replaces it. This catches both the village hosts and political patron in a bind, caused by the rise of a different framework of the hospitality complex, despite the non-eclipse of the older form. How is this challenge mediated? We have seen the reactionary expression of this anxiety from the perspective of the minister. The initial reaction in the village mirrored the minister's outburst.

After the minister left the village, the Okhrey ecotourism festival ended in a public showdown between the villagers and the bureaucratic managers of the project. The villagers sought to lay the blame of mismanagement on the forest bureaucracy. In a public altercation at the "culture ground", local leaders demanded monetary compensation for the villagers' investments in upgrading the homestays, which saw limited occupancy during the festival. For the politically influential families in the village, who felt slighted at the department's choice of a different set of stakeholders as their main intermediaries, this public conflict – a screaming match – restored their ability to speak for the community. The confrontation resulted in the Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) of the SBFP-ecotourism initiative driving off from the village hurriedly, feeling cornered, out-numbered and threatened, leaving his mostly female staff to fend for themselves in the hostile environment. Junior forest bureaucrats who has been more reflexive about their shortcomings in preparations leading up to the festival suddenly closed ranks, accusing the villagers of being ungrateful development subjects, as they too hastened to make their exit. Before the festival, the Forest Department had put up signposts to attract tourists on the highway. "Approaching the SBFP ecotourism zone of Okharey -10 kms.", "Approaching the SBFP ecotourism zone of Okharey - 5 kms.", and so on, these signs read. If one were to drive

into the village a few weeks after the fiasco, one would have seen all these signposts vandalized, the iron bars bent out of shape and the writing graffitied over.

Caught between the patron and the guest – commended neither for the festival’s environmentalist integrity and economic-touristic success, nor for an appropriate behavior of political clientelism – the vandalized signs stood testimony to the spontaneous outpourings of resentment of the would-be ethnopreneurs. However, such behavior, while serving to index the rupture in the material and symbolic value-laden hospitality complex of the region, could not be a lasting solution to the crisis. Mediations were needed to suture the broken interactional complex.

For the village community, represented by its powerful families, the objective in the immediate future seemed to be the recover the honor of hospitality within the regional political complex. As Pitt-Rivers (2012,505) writes, in hospitality, honor “is gained by being paid (and lost by being denied) where it is due”. The ambivalence is that while hosts and guests cannot claim equality within an interactional space, since it would open up the space for rivalry, the inequality of the positions cannot be articulated in ways that bring dishonor to any of its participants (ibid). On the occasion of Tibetan New Year, a few months after the first festival, the political elite in the village decided to organize a “Tourism-cum-Losar Festival” to try to restore this delicate balance with the political machinery of the state. The Forest Department was invited. However, this time the chief patron politician was the Education Minister, who was the MLA elected from the constituency. The influential families in the village that had led the charge against the forestry officers were especially invested in showcasing the community’s ability to successfully execute a local politically-colored festival while maintaining an orientation to tourism.

GUESTS, SOVEREIGNTY AND RECOGNITION

From the story so far, given the lack of tourists at the SBFP festival and the monetary losses suffered in making tourism-oriented investments at the household level, the persistence of a touristic orientation in festival 2.0 appears to be counter-intuitive. If the SBFP festival did not bring any additional tourists, did not lead to publicity for the destination through “exposure” (in development speak), why not organize a *mela* solely addressed to patronage and local participants, instead of hosting another *tourism festival*? The power of the tourist gaze then, in being a determining factor in cultural performances and representations, seemingly cannot be explained through an analysis of neoliberal panopticism (Urry and Larsen 2011), the promise of economic sovereignty (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009), or some mimetic desire to be the “hyperreal” authentic other of the bourgeois touristic imaginary (Adams 1996). Rather the key here lies in seeing tourism as a play for regional sovereignty, through hospitality.

Let me illustrate this point by returning to the tourism policy consultation with which we started. During the meeting, a middle-aged man named Mr. Bindal made an impassioned speech when asked about his “visions” for tourism development in Sikkim. Mr. Bindal was a stalwart of the tourism trade. He owned one the oldest tourism landmarks of the Gangtok bazaar – a bakery plus hotel that is on the itinerary of most visitors to the state. Recently, India’s Prime Minister had announced a new policy granting visa-on-arrival for visitors from 180 countries (*The Hindu* 2014). A new route to the pilgrimage destination of Mansarovar in Tibet was being opened via Sikkim for the first time¹⁴. The media reported it as a diplomatic feat (*The Economic Times* 2015; *Sikkim Express* 2015). The promise of opening up cross-border tourism, with “a billion-

¹⁴ The existent route was through the Lipulekh pass in Uttarakhand. The Nathu La-Sikkim routes is motorable, leading into the Tibetan plateau. It is thus especially suited for senior citizens unable to undertake any arduous trekking.

people waiting on the other side in China [to come to India via Sikkim]”, as he put it, made Mr. Bindal giddy with excitement. It was evident that his enthusiasm was not prompted by the business prospects alone. For him this was another transformative moment in Sikkim’s political-economic trajectory. He nostalgically recounted “seeing Gangtok grow from a one-lane town to a bustling city”. For him, the PM’s recent overtures towards tourism routes to China would be the second wave of opening up of the frontier state to new “footfalls”. As he emphasized, this in turn would make good the decades-old promise of India’s Look-East policy, which had been made “here in our own Raj Bhawan” the last time a PM visited these parts.

The opening up of Sikkim for tourism in the 1990s had been instrumental in the expansion of the “one-lane town”. Before the 1990s, movement into the state was relatively restricted on the grounds of its sensitive status as a border zone, newly incorporated into the Indian Union. The lack of tourism infrastructure, and various bureaucratic barriers had caused Sikkim to be relatively closed off from interaction with the rest of the country. After India’s independence, foreigners could only get Inner Line Permits (itself a colonial holdover) from Delhi, in order to visit the state, for a very short duration at a time. As of the late 1980s the District Magistrate in Darjeeling was also authorized to issue the permit, but not the bureaucracy of Sikkim itself. As a retired Sikkimese civil servant, Mr. Densapa, told me during an interview, this was seen as a particularly paternalistic approach to the region that was resented in the local political circles. Sikkim’s bureaucracy saw this as an insult to its capabilities. Mr. Densapa recounted telling a well-placed executive officer of the central government in Delhi that “it would have been better if we had gone with China”, to register his displeasure about Sikkim’s curtailed sovereign powers. By the 1990s, the center, in keeping with its Look East Policy also turned its attention to the nation’s northeast frontier. A relaxing of the rules of entry into the

state, coupled with a central government scheme that doled out subsidies for hotel-building led to a tourism boom in Sikkim in the 1990s, initiating the state's further integration into the cultural-political fabric of India. For people like Mr. Bindal and Mr. Densapa, this hard-won ability to control the flow of tourists into the state is a way of reclaiming state-level sovereignty after Sikkim's incorporation into India.

The understanding of tourism as sovereignty on India's margin aligns closely with Cattelino's (2008) exposition of the Seminole tribe's "casino-era sovereignty." The casinos – that operate under tribal laws that are exempt from certain conventional jurisdictions of the settler-colonial state – are perceived as "vehicles toward tribal economic power, with the belief that economic security would advance the project of self-governance" (137). Her claim is that the tribal sovereignty enabled through gaming is valuable not because it allows for complete independence or autonomy. In fact, such a narrow, judicially-centered, autonomy-focused conceptualization of sovereignty, she argues, elide the ways in which "nation-states long have established and maintained themselves through interdependency and multilayered sovereignty"¹⁵ (189-91). We could conclude that like tribal gaming, tourism allows the Sikkimese polity that has not naturalized its integration into India to rethink "self-determination as...freedom based not on independence but on nondomination" wherein regional sovereignty is a "relational mode of political distinctiveness" (163). Seeing the stakes of tourism along these lines helps explain the strong political-affective investment in it, and especially the persistence of this investment despite the lack of immediate economic returns and the spectral presence of actual tourists.

¹⁵ The specific example is how "indigenous nations are constitutive of settler state sovereignty [inasmuch as the] treaties forged with American Indian nations in part are a way to legitimate colonial powers and settler nations in the eyes of other states and in the eyes of tribal nations". The treaties she argues reflect "the United States' early and to some extent ongoing reliance upon indigenous peoples" (175).

This ability to exercise regional autonomy in regulating the mobility of tourists in the landscape allows for an articulation of sovereignty that speaks to the realm of political distinctiveness. This in turn raises the issue of cultural distinctiveness or the particularity of the ethno-commodity to be presented to a tourist gaze so commandeered. Comaroff and Comaroff (2009, 82) argue – especially in reading the potential of economic sovereignty through the corporatization of ethnic identity – that while sovereign recognition comes from a distinct cultural identity of such ethnic groups, “the substance of that identity [is] often largely incidental to the process of incorporation itself. The latter depend[s], in the first instance, on a legal status; cultural content could be, has been, invented, added, thickened after the fact”. They present various instances of the primacy of land claims or intellectual property rights where ethnicity is presented as a “thin” political identity and the “thick ensemble of lived signs and practices” (ibid, 44) is articulated later. In the case of tourism-oriented ethno-commodification, such thickening, they argue, conforms closely to what consumers wish to see in terms of the distinctiveness of ethnic others¹⁶ (ibid, 10).

However, as the failure of Okhrey’s festival shows, the road to ethnopreneurialism is not straightforward. The previous section explored the rub of ethnopreneurialism with the authority of the development state and its anxious representatives, invested in the political promise of tourism-as-hospitality-as-sovereignty and yet threatened by the economic sovereignty it might afford their development clients. The next section delves more broadly into the condemnation of the *mela* by tourism entrepreneurs such as those present at the policy meeting. Their ambivalence about the *mela* gives pause to the characterization of “thin” political culture easily “thickened”,

¹⁶ Among other illustrations they discuss the ꞤKhomani Bushmen, who, in being seen, i.e. granted recognition through the mediation of the market, have to present themselves as bow and arrow-wielding foragers clad in loincloth, selling ostrich bead necklaces, while underplaying the everyday reality of their lives in the shanty towns (ibid).

according to clearly-understandable touristic desire i.e. an unambiguously-decoded and singular tourist gaze, emanating from a singular panoptical vantage-point. Instead if we think of the tourist gaze, drawing on Hansen (2012, 12), as “a strange, unfathomable force that can never be entirely reduced to the specific social or cultural context in question [or] to sets of eyes that can be known”, we can begin to ask about the multiple meanings attributed to the tourist gaze that engender the anxieties about the *mela* – as a thick culture presented for touristic recognition.

ETHNO-COMMODIFICATION: CONTESTED “THICK” CULTURES

It was March 2015, I was sitting in on a meeting in the Forest Department headquarters in Gangtok, to discuss preparations for the Tinjurey Ecotourism festival, the SBFP’s first ecotourist zone being “opened to the public”. Nandan, a smartly-dressed man in his late thirties, who was the president of a travel agent’s association had been invited to “support” this endeavor. The FD wanted help in publicizing this event through his association, even as somewhat unproductively this request was being made only a few days before the festival was to start. I had met Nandan only a few days ago, at the Tourism Department consultation. He began his discussion with the DFO with the familiar complaint, “so many festivals have started happening in Sikkim...every week almost!” He informed the DFO that the Tinjurey festival in Pangthang will clash with the Lampokhri Paryavan Mahotsav (Lampokhri Environment Festival) in East Sikkim and the Rhododendron Festival in the west. “We will support you”, he assured the team, not wanting to antagonize any part of the state machinery, even as he continued the denunciation of “each *mela*” which is “now a carnival”.

The two main objections Nandan raised about the culture of the *mela* were that of an unacceptable mode of profit-making and the culture of drinking. Each compromised Nandan’s ideal of ethnopreneurialism. The conversation went thus:

Nandan: (in Nepali) Now all the festivals they are doing, the department is doing, outsiders are doing... all just to earn. Have a festival, get one MLA, tell the MLA – sir I am organizing a festival in my area [meaning MLA’s constituency] ... doing things for moneymaking. Then the festival becomes only for drinking. Now you should also get tourists to the festival no!

DFO: (in Hindi) They call the Chief Guests... only what donation they get that much. Nothing else. When here [implying the Forest Minister who is a frequent “guest”] we are invited... [he is] worried. How much has to be given? Has to be over fifty [thousand].

Nandan’s issue with ethno-commodification seemed to be that the monetization was still following the old patronage script and not a new guest-oriented script that would make the monetization of culture somehow more ethical and morally acceptable. The DFO’s agreement with Nandan’s condemnation of the patronage economy, in light of events that followed in Okhrey seems disingenuous. While being invited to a *mela* may have them worried about the size of donation to be made, the potential loss of such a position of “honor” was equally worrisome for the patrons, rooted in a different cultural idiom of politics.

The aspect of “thick” culture Nandan was most worried about presenting to tourists was that of drinking or public and communal intoxication. He described the Cherry/Temi Tea festival¹⁷, where he took “three vehicles full of tourists”. He derisively calls it a “wine festival”, because “people were drunk, there were drunken brawls”. “Now tourist feedback is...all these people are drunk. What do I then?”, he asked. I was reminded of another conversation, where this sense of disapproval did not accompany the description of this form of sociality. My interlocutor, a Sikkim native known for popularizing Sikkim’s handicraft beyond the state, had

¹⁷ Cherry trees are planted in the tea gardens of West Sikkim. During flowering season, the manicured green hedges are outlined with vivid pink cherry-blossoms, that draw tourists in large numbers.

told me jokingly, “this is our culture you see. Our people like to get drunk. Then they brawl. In the morning they meet each other and say – *mind na garnus* (don’t mind) and everything is alright.” This indulgence of the “thick” culture is not shared by Nandan as a tourism promoter. Variations of this disavowal of the drinking culture were voiced multiple times during the policy consultations and beyond.

Not all tourism promoters shared the same views about this culture. On another occasion, Mr. Dahal, the forest guard in Kitam who also ran a homestay lamented about the ecotourism committee’s discussions about prohibiting alcohol consumption in its “best practices” code for both hosts and guests. “*Tongba* is part of our culture no...when guests come, they come expecting we will serve them...in the evening have *tongba*, talk. We can’t deny that either”. If making thin culture thick entailed giving tourists what they want, and what they want is neoliberal primacy of consumption and authentic otherness, where the content of this otherness doesn’t matter as long as it can provide a salve to alienated bourgeois subjects (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009,10), then the *mela* and its drinking culture would not trip up the differently located tourism agents as much. Its expression of immediate, spontaneous social enjoyment should be seen as appealing to the bourgeois tourist gaze that seeks out vacations to escape a tempered, regimented life. It should also be seen as complementary to neoliberal hedonism, if not bourgeois temperance.

The disavowal of this particular aspect of frontier culture can be understood in the imputed tourist gaze in this instance being read as the gaze of the category of nation by some, rather than as the gaze of a purely neoliberal consumer. In the national gaze, the articulation of ethnic hierarchy between Indian caste society and “backward” tribal societies along the metric of alcohol consumption has a long history (Hardiman 1987, Shah 2011). Further, in the political

cosmology of Nepal, enforcement of a Hindu orthodoxy in the Gorkha kingdom had been achieved by the 1854 *Muluki Ain* (Chief Law), that had delineated castes as “Non-enslaveable alcohol-drinking castes” and “Enslaveable alcohol-drinking castes”¹⁸ (Guneratne 2001,528). Even as the Nepali caste terms or their legal connotations do not cross over the border, a residual stigmatization remains, connoting the potential of alcohol consumption to slot one into a position of inferiority.

Hardiman (1987) interprets the early twentieth century “devi movements” in Adivasi regions in western India, wherein the devi (Goddess) exhorted the tribal populace to give up liquor, not as Sankritization or a capitulation to caste hierarchy but rather as a claim to equality through adoption of upper caste practice¹⁹. By the time Baviskar comes to discuss the revival of the *devi* movement, she reads the disavowal of drinking as “a carefully considered contingent capitulation to dominant ideology” (1995, 97-103 cited in Mosse 2011, 162). In Gunaratne’s (2001) ethnography of tourism in a Tharu village in Nepal, the stigmatization of their alcohol consumption (as an enslavable alcohol drinking caste) is a way for the Brahmin (Bahun) guides to narrate into existence the “backwardness” of the Tharus under a tourist gaze which does not much distinguish between various ethnic groups of Nepal, collectively seen as non-modern and “developing”. Shah (2011), interrogating the anti-alcohol campaign of Maoists in Jharkhand concurs with Baviskar and Gunaratne. She sees this not as a challenge to hierarchy as Hardiman does, but rather as an aspiration of educated male Adivasi youth to achieve higher status concurrent to the village elite who also form the backbone of the radical anti-state movement.

¹⁸ The non-enslavable castes called *namasine matwali* included 'tribal' groups like the Magar, Gurung, Rai, and Limbu and Newars. The enslavable castes called *masine matwali* were people of Tibetan origin, and a number of less important 'tribal' groups, including the Tharu (ibid).

¹⁹ Hardiman reads the immanent, explicitly religious social movement as an economic challenge to the Parsis as legal monopolists of the liquor economy. Before colonization this economy had been integral both to ritual-social life and nutritional necessities of the tribal universe.

Coming back to Sikkim, the question of whether for the tourism elites the anxiety about drinking is a way of capitulation to perceived hegemonic national bourgeois ideology on behalf of “their people”, a way of claiming equality for the entire frontier populace through this desired reform, or the criticism of drinking culture as a way to extricate themselves out of the association with backwardness of “their people” belies an easy answer. However, what this discussion particularly highlights is the multifacetedness of the imputed tourist gaze and its anxiousness. For tourism entrepreneurs like Nandan, the tourist gaze on Sikkim is one of a moral judgment from the nation with bourgeois caste-society as its keeper, a gaze that he feared would adversely judge both its lack of temperance, and its ostensible backwardness in its inability to transcend forms of parochial political patronage²⁰. Furthermore, much of this consternation about the judgement from the tourist gaze takes place while ruing that “it is our own people, who are hanging around” or that “when there is no tourist...these festivals are useless”. Here, the gaze, while producing anxiety does not operate merely in the negative register of felt constriction of being, as Sartre would argue. Rather the tourist gaze, despite its ambivalence and its spilt manifestation as the gaze of capital and the nation, is a repository or a projection of a desire for legibility and positive recognition on the margins of the nation, which therefore does not depend on the actual presence of the tourist or their variegated actual consumer desires.

FESTIVAL 2: RECOVERING THE HOSPITALITY ASSEMBLAGE

In this last section we come back to the negotiation of these ambivalences about ethnopreneurialism on the ground in Okhrey, having explored their roots in the development state’s anxiety about authority and the state elite’s anxiety about misrecognition of thick ethnic

²⁰ my point is not to argue about the factual de-linking of patronage and modern politics, but rather to stress how the ideology of “clean” politics is often used to frame discourses about progressive/desirable political subjectivity. While the rest of the nation may not be perceived as having transcended such political conditions, any aspect of life on the frontier that compounds a perception of its backwardness adds to the anxiety of misrecognition in general.

culture of the frontier in the national-moral gaze. Within this flux of the regime of recognition, the bind for tourism performers of Okhrey was to articulate an acceptable form of ethnopreneurialism that would appease both the tourist gaze and the gaze of the development state, while discerning the uncertain boundary between them.

The second festival followed a spatial logic similar to the first – bringing together a village monastery, performance stage, food and handicrafts stalls as discrete units in the same compound. Yet as a space of hospitality, it sought both to index honor towards the patron and the ability of the village community to command local resources towards a grand display of hospitality. The performance stage and seating arrangement reflected the local political hierarchy. A “VIP seating” area had been erected, in the form of a *shamiyana* (cloth and bamboo tent), where the chief guest would be easily recognizable as the master of ceremonies. His centrality as the sovereign of the space of performance (Mazzarella 2013) was unequivocally declared, as the compère kept the crowds at the fair updated on the minister’s every movement – “now surveying the traditional food stalls, now coming to the stage”, and so on. When the minister finally arrived on state, the platform was immediately handed over to him, leaving no doubt that the performance roster was organized around him and not vice-versa. Food and drinks were made available endlessly in the *shamiyana*, that was frequented by various ruling party cadres through the two days. The lay village folk sat on the chairs on the open ground at the opposite side. Tourists who wandered through the festival were also welcome to sit in the *shamiyana*. Yet in the personalized and constant attention that was bestowed on the political guests, a delicate balance was maintained in not dishonoring any guest, while preventing political guests from feeling dishonored by any perception of the privileging of the tourist’s status over theirs.



FIGURE 3.6: *The Tourism-and-Losar festival with its hierarchically organized space*

In the naming and performance of the festival, the significance of touristic income and touristic orientation was not completely abandoned because of the last debacle. However, it was retained as a horizon of aspiration. On the day of the festival one of the organizers told me that usually cooking and selling meat in the vicinity of the monastery would offend some conservative religious sentiments. Yet, such steps towards secularization of the religious space was needed to “look towards the future” of getting more tourists. The larger push of the development state towards empowerment through ethnopreneurship, and the promise of ethnopreneurship as national recognition could not simply be disavowed.

Time is key to the ideological loop of development. The ideological legitimacy of the development state rests on the perpetual deficit of development among its subjects, which can only be remedied by the state’s constant intervention for the benefit of its subjects. The authority of the state rests on this forever receding horizon of development. The challenge for political patrons in Sikkim was to reconcile the emergence of the capitalist guest as a key player in this development narrative, without them affecting the ideological loop of development as a condition possible only in the future. For the Forest Minister, reconciling this potential threat to

state authority was the objective of the political speeches he made at the two tourism festivals his department organized. He had to retain the centrality of the state's patronage capabilities, earlier made possible by the state's entitlements scheme, within a conservation and development plan that ostensibly peddled empowerment that made citizens responsible for their own upliftment. Firstly, he sought to negotiate the weak spot of positioning the rise of ecotourism as something new for the citizens of the state in a way that did not acknowledge any lack of effectiveness of the state's longstanding developmental dispensation. His solution was to narrate this newness as a culmination of development agendas and not a sudden transformation that should reorient the citizens towards tourism wholly. All that had come before ethno-commodification was reinscribed not as state complacency or failure but as a long game played by Sikkim's visionary Chief Minister. The operative term, co-opted from ecology, was "long-term sustainability". Long-term sustainability, in the minister's speeches was repurposed as the long-term gestation of a development ideal. Such repurposing sought to leave as little as possible to any happenstance, while claiming maximum intentionality of the development state in the growth of the tourism sector.

The patron's push-back to the threat of tourism-granted economic sovereignty also lay in the emphasis on the precarity of empowerment through ethnopreneurship. Firstly, the precarity was established by the fact that only a small number of development subjects could get at it. The general "public" of the state, the minister lectured, to the crowd at both venues, were used to free handouts. They had things "easy" and therefore did not "value" resources – be they developmental or the "plentiful natural resources divinely endowed to the state". Success of such ethnopreneurialism was cast as one-off, attributable to extraordinary dedication of particular villages which had become fruitful tourism destinations. The overall representation of the state as

filled with subjects looking for development entitlements, who had no other option but to turn to the state and its patronage, was maintained by making places like Pangthang the exception.

Moreover, even the success of this exception was not guaranteed. This was made evident in the repeated pep-talk telling the villagers “*time lagcha* – [development] takes time”, “*haras na khanus* – don’t lose hope/feel demotivated”. Ethnpreneurship would have to be kept up for many years. The lack of guarantee of empowerment by tourism was attributed to the demanding gaze of the tourist, who wanted to see culture that had been well “preserved”. As consumers with choice, the minister warned, they could turn to Nepal or Darjeeling, if Sikkim failed to lure them. On one hand, this followed conventional empowerment rhetoric where development subjects were made responsible for its failure. However, this failure was also the guarantee of continued state patronage. The minister likened its ethno-commodification drive to parents who have invested in their children’s education and are now waiting for results. In interpellating the villagers as ethnpreneurs, the paternalism of the state was thus discursively preserved.

This discursive mediation had worked to assuage the hospitality complex in Pangthang. In Okhrey, the minister perceived a sense of disenchantment with the state, especially in the many complaints he heard about the bad conditions of the roads which prevented the village from having better access to tourists. For the villagers then, neoliberal guests seemed to be the deliverers of development and the state was something in the way of it. In such a scenario of perceived threat to state authority, the minister used the cultural complex of hospitality to regain some of the perceived loss of sovereignty. Hospitality in such a scenario was a “boundary object” (Candea 2012, S42) which served the minister to use a moral code of host-guest relations to make a political move.

As the next political patron coming to the village in this context of a muddied host-guest-patron complex, the Education Minister at the “Losar-cum-Tourism festival” found another way to de-escalate the potential conflict. His speech also touted the virtues of ethnopreneurship. *Afno gau afai banao* – make/build up your own village was the motto he preached. Yet ethnopreneurship oriented towards the capitalist tourist gaze, he proposed to the village, need not be antagonistic to forms of subjection to the state. The bridge he proposed was *namrata* – humility. Humility made villagers cooperative instead of being antagonistic in the face of the slow pace of development for example. Humility made them subjects compliant to development as something which will occur in the future. This same ability, to say *hajur jeu* or “yes sir” to everyone was, he proposed, also the basic characteristic of a good worker in the “hospitality industry”. Yes sir, he lectured, could be a response both to the development state (and its patrons) and to paying tourists who demanded immediate services for payments. In this interpretive move, the development-state did not have to concede power, but rather at the end of both the gaze of the capitalist tourist and the development state stood the same compliant subject.

CONCLUSION

“The Balga Bedouin...would never confuse *karam* with the hospitality offered to tourists” (2012, S31), Shryock writes. This chapter suggests that in the increasing penetration of neoliberal logics into existing modes of political relation building, the possibility of one complex bleeding into the other is ever present and ever threatening. The response to this threat can range from reactionary outrage to various forms of reconciliation. This chapter sheds light on the bind of ethnopreneurialism as a mode of empowerment promoted by the development state which contains the potential for undermining its very authority. This catches the ethnopreneurial subject between two competing gazes vying for hegemony. The Sherpa hosts have to negotiate the

resultant impasse, of addressing their touristic performance to the political *patrons* who influence everyday material village life, or to the capitalist *guests* who hold the promise of income-for-services-rendered and therefore economic sovereignty. Discursively the state functionaries try to push this potential for economic sovereignty into the future, by making such empowerment appear precarious, based on the whimsical nature of the consumer-king. Yet such discursive maneuvers sometimes prove insufficient. The onus then falls on the community host to perform the extra labor of appeasement, mobilizing various resources to suture the patron-client relational complex. The reconciliation depends on emerging, through various material-discursive acrobatics, as the compliant subjects of two distinct complexes of hospitality – one political and one marketized.

In telling the story of ethnopreneurship at the intersection of neoliberalism and entrenched developmentalist ideologies, this chapter also contributes to an understanding of the situated negotiations of patronage politics in South Asia. In ethnographically zooming in on the “mela” as the moment of encounter in which patronage relations are substantiated, it highlights the significance of the normative complex of hospitality in meaning making. While scholars often use host and patron interchangeably, the rub in sovereignty over such interactional moments occurs, it seems, because the patron appears as a guest seeking to arrogate to himself or herself the honor associated with being a host. The suggestion here is that in an interactional context “fairly” common in the subcontinent, we would gain by seeing patronage not as a dyadic relation of host-guest, but as a triad of host-guest-patron. The instability of the triad is the source of conflict in this always-already fraught political relation. The arrival of a capitalistic guest on the scene, real or imagined (bringing along also a competing understanding of hospitality) only adds to the original ambivalence of this interactional space.

More specifically to the study of tourism, this ethnography presents an understanding of the particularities of the oppressions of the tourism regime. In turning to hospitality-as-sovereignty as an abiding anthropological tension that undergirds encounters between people/positions wielding unequal degrees of power, it takes the study of tourism beyond both the narratives of a neoliberal capture of nature-culture and a neoliberal emancipation of ethnopolitics. To the former, it adds by analyzing the anxieties of misrecognition under the tourist gaze, which a narrow focus on the power of bourgeois tourists is unable to adequately explain. These anxieties of misrecognition derive not entirely from the panopticism of the gaze, but rather from its spectral, phantasmic quality to stand contradictorily as the hedonistic gaze of capital, and the temperance and modernist progress-seeking gaze of the nation. The tourist gaze so conceptualized thereby creates more room for a multifaceted exploration of tourism politics, explaining its persistence even in the absence of tourists themselves. The absence of tourists and the perduring authority of the state, this ethnography highlights, are also conditions that temper the liberatory possibilities of ethnopreneurialism via tourism. Who bears the burden of these false-starts and how, this chapter shows, is something we need to remain attentive to.

CHAPTER 4

CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE, ENVIRONMENTAL KNOWLEDGE AND THE BOUNDARIES OF BELONGING

INTRODUCTION

One manifestation of India's fraught commitment to 'unity in diversity' is the political recognition granted to most of the regional states in the northeast frontier, wherein these states have more autonomous powers than those granted to others in the union. Sanjib Baruah (2005) has termed this the "protective discrimination regime", wherein certain regional states have the power to disallow non-autochthonous Indian citizens residing in their territory from holding legislative positions, from buying property or holding government jobs. Such measures may be seen as going beyond token gestures of recognition to ensure the cultural survival (Kymlicka 2001; Taylor 1992) of the distinctive, often predominantly tribal, identity of the region. In return, the northeastern frontier, which had enjoyed relative (and sometimes complete) autonomy under colonial rule, is expected to not challenge their integration into the post-colonial Indian state. Narrowing down to Sikkim, the insider-outsider distinction between indigenous citizens and national citizens, if we use Van Schendel's terminology (2011), is foregrounded in the popular politics of the state. Sikkim Subjects consider this distinction a form of recognition owed to them, given the conditions of the state's 1975 merger into the Indian Union. Moreover, in following Markell (2003), if we focus on the sovereignty gained by states when they grant recognition, the ability to recognize (and redistribute resources to) indigenous over national citizens is an important way for the regional state to assert its authority. The question this chapter asks is how is this mode of expressing sovereignty, and this affective investment in retaining exclusionary boundaries of sub-national belonging maintained when the rise of tourism as an

open market enterprise recruits labor competitively from anywhere in the country? And similarly, when biodiversity conservation as a global governance regime brings environmental practitioners from beyond the state?

Ethno-commodification is understood by Sikkim's tourism promoters not only as a source of economic gain but also as a form of cultural recognition and survival, as has been established in the previous chapter. The mantra of ethnic survival through the market, that Comaroff and Comaroff (2009, 18) and others identify as "successful and sustainable cultures are those which brand best", is also taken as the way forward in Sikkim. However, the rub in this formulation arises in the implementation of this ideal, in terms of setting limits to who can authentically and legitimately sell and represent the brand. In the tourism sector, the protective discrimination regime operating through article 371F, disallows the sale of tourism properties to outsiders. National entrepreneurs can therefore only run businesses on lease. The state also initiates measures for the upliftment of local unemployed youth, giving them economic support to operate commercial tourism vehicles as a source of livelihood. Yet such protectionist measures clash with neoliberal market imperatives of openness to flows of people, goods, knowledge and economic opportunities. Employment restrictions on national citizens, which apply to all form of state employment, do not extend to the private sector. The first part of this chapter traces this rub, asking: if tourism is seen as a mode of cultural survival and recognition, how are ideologies of protectionism articulated in/for an industry where, legally, there are limited possibilities for implementing such measures? How is the participation of a diverse work force in a commercial activity that is beyond state control reconciled with deeply held beliefs about the need to protect autochthonous economic interests, which many Sikkimese express as a legitimate economic right?

For answers I draw on the drafting of Sikkim's new tourism policy, as it went from contentious consultations – between representatives of the Tourism Department, non-governmental organizations, hotel owners associations, home-stay owners associations, taxi drivers' associations etc. – to the final policy that was both more and less than the sum total of the discussions. I attend to the ways in which Sikkim's tourism entrepreneurs articulate their desire for economic protectionism in the arena of touristic enterprise where state-initiated measures for their implementation cannot be applied. What are the legitimizations used to make the distinction between national and indigenous citizens in tourism labor? How successful are such narratives in making a case for protective discrimination, and what are their limitations? In reading the final policy recommendations, I trace how the regional state reconciles with its limited sovereignty in enforcing regimes of inclusion and exclusion of participants in the scenario. The aim is to highlight the elisions that are needed, both in the narratives of the local tourism industry and in the planned approach of the regional state, to articulate an ideal of protective discrimination in open market scenarios.

A similar conundrum arises with the SBFP-JICA initiative. Though housed in the Forest Department, as a conservation scheme that is externally funded, it recruits a number of non-autochthonous 'outsiders' as 'project staff'. These participants do not need to meet the standards of protective discrimination necessary to be a state employee. Moreover, environmental knowledge generated by the various non-governmental environmental organizations operational in the state, staffed by national citizens, also compromise an exclusionary articulation of native nature known by native people, that will serve the 'naturalization' of ethno-(sub)nationalism. As the global regime of biodiversity governance gives rise to a class of mobile conservationists,

tasked with ensuring the preservation of nature as national patrimonies, how are ideologies of a circumscribed nativist bio-cultural belonging articulated and negotiated?

Here I follow two flashpoints of conflict pertaining to the generation of environmental knowledge. The first is contestations over a bird survey commissioned by the SBFP project. The second is a public controversy over claims made by an environmental NGO of being the first research agency to sight a snow leopard in the state. This section asks about the specific ways in which environmental knowledge becomes a site for contesting the place of human ‘outsiders’ in the landscape. In doing so it also contributes to the literature that problematizes the distinction between indigenous and scientific knowledge (Agrawal 1995; Lauer and Aswani 2009; Lowe 2006; Sivaramakrishnan 1999). The ethnography sheds light on the ways in which indigeneity is asserted in the arena of scientific knowledge production through politicized claims about “situated knowledges” (Haraway 1988), rather than through essentialized claims about intergenerational modes of knowing and engaging with nature.

SIKKIM’S PROTECTIVE DISCRIMINATION REGIME AND THE DANGERS OF BELONGING

Before I embark on the negotiation of the distinction between national and indigenous citizenship in the arenas of tourism and conservation, let me briefly sketch the history of this distinction in the region. On the eve of independence, the Northeast comprised the undivided state of Assam, the North East Frontier Area administered by the Assam state governor as the agent of the Indian president, and the princely states of Manipur and Tripura (Baruah 2005, 36). Sikkim, as we know, till 1975 was a Protectorate. Tribal areas in the region, classified as “backward” or “excluded” areas by the British, with large tracts of hitherto unadministered territory, after independence came to be governed under the sixth schedule of the constitution. The provision allowed for “autonomous districts and autonomous regions within those districts

with elected councils with powers to regulate customary law, to administer justice in limited cases and to determine the occupation or use of land” (ibid). States such as Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland also apply the Inner Line Permit system, which restricts entry of outsiders into the state (ibid, 37). Most northeastern states also limit the participation of national citizens in the legislative process by reserving seats for indigenous citizens (sometimes to the extent of all but one). As has been established previously, most of these measures are mirrored in Sikkim. Legislative seats are reserved for the Bhutia-Lepcha Scheduled Tribes. While foreigners have to secure Inner Line permits to enter the state, Indian citizens have to secure permits to enter specific areas considered ecologically, culturally and geopolitically sensitive. This protective discrimination is operationalized through the category of the “Sikkim Subject”, qualifying indigenous citizenship as that which was acknowledged during the monarchical regime, recognizing only such citizens for government jobs and land ownership.

Baruah’s argument is that while protective discrimination may be seen as a mode of ensuring cultural survival of the northeast frontier by protecting customary rights, overall it serves an agenda of nationalization of space, especially given the perceived threat from China to Indian’s geopolitical interests in the region. He makes this point particularly with regard to the preferential attention that is given to the region in the disbursement of development funds from the center. The Union Ministry of Development of the North Eastern Region (DONER) is the central agency responsible for the disbursement of these special funding packages which are not available to most other states in the federation. While DONER brings specially-tailored development interventions to the region, the condition for such development is the direct oversight of a union ministry. Development in other states can meanwhile follow a more federally autonomous route. The ministry, as Baruah reminds us, was constituted in 2001, at a time when the rest of the

country was undergoing greater neoliberalization of development. While Sikkim formally joined the North East Council¹ in 2002, the center's approach to Sikkim since its incorporation into the Indian union can still be seen as one of nationalization of space through preferential development interventions. The rise of tourism in Sikkim is linked to one such central scheme in the 1990s, aimed at promoting tourism in the entire northeast region that had not taken off so far. It offered subsidies through the Commerce and Industries Department of the state to build hotels. As a retired bureaucrat recounted to me, a "25% subsidy in a time when commercial loans had an interest rate of 14%" was appealing enough for the elite in Sikkim to begin to build hotels at an accelerated rate. It was from this period on that tourism began to grow rapidly in the state, aided by other factors such as easing of travel restrictions to the state, general rise of neoliberal consumerism and tourists seeking new frontiers beyond the commonly visited neighboring hill station of Darjeeling.

While scholars like Karlsson (2003) see such protectionism as a legitimate expression of a national multicultural ethos, others are critical of the exclusionary measures it brings. Baruah (2005, 51) writes that

The rules of exclusion enforced by the Inner Line, and the restrictions on property ownership...in the tribal states of Northeast India, effectively compromise the constitutional right to free movement of Indian citizens. A similar constitutional provision in Jammu and Kashmir has proved highly controversial. The absence of controversy over the exclusionary rules in Northeast India can be explained by

¹ The NEC is an advisory body created through a parliamentary act in 1971, that reflects, according to Baruah (2005, 45), India's fears about national security in the region, in the aftermath of the 1962 Indo-China war. Initially the NEC was thus envisioned as an advisory oversight body that would also help in maintaining security and public order in the region. However, concerns for regional autonomy reoriented it to eventually become a purely planning body.

either the lack of interest in the region on the part of India's political classes, or the perception that, in this case these are necessary short-term costs of the project of nationalizing space. The institutions of exclusion however have come under increasing stress as a result of demographic change through immigration into the region that is inherent in the logic of developmentalism².

My aim in this chapter is to examine the “stress” on this system, and the modes of negotiating it, that arise in the realm of tourism promotion and environmental governance, which attract increasing numbers of participants from beyond the region.

Van Schendel (2011) takes Baruah’s critique of the protective discrimination regime in the northeast further, arguing that the “indigenous” label while being useful for “demanding basic rights for dispossessed communities” can equally “support majoritarian racist and fascist projects” (29). For him, both leanings have the potential to spiral into forms of “geographic apartheid” (ibid). His issue is with the homeland movements that have proliferated in the region, where, under various circumstances, particular tribal groups have come to battle each other, often violently, over competing claims to the territory. The violence against “Chakmas in Arunachal Pradesh, Santhals in Assam or Brus in Mizoram” (ibid, 29) are cited as illustrations of the “dangers of belonging”, where too much emphasis is laid on the correspondence of ethnic and political boundaries. His contention is that such exclusionary homeland movements, in taking recourse to “different forms of justice, force, entitlements and taxation”, (ibid, 31) challenge the sovereignty of the state, and its multiculturalist approach of “dealing with indigenous entitlement

² Given the rise of right-wing Hindutva-oriented politics, Kashmir’s special status has been revoked, amidst discussions of the constitutionality of such a move. One of the advantages cited of revoking Article 370 is that it now secures rights for later settlers in the state, who did not enjoy equal citizenship on par with indigenous subjects. However, in Assam, where these later settlers are seen as overwhelmingly Muslim in a Hindu state, the rights of protective discrimination and near-violent exclusions have received larger national support.

and human rights by offering modernity-by-developmental or legal pluralism” (ibid). The homeland politics that have emerged in cases such as the Bodoland movement for example, he argues, leads to a circumstance where indigenous identities become irreconcilable with identities as national citizens. He criticizes this politics for being based on various forms of romanticization of the indigenous identity, on forms of exclusion and on “an outdated concept of place” that refuses to acknowledge transformation and hybridity (ibid, 27-28).

The question in this chapter is what do ideological expressions of exclusionary homelands look like, in scenarios not marked by a sharp split between liberal and illiberal politics, where nonetheless the existing regime of protective discrimination meets its limits. In such scenarios, I ethnographically explore how claims about homeland and preferred economic status within it are articulated and negotiated, and whether such negotiations turn to illiberal ideologies or liberal political justifications, to romantic articulations of indigeneity or to triumphalism of the globalizing market.

Before I detail the discursive negotiation of the insider-outsider dynamic in the tourism industry and conservation practice, I want to point to the more explicit political mobilization of the Sikkim Subjects question that was occurring in the state’s judicial realm. This conversation implicitly informed the concerns expressed in the tourism and conservation discussions. In 2015, Mr. Biraj Adikhari, president of the Sikkim Nationalist People's Party (SNPP), which had not contested any elections so far, filed a writ petition in the Sikkim High Court. In 2010, the state’s Land Revenue and Disaster Management Department had officially acknowledged the existence of 31,180 fake Certificate of Identification (CoI) or Sikkim Subject certificate holders in the State. Since then the issue of fake CoI holders had been in the news intermittently, often with newspaper reports about particular national citizens being caught wrongly claiming indigenous

citizenship³. The petition asked the government to undertake a reverification process of these 31, 180 certificates in question. This is an ongoing case. As of 2019, through various rounds of hearings, the State has claimed that the original file with the details of the fake documents has been lost; an independent commission has been set up for the reverification process; this commission has been accused of dragging its feet; and the commission in turn has had to deal with no-shows of the accused during its interviewing/reverification process (Sikkim Express 2017; Talk Sikkim 2019).

In a 2019 televised interview to reporters after a court hearing (*Dr. Biraj Adhikari Speaks on the Fake COI Case 2019*) the petitioner emotionally emphasized the significance of the Sikkim Subject Regulation as a marker of Sikkim's identity. In his impassioned speech in Nepali, he told the gathering, "today if there is any legacy that our ancestors have given, akin to our collective wealth, it is this thing/matter of Sikkim Subject. Let us protect it... this is our sacred duty (*dharma*). We have to keep our Sikkim Subjects identity clean/pure. Because this is the only identity left of us having once been a country". He clarified that he is not averse to the granting of rights to long-residing national citizens. Yet, such rights, he argued, should come through a proper process rather than the corruption of the CoI. While the state government took measured steps⁴ towards the resolution of the issue, many in the state felt that the state was deliberately dragging its feet with an eye towards having registered voters on the roll in ways that would enhance their chances of electoral success. The government was therefore criticized

³ For example, in 2013, newspapers reported the Sikkim Police apprehending a person who had used fraudulent certification to enter the Forest Department services as a gardener in 1983. The accused national citizen, of Nepali ethnicity, turned out to be from Lakhimpur district in Assam. He was caught using the CoI and school certificates of a Sikkim Subject who had been residing in Nepal for the past 30 years (SikkimNow! 2013).

⁴ By the time of the last hearing in 2019, the state legislative elections had led to the ouster of the party that had held the reigns of state power uninterrupted since 1994. The expectation among the petitioners and the general public seems to be that the new regime will be more proactive in following the case.

for not doing enough to enforce the court directives in a manner that would honor sub-nationalistic sentiments⁵ or even commitment to due process. Taking account of this affectively charged backdrop is crucial to contextualizing the stance taken by various Sikkimese tourism entrepreneurs and conservation practitioners in their respective arenas of conflict.

NEGOTIATING BETWEEN THE DEMANDS OF PROTECTIVE DISCRIMINATION AND TOURISM

INDUSTRY EXPANSION

In this section, I detail the ways in which the need or desire for protective discrimination in the tourism sector, to safeguard the interests of Sikkim Subjects, is weighed against the need or desire to foster an openly competitive tourism industry in the state. Writing about Mumbai, which has seen many decades of violent conservative politics aimed at migrants, Nikhil Anand (2017) highlights how water scarcity as a discourse has been produced and used to foment xenophobia. The discourse makes older claimants to the city suspicious of migrants and new settlers, seen as usurpers precipitating a Malthusian resource crisis by overcrowding the city. Adding to this larger body of literature that discusses substantive ways of claiming and denying citizenship and belonging beyond formal inclusion (Holston 2008, Rosaldo 1997, Ong 2005), I highlight how the market and the malleable tourist gaze serves as a mode for expressing exclusionary claims over the landscape in Sikkim, without resorting to a straight forward expression of a ‘sons of the soil’ ideology, I then ask what the elisions in the narrative are; and how the final policy accounts for or reinforces these elisions.

⁵ Currently, this sense of threatened identity is also compounded by the Hindu majoritarian government at the center pushing the Citizenship Amendment Bill, 2016. The bill seeks to grant citizenship to illegal immigrants to the country if they belong to the Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi or Christian religious communities. While such a regulation nationally would not override Sikkim’s special status under article 371F, it has nonetheless created a sense of suspicion and perception of yet more threats to the Sikkimese identity; even as the national right wing party has made considerable inroads into Sikkim where it had no prior presence.

Outsiders are killing our industry

In every meeting that was held to discuss the current issues and future prospects of the tourism industry, a recurrent theme was about the capture of the industry by “outsiders”. The figures presented in the final policy, as per the Sikkim Human Development Report 2014, stated that 61% of the people employed in the tourism sector in Sikkim come from outside of the state⁶. This complaint about outside service providers dominating the industry covered a range of services offered. In 2015, Sikkim was only accessible by road, with an erratic helicopter service that was not operational for long periods of the year during adverse weather. Tourists therefore need to hire vehicles with drivers, first to enter Sikkim from the closest airport or train station, both located in the neighboring state, and then to travel within the state. Therefore, the grievance was that most taxi services being provided to tourists in Sikkim were by out-of-state drivers. If the tourists went to the neighboring state first, visiting Darjeeling as the longer known hill-station, the chances of them retaining the same vehicle and driver for their tour of Sikkim became higher. Inasmuch as these drivers became impromptu guides, given that on narrow switchback roads, distances of a hundred or hundred and twenty kilometers can take four to six hours, Sikkim’s tourism entrepreneurs further resented the outsiders. The problem also extended to the businesses of tourism accommodation. The initial national subsidies for hotel construction led to a frenzy of entrepreneurship among Sikkim’s elite. A majority of them, who had the resources to take up the offer, were government employees and politicians. Subsequently these hotels were given out on lease to be run by full-time hospitality professionals. Most participants of the policy discussion concurred that nearly 90% of the hotels, at least in the capital, were run by outsiders, this time the national citizen not being restricted to residents of the neighboring

⁶ Even as the policy acknowledges the lack of reliable tourism figures, because the official figures rely on registered tourism providers and much of the service can be provided without official registration.

districts. Most of these leased out (mainly budget) hotels, the stakeholders contributing to the policy discussions lamented, draw their staff (in low paying positions of cooks, waiters, receptionists) from the region or community to which the lease-holder belongs.

Yet, a narrative supporting the exclusion of this sizable work force could not be articulated as a matter of simply the need to protect the economic interest of Sikkim Subjects who were tourism entrepreneurs. Especially since, as one of the Tourism Department employees pointed out, “by law, we can’t stop them”. This impasse was foregrounded at the end of the first stakeholder consultation meeting when the Tourism Department representative selected to give the vote of thanks appealed to the tourism promoters to continue to give their feedback on how to “stop the people from the foothills, and give advantage to CoI holders”.

State and tourism industry representatives negotiated this bind by characterizing the outside service providers not as non-legitimate labor, but as non-quality labor. Their appeal for exclusion was not mainly to protect the “economic rights of Sikkim Subjects”, even as such a claim was made by a few. Rather their central claim was that in providing bad quality service, these outsiders were damaging the name or brand of Sikkim. One homestay owner, giving reasons for “the roadblocks” that were hindering Sikkim’s growth, told the gathering that most of his guests complained about the bad experience they had with the drivers. The grievance was that the drivers often went back on previously agreed upon prices. This left tourists with no option but to pay up, sometimes almost double the initial price, given the remote location in which the discussion took place. This hyper-inflation was issue especially in peak tourist seasons when vehicles were in short supply. Various participants in the subsequent meetings echoed these concerns. “Our CoI people don’t do this”, a Tourism Department employee proclaimed on hearing the complaints. “See, 60% of the drivers from outside, they are the ones charging such

exorbitant prices. The 40% of our local drivers, they may charge ₹ 500-1000 (\$ 7-14) more during peak seasons”. This narrative quickly congealed in the various meetings. Even as all drivers were seen as guilty of malpractices, the outsiders were accused of malpractices to a greater degree. Based on personal observations, the figures cited to support the claims varied widely, both in terms of number of vehicles operated by outsiders (some claimed the number to be as high as 90%), and in terms of the difference in prices charged.

The need to enforce a protective discrimination regime was articulated in the meetings as a reaction to outsiders who were “killing our industry”, making the judgment appear to be divorced from any ethno-political considerations. Further, the appeal was also made on behalf of tourists, as the main aggrieved party. Various homestay and hotel owners talked about tourists being *pained* by such encounters with drivers (using the Nepali phrase *mann dukhaune* rather than other terms that would depict anger or irritation). Some charged out-of-state drivers for perpetuating bad touristic experiences by “blindly giving wrong information”. As a travel agent elaborated, “the drivers from the foothills, they just don’t know where to take the tourists within Sikkim. Then the Bengali tourists say that there is nothing to see in Sikkim”. While this could be blamed on the driver’s lack of knowledge about Sikkim, the insinuation was about intentionally misleading guests to thwart competition. The specific instance cited was the comments on the Tripadvisor website, that described the cumbersome process of getting Inner Line Permits for Sikkim. One Sikkim Subject claimed that tour operators from Darjeeling were writing these negative reviews under false identification, to discourage tourists from coming to Sikkim, so that they would visit Darjeeling instead which was not under the ILP regime.

Even as the perception of ‘outsiders’ was informed by the ethnopolitics of the region and the historic significance of the protective discrimination regime, it was the mobilization of the

judgement of the category of the tourist gaze, in the various meetings by various local practitioners, that legitimized the call for exclusion of laboring national citizens. The turn to the tourist gaze gave an apolitical appearance to the political contest. This maneuver of mobilizing the tourist gaze to externalize an internal political ambivalence is reminiscent of the contradiction of the non-native cedar in a nativism-valuing biodiversity program, that is similarly passed on to purportedly touristic desires. The next step in this chapter, for us, is to ask what are the elisions necessary to make this narrative work; and what are the limits to such elisions?

The Fault Lies in Us: State Pride, Indolent Labor and Business Prerogatives

To begin with, the charge about the greater malpractices perpetrated by out-of-state drivers could not entirely deny the unethical practices of the local drivers. Beyond the confines of the Tourism Department, while many indigenous citizens had a similar diagnosis of what ailed the tourism industry, they were less sure of their own ability to separate out the unprofessional indigenous drivers from unprofessional national drivers. A retired bureaucrat associated with the Forest Department, for example, lamented the political clout enjoyed by particular district-level taxi drivers' associations, against whom no action could be taken. These district level taxi stands in the interiors of the state are usually run by indigenous citizens. Other stories that circulate, parallel to the ones told in the tourism meetings, in which the culprits are abrasive and unprofessional drivers in these remote district taxi terminals also puncture the narrative of the easy mapping of unprofessionalism on to citizenship/ethnic identity. Similarly, the speculation that competing travel agents from the neighboring state left bad reviews about the process of entry into the state was contradicted by some other testimonials in the meeting itself. One travel agent, for example, described tourists being stranded in the evening at the border. This occurred

because the Inner Line Permit office asked for the visitors to produce printed documents, even as all the photocopy shops in the vicinity had shut down for the night.

The greater problem with this narrative against outsiders was the inability to square it with the complicity of Sikkim Subjects in creating the scenario of the dominance of out-of-state labor. This contradiction in the narrative came to a head with the discussion about the operation of luxury vehicles in the state. As the president of the Luxury Vehicles Association explained in one of the meetings, “the Z number[plate] was for unemployed youth”. The state government, after being approached to create employment generation schemes, had started giving preference to urban youth in issuing such licenses. “Yet today, Z series, 60% vehicles are being run by outsiders. Meaning the number plate is SK [of Sikkim]. The owner is from here, but driver is from West Bengal”. Arguing against those taking a more militant stand about unprofessionalism of national citizens, she insisted that the issue could only be solved by “inner resolve (*man bhitra*), that we will not sublet”. Against the narrative of sabotage from outside, a few attendees of the meeting framed it as a matter of “state pride” that should lead indigenous capitalists towards support of local human resources. One such participant was a young researcher who had also become involved in conducting training workshops for homestay owners all over the state. He gave the example of the pharmaceutical industry that had been booming in the state. He claimed that the industry ended up employing local labor only at the lower level, in the informal sector, while outsiders occupied the roles that were formalized. His proposed solution was better training for the local labor pool, across industries, so that they would rise up beyond the low paying jobs, thereby also being incentivized by a sense of security and pride in their occupation. His interjection shifted the question from what to do about outsiders to why ‘insiders’ fail to or choose not to fill these tourism labor positions.

Pushed then to explain their own complicity in perpetuating the skewed labor scenario, the hotel owners, as out-of-state-labor-employing capitalists had to face up to the central contradiction of the protective discrimination discourse. Given Sikkim's relatively small population and privileged status in receiving national development grants, unskilled labor in the state most likely to fill the positions open in the tourism industry had others forms of livelihood security they could turn to. One of the NGO members recruited into the policy-drafting process remarked, for "any livelihood initiative [when] we go to village, there are no takers. [Villagers] are so happy doing one *jhora* [maintenance work on streams] or one cc footpath." The reference was to a national employment guarantee scheme, which paid minimum wages to the poorest citizens, often by creation of small jobs around the village that also contribute to infrastructure building, as with the concrete footpaths. While the scheme was national, combined with other available welfare schemes, it had had better success in leading to livelihood security in Sikkim.

The contradiction thus was that the tourism industry in Sikkim sought low-wage labor, trying to recruit from a population that could weigh its options by considering conditions of work, of accommodation, work-hours etc. The industry therefore needed labor that did not enjoy the security that the protective discrimination regime provided i.e. outsiders, while urging and being urged to continue the ethos of protective discrimination in its operation. Most representatives of the industry who attended the consultations tried to elide this contradiction, by characterizing Sikkim's unskilled indigenous labor force as indolent, unable to espouse the neoliberal ethos of responsabilized (Burchell 1996), self-investing (Brown 2015) citizenship. Chiding the researcher for not knowing the "ground realities", many budget hotel-owners began recounting their experiences with Sikkim's intransigent labor force. They complained about local room-service and restaurant staff whom they had employed previously, who would go home for

the holidays and extend their leave indefinitely citing family pressures, about staff who had quit the job after half a month because they had made the money they needed to buy particular things they needed, and so on. As the owner of a prominent hotel in Gangtok summarized, “*Mari mari sikhaye, pheri, migratory pattern, naya season naya manche*” (I die training the staff, then they follow a migratory pattern and in the new season I again have to find new people). As other hotel-owners agreed with this assessment, the researcher’s point about the disjuncture between the narrative and conduct of Sikkim’s employment generators was brushed aside in favor of an implicit privileging of capital’s need to find cheap labor as an interconvertible logic. The next section explores how the final tourism policy dealt with the narrative of the brand-devaluing outsider, while continuing to elide the issue of the role of the capitalist’s naturalized quest for cheap labor, and of the livelihood security offered by the protective discrimination regime, in creating the scenario under criticism.

Governmentalized Resolutions: Standardization, Certification, Capacity Building.

Tania Li (2007) in her ethnography of the World Bank’s development and conservation policy-making in Indonesia critiques the mode of depoliticization, wherein problems that are acknowledged to be thoroughly political in nature are “rendered technical” in policy frameworks. In development policy, Li argues, a problem can be framed only when it coevolves with a possible intervention at hand. Paraphrasing James Ferguson (1994), she writes that “an intelligible field appropriate for intervention anticipates the kinds of intervention that experts have to offer. The identification of a problem is intimately linked to the availability of a solution”⁷ (7). My aim here is not to reproduce Li’s binary of a political society and a

⁷ In Li’s theorization, the line between the depoliticizing development apparatus (and its personnel) and politics, which begins where policies meet their limit in the real world is rather stark. So, on one hand politics is screened out in the constitution of “improvement” as a technical domain. The obverse of this are “conditions under which

depoliticizing (mostly international) development apparatus. However, I am interested in exploring how the availability of a solution dictates the framing of the problem in policy-making. Rather than seeing this an essential quality of the development apparatus, I link it back to the specific political impasse about the legal limits of the protective discrimination regime. The technical solution proposed by the Tourism Policy, as elaborated below, resorts to an emphasis on processes of certification, standardization and capacity building in tourism development. How do each of these terms address or elide the contradictions between political demands for protectionism, limits of state authority and naturalized logics of capitalistic profit-generation?

Let us start with the rendering of standardization and certification. “Lack of regulations/standards” is listed in the policy as one of the industry’s four main challenges that it sets out to address (Government of Sikkim 2018, 14). Why are standardization and certification the appropriate technical solutions? If the answer is to be standardization and certification, how is the problem phrased? And how does it help reframe the protectionist issue? The rephrasing of the problem, not reflecting much of the discussions preceding the policy, was one of economic justice. The policy espouses the goal of giving people “equal opportunity to benefit from tourism, [without] limiting [it] to more resourceful and well-connected groups from either outside the State or certain pockets of the State” (ibid, 19). There was little in the feedback provided by differently located tourism entrepreneurs that indicated cornering of income opportunities by privileged groups as a central concern of the industry. However, setting up the problem this way allows for the next two steps. It allows the solution to be one of ensuring just distribution of tourism benefits. Bringing more people into the fold of tourism entrepreneurship,

expert discourse is punctured by a challenge it cannot contain; moments when the target of expert schemes reveal, in words or deeds, their own critical analysis of the problem that confronts them” (11). Thus “government is a response to the practice of politics that shapes, challenges and provokes it. [And] the practice of politics stands as the limit of the calculated attempt to direct conduct” (12).

the policy states “should not be at the cost of service quality or the overall visitor experience” (ibid). And therefore, the call for more regulations, for insistence on certification processes for different participants in the tourism industry can then be legitimized in the name of the tourist, whose experience should not be compromised by sub-standard services offered by service-providers with less resources and knowledge who have nonetheless been given the opportunity to participate in the industry. Lack of standardization, the policy states leads to “negative publicity for the state”, the rectification of which will “enhanced visitor experience” (ibid, 14). However, even as the issue of economic protectionism seems to not ostensibly inform the concern about pleasing the value-for-money-seeking market and thereby defending Sikkim as a brand, standardization and certification does circuitously serve the agenda.

The maneuver here is two-fold. The political exclusion of non-indigenous labor in private economic enterprise in the state is beyond the sovereign powers of the regional state apparatus. Yet, the focus on setting and enforcing standards for tourism service and requiring certification of all service providers increases the ambit of disciplinary control over the labor force through a project of greater legibility of subjects. The first hurdle that the policy highlights is a diffuseness of authority of the state over entrepreneurial conduct in tourism, who are governed by fragmented regulations from a variety of government department such as Urban Development, Tourism, Municipal Corporations, and Commerce and Industries. This allows subjects to evade legibility by evading registration with one or more departments that have under-specified jurisdiction over tourism entrepreneurs. The policy therefore recommends the consolidations of various legislative acts such as the “Registration of Homestay Establishment Rules (2012), Sikkim Registration of Tourist Trade Act (1998) and the Tourist Trade Rules (2008)” that approach regulations piece-meal (ibid, 26). Standardizing the parameters for evaluating the

quality of tourism services, through the metrics of health, sanitation, architecture etc. then would allow for a continuous monitoring of entrepreneurial conduct. It would permit the surveillance regime to implement the standardization codes with “zero tolerance [of] malpractices, [by meeting] violation of regulations with strict penalties” (ibid, 27). The enforceability of standards, the policy foresees, will also yield an “all-inclusive database of tourism service providers” (ibid), to set the project of creating legible, governable subjects in motion.

Where the regional state lacks in sovereign power of exclusion of national citizens, the gap is sought to be overcome through the creation of a disciplining regime that can govern the conduct of citizens’ economic practices and use adequate penalties to keep them in check. The plan outlined is also for mandatory certification of “every group of tourism service provider such as tourist guides, porters, cooks, drivers, etc.” (ibid, 27). The government-run Indian Himalayan Center for Adventure and Eco Tourism (IHCAE) is the proposed agency for imparting compulsory and repeated training. That the main target of this expanding and tighter disciplinary regime is the national citizen operating in the state is obfuscated in the policy writing. The second part of the maneuver is that in appearing to target new entrants into the business – the less “resourceful” and less “well-connected” service providers whose standards will have to be brought up to touristic expectations – the wording of the policy also implicitly allays fears of well-placed Sikkim Subjects with stakes in the industry, who might worry about being the target of the surveillance regime envisioned.

While the emphasis on standardization and certification allows the regional state to circumvent the problem of its lack of power to sovereignly exclude national citizens, a turn to the language of “capacity-building” seeks to similarly elide the issue of the complicity of Sikkimese entrepreneurs in perpetrating the skewed labor ratio. While acknowledging the reservations of

the tourism professionals about the “willingness of local youths to be involved in this sector”, the policy frames the issue as one of the “creation of an enabling environment” (ibid, 14). The enabling environment prescription is however left adequately under-specified. It does not point to the under-payment of labor in the sector. Nor does it invoke any political rhetoric of state pride that should be espoused by local employers and employees, as was contentiously discussed in the meetings. Rather the diagnosis offered is of a “significant mismatch between the skills that the trainees develop and the requirement of the sector” (ibid, 25). Here rather than repeat the problematic language of indolent, non-responsibilized labor, the focus is shifted to the section of the labor-force that is formally trained in the state’s hotel management institutes and are then over-qualified for most of the jobs that are available in the lower rungs of the industry⁸. Further, in what seems to be a deferral of the thorny impasse between economic protectionism and the imperative of low-cost labour for business, the policy recommends that a “comprehensive analysis shall be undertaken by the department of the needs and gaps in terms of existing capacity building programmes” (ibid).

The language of building “skills and capacity for quality service delivery, through consistent human resource development” (ibid) seems to fall back on a developmentalist “will to improve” (Li 2007), that misrepresents the local labor force’s non-participation in the tourism sector as an issue of lack of qualification rather than of mismatched monetary and non-monetary expectations. The objective listed in the policy is “revisiting the curriculum of the courses on tourism being offered in the state by various institutes and actors, to bring uniformity in curriculum content and to make these more relevant” (Government of Sikkim 2018, 25). If the

⁸ Another complexity of the tourism landscape is that some entrepreneurs see Sikkim as lagging behind in becoming a luxury tourism destination with internationally known operators because of its protective discrimination regime. The need to lease property is cited as a reason for larger tourism players not investing on the state.

issue, as expressed in the meetings, was one of over-qualified professionals seeking top-tier salaries on one hand, and hotel owners themselves having to train their low-wage staff on the other, it is not quite clear what problem the directive of uniformity of training and curriculum seeks to solve; other than avoiding addressing the contradiction between the economic security provided by the protective discrimination regime and capital's need for cheap labor.

Lastly, the policy, in recommending how the state should intervene on the protectionist issue in the free market, appears also to reinforce the class hierarchies that prevail in the politics of exclusion globally; be it in the ways in which immigrant white-collar workers living in high-rises in Mumbai are granted access to water, while long-term immigrants in settlement are demonized for expropriating resources that “sons of the soil” deserve (Anand 2017) or the vilification of poor immigrants from East Asia to Vancouver while rich East Asian investors are able to manipulate laws to suit their interest (Ong 2005). Sikkim's tourism policy envisages a wider and deeper surveillance and governance regime for cooks, porters and drivers, seeking to subject them to repeated certification courses and evaluations. The opportunity cost in terms of revenue or wage losses during the times spent at these courses is not addressed, either for Sikkim Subjects or national citizens who occupy these lower-rung positions. While for these positions the approach is one of disincentives, for the better-off local entrepreneurial class that is usually blamed for giving away employment opportunities to outsiders, the policy recommends a process of incentivization. This includes offering “support in marketing, travel support for participating in tourism marts, rebate in electricity tariff, [and] awards” for entrepreneurs running their businesses instead of leasing them out (Government of Sikkim 2018, 38). Additionally, the policy also recommends “institutional financing on soft terms for encouraging local entrepreneurs to take part in tourism ventures” (ibid).

My aim in this section has been, through the illustration of the tourism sector in Sikkim, to offer insight into how the stress on regimes of exclusion in the northeast, from modes of developmentalism that draw outside populations, is manifested and addressed. My first task has been to be attentive to the disjuncture in the framing of the problem in everyday affective terms and in official structured policies. My insight here is that the turn to market logics, to concerns about quality and standards, allows for an avoidance of the more contentious political language of framing the issue of the place of outsiders in the local economy. While eliding this overtly political language, the emphasis on quality assurance nonetheless allows for the envisioning of an apparatus of surveillance and legibility that grants the state some oversight of the subjects in question, in the absence of more direct sovereign powers of exclusion. Thus, the malleable tourist gaze yet again comes to play a pivotal role in an ethnopolitics of recognition, unmoored from the actual voice, physical presence and self-stated demands of tourists. This re-entrenchment of state authority, exercised by speaking for the desires of the tourist gaze, I have highlighted, comes at the cost of indiscriminate surveillance over low-wage tourism laborers even if they are indigenous citizens. The issue of complicity of Sikkim's capitalist class meanwhile remains unquestioned. This section has traced how instead of simply citing ethnopolitical differences, boundaries of exclusion are drawn in tourism practice along lines of good or bad quality service. The next section explores how such boundaries are legitimized, and such legitimizations questioned, in conservation practice.

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE, SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE AND MARKETIZED KNOWLEDGE

Like the migrant labor that fuels the tourist sector, the environmental sector in Sikkim has its fair share of "outsiders". These include national citizens working in international environmental NGOs, environmental experts commissioned for governmental and

nongovernmental environmental research, and some higher-level bureaucrats in the Forest Department who have been posted to Sikkim⁹. In this scenario, the ideal of a protective discrimination regime is negotiated on the terrain of environmental knowledge, i.e. the politics of belonging manifests as the politics of environmental knowledge production. Below, I trace two particularly contentious moments of environmental knowledge generation in the state during my fieldwork, highlighting how political-cultural inclusion/exclusion is negotiated through these moments. Ways in which the production of scientific knowledge, beginning in colonial times, has relied on the labor and know-how of local communities, without crediting them, has been well-documented (Endersby 2008; Sivaramakrishnan 1999). In post-colonial times, scholars have analyzed the power of national scientists, in terms of how they negotiate a subaltern position in a global hierarchy and yet a position of privilege vis-à-vis local communities (Lowe 2006; Hayden 2003a). This chapter asks how these historical hierarchies in ecological science are engaged with in Sikkim, either to serve or to challenge an ideal of a protective discrimination regime on the frontier.

Politics of a Bird Survey: Governing the Avian Population

The biodiversity conservation discourse puts strong emphasis on the enumeration of species. This emphasis has come under some criticism, with Bowker (2000) likening it to taking inventory of items in a house while it is on fire. Hayden (2003a, 53) sees this mode of enumeration to be a result of a neoliberal outlook where “the unknown potential of genes, species, and ecosystems represents a never-ending biological frontier of inestimable but certainly

⁹ Before Sikkim’s merger, the deputation of mainland officers from the Indian Administrative Services to Sikkim was a source of contention, with local officers complaining about being overshadowed by them. The kingdom saw this as another way of India curtailing its sovereignty (Cooke 1980; Hiltz 2003). Some of this suspicion of outside administrators has remained in the post-merger scenario.

high value”. Writing at a moment when bioprospecting was seen as highly promising, in Hayden’s formulation the power of taking inventory of nature comes from the ability to then make it profitable. Today, beyond bioprospecting, other means for marketization include ecotourism, payment for ecosystems service (PES) etc. Taking a more Foucauldian approach to the power entailed in the inventory of biodiversity, Youatt (2008) characterizes it as a form of biopower. Her point is that when the human ‘population’ came into existence as an object of knowledge-power, sovereignty morphed into governance for the good of the population. Biodiversity censuses can be taken as the next step, in the widening of this population to include other species, not merely as bluescreens, but as subjects¹⁰. Power for scientists involved in such census operations comes from their ability to constitute and know this population, through their ability to steer scientific prerogatives that make the census possible. The allure of the census, she suggests, “rests partly on the way that biodiversity scientists are able to tap into discursive power, particularly the seductive power of discourses like panopticism and discovery” (397). Both this power to monetize and the power to constitute a population, I highlight, are at stake in the controversy over the survey of birds in Sikkim.

The problem began with the SBFP project commissioning a bird survey as a part of its initiative. The survey was outsourced to a local ornithological society. Through the duration of my fieldwork, the knowledge generated from this survey was the subject of a protracted contest between the two parties, mapped onto the outsider-insider cleavage in the state. The dispute began with the problem of monetary compensation. The society complained that they were being underpaid, that funds were not being regularly disbursed, and that the FD, with an ‘outside’

¹⁰ The caveat she puts is that the project of self-governance that population science enabled for humans has limited traction in non-human species.

officer as its point-person, was piling other responsibilities onto the surveyors. As one of my interlocutors who had been part of the surveying team lamented, “there were so many days when I would be out in the field and not even eat food”. He also expressed displeasure at being asked to conduct ‘sensitization workshops’ in the villages near which the survey was taking place; a duty that was not part of the original agreement. Such points of conflict congealed soon into an antagonism between the “local boys”, as they came to be referred to, who spearheaded the ornithological society, and the particular outlook of the Forest Department which valued outside researchers more than the locals. The particularity of the dispute was scaled up to a larger criticism of misrecognition of the environmental knowledge of indigenous citizens. The society pitted itself against previous avian enumeration projects that had been carried out by non-local researchers, that they implied were better paid and respected than them.

In staking its claim to recognition, the society articulated a binary of environmental researchers. The subjects of their criticism, which became well-known in the conservation circles of Sikkim, were the “desktop researchers”, i.e. out-of-state personnel who generated knowledge about the state, either through governmental or non-governmental commissions. The local boys accused the former of inflating the bird species diversity count in the state. The accusation was that relying on older research/censuses, many studies that had been commissioned in recent years, undertaken by these “outside experts”, listed species that had not recently been seen in the landscape. As another core member of the society told me during a conversation, “they say there are 693 species of butterflies and birds in Sikkim. But they don’t have photographs. How can I believe them? I want to see all the species.... I believe [the number is] only 300”. The claim being made for a privileging of biocultural nativism was not on the basis of an idealized indigenous knowledge standing in opposition to scientific knowledge. The case made by the

society for local knowledge stands close to the scholarly call to de-essentialize an understanding of indigenous knowledge (Agrawal 1995; Robbins 2003), as a mode of “perceptual engagement, rather than intergenerationally transmitted knowledge systems” (Lauer and Aswani 2009, 326). The claims that local environmental actors were making positioned them as better scientists, rather than situating them as outside of the hegemonic scientific apparatus. If as Youatt writes, constituting a population as the subject of knowledge is a source of power in biodiversity surveys, the local boys sought to claim this power for themselves; and delegitimize the claims of outsiders by questioning their ability to accurately constitute this non-human population.

Outsiders Push Back: Of Commercially-Motivated Knowledge

As the controversy surged, the ornithological society also increased its presence in the state. It undertook its own ‘environmental awareness building’ programs, met with politicians, and printed posters with a limited enumeration of birds and butterflies of the state to be distributed to schools to aid environmental education. Their activities implicitly and sometimes explicitly served to create an exclusionary imaginary about legitimate representatives and knowledge-producers of/about Sikkim’s nature. How did non-local researchers, as the other of this imaginary, negotiate their position?

While the ornithological society pushed for a validation of their local knowledge, the SBFP personnel began expressing their own dissatisfaction with the results of the survey that had been shared with them. The impasse reached between the parties, somewhat ironically, in light of the criticism of the outsider’s inability to provide visual documentation of their knowledge claims, was due to the ornithological society’s reported refusal to share all the photographs and information from the survey. This gave the SBFP grounds to push back on the binary of positions that the society had created, since a moral claim could be made about the ethics of

sharing of scientific knowledge more broadly, and the benefits of sharing biodiversity knowledge in particular, which is an avowed goal of the global discourse¹¹. This refusal was legitimized by members of the society as protecting their right to their intellectual labor. As one of my two interlocutors in the society told me, “they take our research and make it their own”. Against a commonsensical assumption that researchers paid to carry out a survey owe the commissioning agency the data generated, members of the society applied their ethical parameters, discerning how much data should be given to the project as a fair exchange for the money they received.

Given the general affective investment in the protective discrimination regime in the state, and the emphasis in the biodiversity discourse itself on valuing local knowledge, contestations of the claims of the “local boys” were muted and sporadic. One of the national consultants for the project, expressing frustration with the society’s close guarding of their findings, began discussing alternative models of conducting a census that rely on tourists and amateur naturalists, to crowd-source and cross-reference data about particular species¹². Even as outside researchers often avoided taking overtly antagonistic positions, they did have their own criticism of the exclusionary bio-cultural imaginary within which this particular contest was nested. This became evident to me from a particular humorous take on the controversy. The joke,

¹¹ Nationally, this global ideal of a comprehensive and transparent register of the world’s biological diversity has translated into the project of a People’s Biodiversity Register, under the Biodiversity Act of 2002 (notified in 2004). It specifies that “every local body shall constitute a Biodiversity Management Committee within its area for the purpose of promoting conservation, sustainable use and documentation of biological diversity including preservation of habitats, conservation of land races, folk varieties and cultivars, domesticated stocks and breeds of animals and microorganisms and chronicling of knowledge relating to biological diversity”. The provision is for digitized documentation of locally available bio-resources, specified as “plants, animals and microorganisms or parts thereof, their genetic material and by-products (excluding value added products) with actual or potential use or value [excluding] human genetic material”. Sikkim’s Biodiversity Board had, during my fieldwork, begun work on facilitating such documentation through village-level Biodiversity Management Committees. Critics faulted the board for being much slower than those operating in other states.

¹² This model has been implemented nationally in the concept of the Big Bird Day, started by non-governmental conservationists in Delhi. It is now an annual national day-long enumeration event. Alongside amateur birders, some state Forest Departments have also started participating in the count. Pro-tourism conservationist in the country also legitimize the presence of tourists in forests, arguing that tourists help in enumeration and monitoring of key species.

told during a discussion among a group of outsiders (including me¹³), rested on the importance of the Buddhist concept of *beyul* in signifying Sikkim's ecology. This ideal, of the whole of Sikkim as a sacred Buddhist geography, can lend itself to an implicitly exclusionary contemporary imaginary of the landscape.

Travelling in Sikkim (and the surrounding Buddhist Himalayan region), a tourist is quite likely to encounter the term *beyul*, if not on some webpage describing the landscape, then as the name of a homestay, a trekking group or travel agency. For Sikkim's Buddhist residents, as well as scholars of divinity in the region, *beyul* (*sbas yul* in Tibetan transliteration) means sacred hidden land, and is a central character of this landscape (Balikci 2008; Mullard 2011). As Balikci (ibid, 87-88) elaborates, drawing on a 1908 treatise on the history of Sikkim attributed to the then king and queen,

The land was initially blessed... in the eighth century by Guru Rinpoche who exorcised the land of all evil spirits, and rid it of all obstacles that would tend to obstruct or disturb the course of devotional practices. Prophetic books were compiled and hidden by him in rocks so as to be rediscovered in later times [Some *beyuls* were quiet refuges set aside for meditation, others, like Sikkim, were places for lay people to settle, while escaping from political turmoil]. Treasures were hidden in one hundred and eight secret mines and stores to render this land productive, healthy and harmonious as well as to facilitate the

¹³ My position as an outsider was always a matter of fine-grained delineations, made by my interlocutors in specific contexts, rather than a fixed judgement that endured throughout my fieldwork. The nature of long-term ethnographic engagement separated me from the more vilified professional expert researchers, seen as uninterested in local dynamics. However, my identity as an Indian citizen also did not allow me to be slotted with the more benevolently perceived foreign ethnographer, whose stakes in issues come to be seen as truly neutral. As a substantial part of my fieldwork occurred with NGOs peopled by national citizens, some of my other interlocutors ascribed a position to me based on this association. Yet such presumptions were not always uniform. When discussing the plans of withholding data from the SBFP, my interlocutor with the ornithological society included me in his circle of vulnerable researchers exploited by the project. By then we had known each other for several years, as he was one of my first acquaintances in the field. Skeptical of my arrangement of participant observation with SBFP that had me also contributing labor to the project, he warned me to not share all my research results with them.

spread of the Dharma. [Guru Rinpoche then] tamed all the supernatural beings of the land, including the mountain god Kangchendzönga, binding them through solemn oaths into being protectors of the faith and to refrain from causing harm to sentient beings.

The founding of the Buddhist kingdom in 1642 CE then, by the Nyingma-pa sect seeking refuge from persecution in Tibet, is seen as the fulfilling of this prophecy, i.e. the “opening [of] the hidden land”, as Mullard (2011) encapsulates in the title of his book. Both Balikci and Mullard point to the ideological work done by this origin mythology, with the latter taking a critical look at “the transformation of prophetic and religious literature into the Sikkimese historical tradition” (12). What is particularly significant for us is that the understanding of *beyul* – as a land of fertility, medicinal herbs, curative waters, and protective mountain deities under oath to cause no harm to sentient beings – lends itself to the idealization of an indigenous conservation ethic, where observers see “a potential for environmental sustainability informed by Tibetan culture and Buddhist praxis” (Terrone 2014, 461). The inscription of the Khangchendzonga National Park as a cultural and natural heritage site by UNESCO, based on these claims about sacred geography, attests to the hegemonic strength of this ideal in the region.

Given the centrality of this religious belief in undergirding a potentially ethnonationalist idealization of Sikkim’s nature, it was not surprising that *beyul* would be the target of the outsiders’ subversive humor. Discussing the latest developments in the bird survey saga, one of the non-local conservationists explained the SBFP project’s position. SBFP had the mandate to marketize conservation, and so wished to use the data from the bird survey to develop more lucrative bird watching trails and zones. “For that the society has to include the details about the exact place of sightings, frequency etc. no?” asked one of the other persons in the room. “Yes. But that they [the local boys] can’t tell you. That is like *beyul*”, came the sarcastic reply, received

by stunted laughter. While people sometimes alluded to the ways in which the ideal of *beyul* short-changes the culturally diverse, non-Buddhist environmental practices in the state, given the affective stakes in reiterating Sikkim's distinctiveness within India, and the hegemonic idealization of sacred geographies in paradigms of conservation-from-below¹⁴, no one in the ecological circles expressed an outright skepticism of this mode of sacralizing the landscape within environmental discourses. The joke would probably not be repeated to a larger audience.

Yet it was illuminating of the out-of-state actor's critical evaluation of the position espoused by the ornithological society. Their counter-argument rested on casting aspersions on the meaning of *beyul* turning from a sacred hidden land to a monetarily profitable hidden land. The indigenous citizens at the forefront of the ornithological society were also commercial birding guides. Jokingly using the term *beyul* to refer to the birding guides' protectiveness about their environmental knowledge helped suggest a motivated aspect in their guarding of knowledge: not as a religiously-inflected political defense of one's homeland but as a purely commercial protection of trade secrets. The joke therefore sought to delegitimize the position of the local boys that might draw on the romanticization and sacralization of indigenous knowledge.

As a counter-argument this joke however had its limitations. The discourse of biodiversity, and the knowledge generated from it has always been market-oriented (Hayden 2003b). As scholars have critically interrogated, the concern for ensuring just compensation for use of indigenous resources, and indigenous knowledge about these resources, has led to a great emphasis on the mechanisms of delineating intellectual property rights (Pearson 2013; Sillitoe 1998) and of ensuring fair compensation in bioprospecting enterprises (Brush 1999; Peterson

¹⁴ See for instance the various academic and conservationist writing on the significance of sacred groves around the world as panacea for conservation (Gadgil 2018; Nyamweru 1996; Ormsby 2013). This has also generated some criticism that problematizes such idealization (Freeman 1999; Kent 2013; Zeng 2018).

2001; Shiva 2007). Given this genealogy, the criticism of the ornithological society's position being economically motivated rather than purely cultural or environmental does not carry much potential to delegitimize their position. However, it does call for attention to the way in which this contest of nativist claims to environmental knowledge is inextricably linked to ideals of economic protectionism, even when arguments are put forward in cultural and ecological terms. The power over nature at stake in these contests is inextricably both economic and biopolitical.

The limitation of this critique also lies in the fact that it reproduced a liberal cunning rather than overtly challenging the “dangers of belonging” (van Schendel 2011). The aspersion cast on the ‘local boys’ is reminiscent of Povinelli’s (2002) critique of the recognition granting liberal subject who is suspicious of indigenous claims made from motivated positions. She has highlighted the oppressive nature of this demand, where indigenous culture and action is expected to be “pure” in ways that are impractical and ahistorical. Thus, the joke is perceptively diagnostic of the exclusionary tendencies that undergird the deployment of religio-cultural imaginaries of placemaking in conservation and biodiversity practice. Yet its subversive potential is limited by its own judgment of indigenous subjectivity that implicitly sets up a binary of authenticity/inauthenticity. Rather than challenging the essentialisms of discourses of indigeneity, the joke-as-critique appear to re-entrench them.

Discovery narratives and politics of “credit seeking”.

While the controversy over the bird survey involved the indigenous environmental researchers and SBFP, with outside conservationists and researchers implicated indirectly, the controversy over the sighting of a snow leopard in the state pitted an international conservation NGO, run by national citizens, directly against local interests. In 2016, the international NGO, working on high altitude conservation, was able to capture a photo of the elusive snow leopard

on the camera traps it had set as part of its project. This became a well-publicized event in the conservation circles. The organization's national website carried a report to publicize this work of their local chapter. The report described their pioneering role in having the first photograph of the snow leopard in the whole of Sikkim. This claim was particularly contentious, given that a previous camera trap had already captured a photo of the snow leopard in another district, in West Sikkim. As the local chapter of the international NGO was peopled by out-of-state researchers, the controversy quickly mapped on to an insider-outsider dynamic. It was read as another testament to the purportedly unethical practices of out-of-state environmental researchers. A local magazine also carried the story. While the body of the article qualified this as the first documentation of the snow leopard in the north district, the caption accompanying the photograph again made the 'first in Sikkim' claim, fanning the controversy further.

One of the core members ornithological society expressed his dissatisfaction about the whole fiasco through a Facebook post. Other people commenting on his post interpreted this as a turf war between the international NGO and the other research organization that had the photographs from the west district. The object of criticism for the ornithological society member however was the ethics of "credit-taking" in general. The people in the field, he argued, could similarly take credit for sighting various species for the first time, in various ecological niches of the state. His stand therefore seemed to be that such claims about first documentation made in the formalized conservation science arena overlooked the work of local researchers, who he saw as being "taken for granted" in the whole process.

Youatt (2008, 398) points out that the rhetoric of the global biodiversity census, "taps into complex Western narratives of discovery and conquest of nature (ironically, since the conservation agenda of the census is aimed in part at preserving the wildness of nature). This

rhetoric also draws on the position of social power held by the modern sciences to reveal the unknown to human publics”¹⁵. This trope of discovery has a long genealogy, especially in colonial science and colonial travel writing. Mary Louise Pratt (1992) in her seminal work traces the problematic idealization of discovery by travel writers, whose posture she characterizes as the “monarch-of-all-I-survey” (205). Such writers, she highlights, visited colonized landscapes and “proceeded to discover what [locals] already knew” (202). Yet such discoveries could only be made meaningful and real to Western/ized audiences through their rendition into colonial texts and colonial maps, giving the impression that what the colonial traveler saw was all there was to the landscape (202-204). The ornithological society’s objection seems to align with this line of critique of the narrative of discovery that overrides the everyday knowledge of species that people like the members of the society have – through their prolonged engagement with the environment – with scientists then taking credit for what locals already know.

The criticism of “credit-taking” however stops short of a more expansive rejection of science or call for its decolonization, inasmuch as the society’s objection to the work of “desktop researchers” in the bird survey was rooted in this very demand for photographic proof, to perform their knowledge of the environment. The effort to delegitimize outside researchers it seems is the primary objective in which justifications are drawn from contradictory ideals. Lastly, the criticism of credit-taking/discovery narratives could also be traced to the desire to ensure that environmental knowledge can be profitably marketed exclusively by indigenous citizens, in keeping with the protective discrimination regime.

¹⁵ Youatt cites an ecological scientist, who calls for “faith in the sprint to the finish of the global census, [wherein] unknown microorganisms ... will be revealed. [And] never again, with fuller knowledge of such extent, [will we] need [to] overlook so many golden opportunities in the living world around us” (ibid).

This was evident in an information session, conducted by a few members of the society who had been invited to the Okhrey Losar and Tourism festival, to talk to aspiring tourism entrepreneurs in the village. This event occurred a few days after the snow leopard controversy. Talking of the diversity of species around the sanctuary as a tourism resource, one of the society members cited the example of Ladakh and its ability to earn “lacs and lacs” (i.e. hundreds of thousands) through snow leopard tourism. He directed the “youth” to focus on the enumeration of the red panda, which is found in the Barsey sanctuary. Speaking in Nepali, he instructed the audience gathered in a room on the top floor of the village monastery, “nowadays all mobiles have GPS. You should record when and where you see the animal. Collect this record over two-three years. Then you will know in which season you can spot the red panda in which location. Then you can show tourists around. This is what they do in Ladakh. There are wait lists. Tourists shell out a lot of money”. Coming in the wake of the snow leopard controversy, this information session can be seen as putting forth an alternative imaginary to the process of scientific discovery and enumeration. This alternative is not only concerned about local researchers not being taken for granted by the scientific institutional apparatus, but also about the monetization of the enumeration process by locals to generate touristic revenue. Retaining exclusive rights to economic use of the resources in the state, is of equal concern. Whereas in bioprospecting or PES models, the idea of property and therefore the question of who benefits from marketization of nature is more clearly delineated, with ecotourism as a geographically diffuse, non-extractive use of nature, the exclusionary definition of beneficiaries remains a matter of contest. The model envisaged for the red panda of Barsey underscores this gap, and the quest to close it, through the market-oriented practice of biodiversity conservation. This section has thus looked at environmental knowledge production as a contentious site for ethnopolitics, inquiring into the

legitimizations used to espouse antagonistic positions that advocate inclusive or exclusionary boundaries of belonging. The effort has been to draw attention to how such varied legitimizations are a terrain of ‘cross-pollinated’ discourses, where political ideologies impact environmental positions and environmental positions influence political stands.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has looked into the rub between the strong state policy for a protectionist regime, bolstered by the staunch cultural approval of such a political orientation on one end, and the inflow of non-autochthonous labor force engendered by the growth in tourism enterprise and the global conservation apparatus on the other. Looking at these less overtly antagonistic domains of the politics of nativism within the protective discrimination regime (Baruah 2005) of northeast India, this chapter hopes to have highlighted, is necessary for an expansive critique of the “dangers of belonging” (Van Schendel 2011).

In the arena of tourism, the stress experienced by the regional state lies in its inability to enforce a condition of sovereign exclusion of national citizens in the economic sector, that is also desired by a significant portion of indigenous citizens. The reconciliation of this impasse that the tourism policy tries to effect is to strive for greater inclusion of these outsiders within regimes of governmentality and more crucially regimes of discipline and legibility. Justifying this project of legibility as the need to counter malpractices by outside entrepreneurs who compromise Sikkim’s brand helps an exclusionary political agenda to derive legitimacy from the ever-plastic and purportedly apolitical tourist gaze. All the measures envisioned by the Tourism Department to bring these out-of-state entrepreneurs under the regime of various regulations may or may not become operational and effective. Rather than reading these efforts towards “standardization” and “certification” as manifestations of a development apparatus’ innate need to “render

technical” (Li 2007), i.e. reframe problems to fit implementable technical interventions, my argument is that for the state it serves as a way to respond to an anxiety about declining sovereignty. This anxiety arises with the opening up of the northeast in general, and Sikkim in particular to neoliberal economic enterprises. Thus, even as neoliberalization weakens some of powers of adjudicating citizenship that rests with the state (Ong 2005¹⁶), it also then leads to other expressions or efforts of encompassment of subjects within the authority of the state. I have also highlighted how such modes of legibility burden low-wage tourism labor disproportionately, irrespective of citizenship, while eliding the complicity of local tourism entrepreneurs, whose quest for cheap labor perpetuates the condition under criticism. Moreover the contradiction that remains unacknowledged in the anxieties expressed about the state being overrun by out-of-state labor is that it is the livelihood security that is granted by the state’s robust protective discrimination regime that makes the potential local labor force avoid the low wage tourism positions, which are then filled by outsiders who are “free” to sell their labor because they lack such security.

With the conservation enterprise this insider-outsider dynamic is expressed through controversies in particular species enumeration and documentation projects. The global biodiversity regime places much emphasis on species enumeration, which some have criticized for seeking a panoptical power over life. Desires for native jurisdiction over local nature are however not expressed through a rejection of this global scientific knowledge production discourse. As illustrated, in the controversy over the bird survey, the case against out-of-state

¹⁶ While not idealizing the triumph of mobility and cosmopolitanism due to globalization, Ong contention, is that “citizenship is less and less a relationship to the state, and more a relationship to the self, as in the self-actualization of the flexible, neoliberal entrepreneur who can engage in an array of private, corporate and social practices in cosmopolitan situations”(160). While tourism entrepreneurs from outside being discussed in this chapter cannot be compared to the global circulation of labor Ong is writing about, I have shown that it is nonetheless pertinent to ask about ways in which states react to mobile entrepreneurship in different scenarios.

environmental labor is made in terms of their inability to constitute accurately the population of birds as the subjects of governance and welfare. Rather than operationalizing the categories of indigenous knowledge and scientific knowledge, the local environmental labor developed the distinction between “desktop researchers” and “field researchers” to make an argument for the valorization of situated knowledge gained through prolonged engagement with nature, that tacitly valorizes indigeneity. Similarly, an implicit critique of the trope of discovery, with its colonial baggage, is used to challenge the scientific protocol of making claims about first documented sightings of particular species through the use of camera traps. However, this also reveals some of the self-contradictory nature of the claims made about the superiority of local knowledge, given that in the bird survey outsiders were asked to provide photographic evidence of their knowledge and in the snow leopard instance such photographic evidence was criticized as “unethical credit-taking” akin to the neo-colonial trope of discovery of nature. The outsiders in turn fall back on a liberal cunning of recognition, which relies on pointing to the economic interests that drive the objections raised by the “local boys”, thereby seeking a purity of indigenous practice that is impractical and ahistorical. Both the environmental and tourism settings reveal therefore an uneven terrain of protectionist claims, comprising various ambivalences and contradictions that arise from the inability or unwillingness to espouse a position of outright xenophobia or reactionary rejection of economic, political and environmental cosmopolitanism.

CHAPTER 5

ORGANIC POLITICS IN THE HIMALAYAS: BETWEEN STATE SOVEREIGNTY AND ALTERNATIVE AGRARIAN IMAGINARIES

INTRODUCTION

Sikkim, India's 100 per cent organic state, has won the "Oscar for best policies" in promoting agroecological and sustainable food systems – the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) website declared in October 2018. Against the backdrop of growing anxieties about planetary toxicity, organic agriculture and its purchase have emerged in recent years as a prominent mode of expressing an ecological ethic by acting on a concern for both environmental and human health. In this scenario, a small and marginal Himalayan state on India's northeastern frontier implementing such a forward-looking environmental policy has piqued national and international interest. The FAO recognition is the most recent of the various accolades Sikkim has received for this initiative since 2016 when it achieved this status. This chapter explores the conundrum of Sikkim's growing national and international acclaim for this pioneering agrarian reform, despite the "organic mission" failing to meet various conditions that legitimize the paradigm of organic agriculture, especially in the understanding of the state's own citizens.

Firstly, as a mode of production, among other things, organic agriculture often idealizes "food sovereignty" for farmers. The conventional paradigm of global food security rests on the quest to eliminate hunger through cheap food productions. In opposition to this outlook, food sovereignty through organic cultivation claims to focus on local self-sufficiency that extricates powerless populations from the expropriative agro-capitalist regime (Agarwal 2014; MacRae 2016; Trauger 2014). This is especially the ideal of an "organic mission" in the popular

imaginary in Sikkim¹. Sikkim's organic mission however has not brought self-sufficiency to the state or its farming class. Secondly, neither has it saved farmers from exploitative middle-men by bringing better/premium income for organic produce – as is often the claim among those giving an economic rationalization for the organic movement. Thirdly, even as organic commodities are increasingly sold through large corporations, the ideal of the family farm remains cherished in the organic agrarian imaginary (Guthman 2004). Farmer's sovereignty or autonomy therefore is valued in this imaginary (Aistra 2018). Contrary to this specific ideal in organic agriculture and the general value of participatory decision-making in contemporary development discourses, the “mission” in Sikkim was enforced by the state's political machinery without any explicit legal basis for banning chemical agrarian inputs across the state. Despite these covert and overt consternation about declining production with lower resilience of crops, about consequent income loss and about state authoritarianism, Sikkim has not seen explicit farmer protests, voting out of the current government or significant civil society opposition to the reform. The ethnographic puzzle at the heart of the chapter then is: what prevents the contradictions of the organic mission, these three nodes of “organic discontent” as it were, from precipitating a crisis of legitimacy for the development state?

The aim here is not simply to present a critique of “green-washing” – a charge that seems to conjure up an image of a state able to ideologically mystify its target audience about its environmental credentials, while at the same time displaying an apparently transparent nefariousness everyone is able to see through. With the climate crisis, there is an unquestionable need for state-initiated progressive environmental policies. The aim here is to offer ethnographic

¹ Self-sufficiency of organic agrarian production is also the ideological goal of the state. So much so that in April 2018, the state government began confiscating and “burying” non-organic vegetables that it apprehended, either entering the state or having reached the markets (Choudhury 2018; *The Statesman* 2018).

insights into the complexities of state interventions in the alternative agrarian paradigm, beyond a binary of demonization or celebration of the state. Attending to situated political stakes in progressive environmental policies as a whole and agrarian reforms in particular, as I hope to show, enables us to better evaluate both the possibilities and limits of such interventions.

The role of the state in the phenomenon of organic agriculture is often analyzed along two opposite lines. On one end, self-sovereignty for farmers, against the territorializing state, is seen as the one true metric of success of the organic movement (Trauger 2014; MacRae 2016). Recent years have especially seen increasing criticism of bureaucratization and “conventionalization” of organic farming (Best 2008; Padel, Röcklinsberg, and Schmid 2009; Teil 2014) through the regimes of certification and governmentality-precipitating legal organic standards (West 2012). This is read as a co-option of farmers’ autonomous ways of life, histories, techniques and territorial engagements into the routines of state, and now supra-state² sovereignty (Altieri 2009). Aistra (2018, 214), for example, fears that such co-option will lead to “internal loss of solidarity, resulting in atomization, depoliticization, demobilization, and retreat” of ground-up organic initiatives³. My aim in this ethnography is to go beyond this formulation of the state as simply the farmer/community’s other. Without necessarily disagreeing with the governmentalizing effects of state-led organic agrarian regimes, my contention is that in such critiques the state’s will to power remains under-examined and under-contextualized. Even a critique of the territorialization of state power is better served by inquiring into the particularities of the state’s political stakes in rolling out such organic initiatives. My aim is also to ask about

² Critiquing the bureaucratizing power of the European Union or the Central America Free Trade Agreement which regulate organic agriculture within their dominion (Aistra 2018).

³ Her argument is that growing state regulations catch organic movement in a bind. Thus, “concentrating too much on participation risks falling into bureaucratization; focusing too much on recognition can lead to an exclusionary essentialism; and aiming specifically at distribution [eg: seeking state benefits that accrue from labelling] at the expense of recognition and participation can result in neoliberalization” of the movement (214).

the modes of discursive, spectacular and performative legitimization of this development and conservation intervention. Thereby, this ethnography attends to the recruitment of agrarian constituents into the state-led alternative agrarian imaginary, without presuming people's participation to be equal to their atomization or retreat from a movement.

On the other end, such self-sovereignty discourses are criticized for becoming complicit with neoliberalism. Agarwal (2014) and Guthman (2004), among others, have argued that the emphasis on individual choice, and the foregrounding of the family farm in alternative agrarian imaginaries let states off the hook in bearing the ecological and economic risks of such modes of production. Such voluntarism, Guthman argued, makes the entry costs for small farmers into the organic regime prohibitively high, thereby privileging big agricultural corporations. Further, family farms may also perpetuate non-progressive, gender-disparity laden labor conditions (ibid). In agreeing with a call for strong state interventions, this chapter seeks to draw attention to the development state's anxious quest to bolster its legitimacy and authority in this domain, vis-à-vis the neoliberal market and the "traditional" farm.

In inquiring into the issue of state legitimacy in organic interventions, this chapter analyzes "Organic Sikkim" as a political "brand" developed by the state. To see the organic phenomenon as a problem of political brand-building is to attend to the narrative, performative, and discursive aspects of the phenomenon, bringing into relief the ways in which organic agriculture is more than just chemical-free production. As Nakassis (2012, 628 citing Sidney Levy [1955, 34]) elaborates about the fundamental characteristic of branding, "a public image, a character or personality may be more important for the overall status (and sales) of the brand than many technical facts about the product". Through the lens of branding we can ask about the values of organic production in terms of its "immaterial qualities [such as] reputation, affective

resonance, characterological traits” (Nakassis 2013, 111-112). The image of the state and therefore the legitimacy of the organic reform depends on such positive value-associations, both by farmers as the main political constituents, and by the larger audiences/consumers. As Nakassis discusses with reference to the history of trademarks, a “brand [is] not a description of [a commodity’s] exchange value, its use value, or a sociological description of either. [Rather] it [is] a description, a set of directions that link[s] the commodity in hand to the figure, or “reputation,” of its absent producer, purporting to trace the commodity’s production history for its would-be consumers” (ibid, 114). Thus, Organic Sikkim as a brand, if circulated successfully not only links back to the reputation of the state of Sikkim as a pre-given fact, but the repetition of the purchase (literal or figurative) and therefore the positive value associations at the consumption end (i.e. in the citation) also builds up the state’s reputation as the guarantor.

Separate from Nakassis’s focus on counterfeiting, my interest in the analytic of branding is from wanting to explore it as a problem of “keeping while giving” the value of the brand, that the state of Sikkim, as its producer, encounters. Building on Annette Weiner’s (1992) work, Mazzarella (2003) discusses how those building a brand, in order to retain their power and relevance seek both to distribute the value of the brand by enabling its circulation among consumers, while also trying to retain the value associated with it for themselves. The focus in this chapter is on the contest for the value of the brand between the state of Sikkim and its development subjects. The Sikkimese state’s authority and legitimacy rests on the ability to “keep” the (immaterial) political value of this “pioneering” ecological and developmental intervention, while also “giving” its value, specifically to the farmers, and more broadly to the development subjects of the state, so as to retain its populist credentials. Farmers, at some level, can claim equality with the state as co-producers of Organic Sikkim (at least materially), but also

need to be cast in a hierarchically lower position as subjects of the development state. This is therefore another specific iteration of the larger problem explored in this dissertation about the state's anxiety in implementing neoliberal development programs that purportedly empower citizens, and in the process make subjects less beholden to the authority of the state. Framing state-society relations in organic agriculture in terms of this contest of value, I hope, takes us beyond both broad-strokes criticism of state sovereignty that may end up romanticizing farmer's autonomy, while also being attentive to state maneuvers towards consolidation of authority that elide thorny questions of livelihood security, democratic decision-making and the long-term economic sustainability of green developmentalism.

To outline what follows, the next section begins with explaining Sikkim's meteoric rise as a pioneer in large-scale organic agricultural production, the zenith of which was the 2016 "Organic Festival" to mark the completion of the certification process. This brought the Prime Minister of the country to Sikkim, along with unprecedented national and international attention. The following section details the lines of organic discontent as it were, among Sikkim's farmers, its agriculture bureaucracy and other citizens. The chapter then analyses how these discontents are mediated discursively and performatively while building the "Organic Sikkim" brand.

Such mediations, I argue, are made possible through three ambivalent nodes of value of the organic phenomenon, which the state capitalizes on. The first maneuver of keeping-while-giving revolves around the ambivalence of "tradition" or "innovation", as the characterological trait to be associated with the brand of Organic Sikkim. While the state wishes to be seen as innovative creator of a brand, the notion of continuity with traditions is used to avoid connotations of being an authoritarian regime that is disrupting the lives of farmers in the process. The second ambivalence has to do with the reputation to be built for the state from the

brand being as one of delivering farmers from the market or delivering them to it. As analyzed in the third chapter with respect to the tourist gaze, while the neoliberal state pushes its subjects towards the market, it is anxious that its role as political patron will diminish if the market becomes the new economic patron for frontier citizens. This ambivalence about the market in a developmentalist imaginary, as the state's competitor in dispensing development, that is sometimes flattened in the analytic of neoliberalism, is further explored in this chapter. The last maneuver involves an ambivalence over whether the central significance of organic agriculture is its economic value or its value as a source of national and environmental recognition beyond monetary logics. This leads us to focus on the spectacular, theatrical dimensions of the organic mission, especially to the ways in which organic agriculture is staged as a mode of symbolic prestation between a supplicant frontier and powerful center. These spectacular dimensions of development legitimization, that belying the reduction of organic brand value to a purely economic calculus, the chapter argues, are perhaps under-analyzed by Foucauldian or Marxist critiques of development. Specifically, critiques of organic agriculture often lament the compromise of an ideal – either because of vested state interests (Best 2008; MacRae 2016; Padel, Röcklinsberg, and Schmid 2009; Teil 2014; Trauger 2014) or vested neoliberal market interests (DuPuis 2000). The aim here is to shed light on the foundational open-endedness of the values or ideals of organic agriculture that is generative of an unpredictable “organic politics”.



FIGURE 5.1: *The Sikkim organic logo (left), in a Government of Sikkim (n.d) publication (right).*

“ORGANIC WINDS” BLOWING IN SIKKIM

We [the rest of the country] are stuck in the winds of modernity. Here [in Sikkim] we are being inspired by the “organic” winds/breeze. And now this breeze is not limited to Sikkim anymore. This organic wind will spread all over the entire country. – declared the Prime Minister in his speech in the state capital in January 2016, during his much-anticipated tour to commemorate the certification of all of Sikkim’s 74000 hectares of agricultural land. Michael Hathaway (2013) highlights how his interlocutors use the metaphor of wind (*feng*) to explain the rise of environmentalism in China. Winds connote, he argues (ibid, 13) “times of notable changes that are deeply felt engagements, [describing not only] political events but structures of feeling that change what it means to live in the moment and create lingering effects”. The Prime Minister’s use of the Hindi term “*pawan*” may be similarly seen as alluding both to a political event and the structures of feeling engendered by it.

Firstly, to cover the basic grounds of this phenomenon – Sikkim’s journey to organic agriculture began in 2003, when the Chief Minister of the state introduced in the state legislature his “vision” of turning the state “fully organic”. Initially measures towards the implementation of this “vision” by the Agricultural and Horticultural Department moved along slowly. This changed in 2010, when the initiative was upgraded to “mission” status, with a deadline set for 2015. Funds for the mission were pooled from different sources such as the Horticulture Mission in North East (HMNE), Macro Management in Agriculture (MNA,) Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojna – National Farmer’s Development Scheme (RKVY) and the state plan, since there was no separate budget for the mission that the state could create. Meanwhile, another coup of national recognition occurred when *Satyameva Jayate*, a high-profile public interest talk show hosted by Amir Khan, one of Bollywood’s biggest actors, featured Sikkim as a success story. The episode,

aired in June 2012, discussed the negative ecological and human health impact of chemical fertilizers and pesticides across the nation. Organic agriculture was presented as a way forward. While most showcases were of smaller farmers' co-operatives from all over the country, Sikkim was commended as a pioneering state, giving further credence to its political "green" brand.

By late 2015, the organic winds were blowing with great gusto in anticipation of the imminent spectacular fruition of the mission. The whole state was abuzz with speculations and updates about the PM's tour, as preparations were noticeable in every corner of the capital and beyond, especially in terms of various beautification drives. The ostentatious "Organic Festival" put up by the state involved agricultural and horticultural displays at three venues in Gangtok. The local population flocked to the state gardens in large numbers, to see the 20-30 feet tall Buddha sculpture made of bananas, the similarly gigantic Ganesha made of oranges and an enormous Red panda (the state animal) made of lentils – on display amongst a variety of other organic produce. Thousands of people also lined the streets on the designated day to wave at the motorcade of the PM, since heads of the Indian state rarely tour this marginal region. The enthusiasm within the state was accompanied by considerable national and international media coverage. If one were in Sikkim in January 2016, when this was underway, one would not be able to miss the affective charge in the state, whose mood the PM seems to have cannily captured in his speech. Yet the organic winds also carried whiffs of discontent that needed mediation, as the next section will discuss.



FIGURE 5.2: *Organic produce displayed at the Saramsa gardens, near Gangtok.*

THE ORGANIC MISSION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Limits of self-sufficiency

The first crisis of legitimacy of Organic Sikkim pertains to the lack of self-sufficiency of production that is often taken as a hallmark achievement/aspiration of the movement, especially in the understanding of Sikkim's residents. Organic agriculture is often valued for its emphasis on localization of production and consumption (Guthman 2004; Wilson 2017). This calls for shorter food supply chains, idealization of farmers markets, mottos such as farm to table etc.

Globally this particular approach of prioritizing self-sufficiency can be linked to *La Vía Campesina*, as the coalition of farmers for sustainable agriculture, founded in 1993, which is credited with coining the term Food Sovereignty. The movement claims that Food sovereignty “puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies, rather than the demands of markets and corporations”⁴. Nationally the emphasis on recovering especially the country’s seed sovereignty comes from activists who characterize India’s Green Revolution as a World Bank-induced neo-colonial capitulation (Shiva 2016). Nested within this larger sustainable agriculture movement, the declaration of a territory as fully organic carries the expectation of self-sufficient production that keeps at bay any non-organic production and consumption associated with the exploitative, unhealthy, ecologically damaging agro-capitalist regime. Accordingly, in the two-hundred odd-pages handbook produced by the Sikkim Government, titled *Sikkim Organic Mission: Journey of a Fully Organic Farming State* (henceforth called *Journey*), ensuring “seed and food sovereignty” is listed as one of the policy-objectives of the mission (Bhutia 2015).

The commonsensical assumption in Sikkim then, that in a “fully organic state” everyone produces, purchases and eats fully organic food rub up against the citizens’ experience with the mission. “If you go to the local market [in Gangtok], then 90% [of the produce] is from Siliguri”, a government officer told me during an interview in 2016. Siliguri, a town in the neighboring state is the closest market for vendors in Sikkim to buy conventionally-produced food items in

⁴ Its 2007 declaration defines Food Sovereignty as “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems”. FS is claimed as “a strategy to resist and dismantle the current corporate and food regime...It defends the interests and inclusion of the next generation, prioritizes local and national economies and markets”, and empowers peasant by advocating for their rights to use and manage lands (in Agarwal 2014,1248). Agarwal also notes a “shift from an emphasis on national self-sufficiency (as a cry against global hegemony and dependency in access to food) in the 1996 definition, to arguing for local self-sufficiency in the 2002 definition...[till] the 2007 declaration foregrounded family farming (ibid).

bulk. “If the roads [to Siliguri] are blocked for 2-3 days then the vegetable prices shoot up”, he elaborated as proof of his claim. As the candid conversation progressed, he explained that the local produce that farmers often sell by the roadside is not even enough to self-sustain the farm. In 2016, the brand of “Organic Sikkim” was prioritizing distinctive Sikkimese fruits and vegetables such as mandarin oranges and Himalayan ginger. Yet the lack of self-sufficiency, even in the production of such fruits and vegetables, leaving the question of grain production aside, was an open secret in the state.

In a “stakeholder” consultation meeting to devise a new “green” state tourism policy that would embrace the organic brand, a hotelier accused the governmental organic vendor, Sikkim State Co-operative Supply and Marketing Federation Ltd. (SIMFED), of sending its trucks down to Siliguri to buy produce. Even as the rest of the attendees laughed at his blatant accusation of state conspiracy, no one disputed his broad claim about the mission’s limits. An academic criticism of the Food Sovereignty movement for its inability to address concerns about food security (Avery and Avery 2008; Berstein 2013) seemed to be echoed by the citizens of Sikkim.

Limits of economic viability

Such limitations of self-sufficiency are also ecologically determined. *Journey* proclaimed that by December 2015 Sikkim would be annually producing 4.23 lakh (423,000) tons of exportable crops such as ginger, cardamom, turmeric, buckwheat, urd, soybean, cymbidium orchid etc.” (Bhutia, 2015, 7). The catch however was that the state’s 74,000 hectares of Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA)-certified land from which the produce came from covered only 11% of the land of the state (against a national average of about 60% farmland). This in turn prevents economies of scale that make production and distribution profitable.

What this meant on the ground, as an Agricultural and Horticulture Department employee told me was that often a farmer or even a group of farmers “do not have the capacity to fill a standard [freight] container of forty metric tons [with any one kind of produce]”. Various interlocutors described an incident with a German importer looking for organic ginger from North Sikkim. The negotiations went a considerable length, until farmers realized that even when they pooled together their produce, they would not be able to fulfill any significant percentage of the demand. Since there was no cold storage and other supply chains in place as part of the mission, farmers could not incur the substantial costs needed to reach larger and more distant markets. In the villages I worked in, most farmers sold their produce to the middlemen they were used to dealing with prior to the organic mission, without getting premium prices for their products. A retired forest bureaucrat narrated a similar story about the failure of an orchid export deal that he had initiated through his personal global horticulturalist networks.

Given these limitations of production and supply, and therefore of the capacity for large income generation, questions arose about the impetus for the state to undertake a program that was officially estimated to cost INR one hundred and sixty-one crores and sixteen lacs, i.e. Rs (₹ 16,116,00,000 or USD 2,293,021), over the five-year period between 2010-2015. More so since the development initiative did not have a dedicated funding source and sponged off of other smaller initiatives to stay afloat.

Limits of democratic legality

The bigger potential for the crisis of legitimacy for the state arose from a lack of clear legal status of the organic mission. Between 2010 and 2015 various measures were implemented to stop the use of chemical inputs in agriculture and horticulture, which were perceived in various degrees by various state subjects to be curtailing the farmers’ and citizens’ autonomy. In

this period, as detailed in *Journey*, “subsidies on chemical fertilizers and pesticides [were] reduced at the rate of 10% every year to make it costlier and discourage its use” (Bhutia 2015, 9). The state also stopped taking its quota of chemical fertilizers and pesticides allocated to it by the Government of India. It closed all chemical input sale points and outlets, and stopped placing orders with SIMFED for the supply of synthetic fertilizers. It requested the UD & HD (Urban and Housing Development Department) not to issue licenses for trading of fertilizers and pesticides, and requested the Transport Department not to allow transportation of fertilizers and pesticides from outside the state (ibid).

The problem with these comprehensive measures was that up until the end of 2014, there was no concrete legislation that disallowed the use of chemical inputs in the state. The Sikkim Agricultural, Horticultural Input and Livestock Feed Regulatory Act comprehensively outlawed the use, sale, transport, stocking, display, distribution of any inorganic agricultural, horticultural inputs and livestock feed in Sikkim’s agriculture, horticulture and animal husbandry. However, this provision was only passed in the state legislature at the end of 2014, and gazetted in January 2015. Thus, during my initial field-visits, I would find short columns in the local newspaper every few days about the police searching vehicles and confiscating chemical fertilizers being brought into the state. But in the absence of legal provisions that made it a punishable offense, the perpetrators could not be prosecuted. Many of these reports came especially from western Sikkim, known for its potato farming. When I spoke to the potato-farmers in Okhrey where I was primarily studying the tourism initiatives, and to other people I met during long shared taxi-rides to the village, they would imply that this was a risk some farmers took knowingly. Aspersions of criminality prevented frank admissions, and fingers were always pointed at somebody else. However, most people sympathized with the offenders, citing declining production and regular

prices for organic produce. The situation was often described as a no-win scenario for farmers, caught between the state and the market.

The transnational organic foods movement, as Larsson (2015, 784) points out, “derives its legitimacy, in no small part, from its embrace of “democratic” practices of two different kinds: first, by giving producers and consumers a choice about whether to make or buy “organic”; and second, by operating internal democratic procedures that give members effective voice in the continuous evolution of the meaning of “organic” and the methods used for certification”. The implementation of the organic mission in Sikkim did not quite emerge as the ideal condition sought by such activist-academics who posit “popular self-rule” (Trauger 2014, 1147) as the idealized outcome of the organic movement

Given the organic mission’s inability to meet local consumer demand, to guarantee extra-local trading/supply chains to garner premium prices, and to safeguard farmers sovereignty and choice, various forms of popular skepticism were also part of the organic winds blowing in Sikkim in 2015-16. On a particularly hot and dry day, I found myself seated in a shared ten-seater taxi, on an untarred state highway that had been “under construction” for at least five years. The thick layer of red dust kicked up by other vehicles plying the bumpy dirt road gave the appearance of an off-road moto racing event. Coated in sweat and red earth that had managed to seep into the rusty old car despite rolled-up windows, a passenger remarked, “*aba ta baato pani hamro organic bhayo, hai* – now even our roads have become organic, haven’t they!” The car full of physically rattled strangers burst into laughter. Such humorous takes on the development state’s well-publicized organic brand was a recurring feature during my fieldwork.

Yet despite various such implied dissatisfactions, the legitimacy of the Organic Mission and the development state backing it did not diminish to the extent that would engender farmer's protests, regime change or even overtly public civil society opposition. The next section asks about the state maneuvers that act to mediate these discontents. In doing so it highlights the importance of narrative and performative legitimacy of environmental discourses in a popular democracy. Moreover, tracing the state's endeavors at keeping-while-giving the value of organic agriculture also illuminates the open-endedness of the values associated with it, such that a successful organic project needs to be greater than the sum of the ecological and economic aspects of organic production.

BETWEEN AGRARIAN INNOVATION AND AGRARIAN TRADITIONS

Annette Weiner (1996), in rethinking the Melanesian kula exchange as an attestation to the significance of the circulation of prized possessions in making social value, argued that since the fame of the giver is central in this complex of reciprocity, strategies of exchange entail concerted efforts to keep the most valued shells out of circulation for as long as possible. This factor, she claimed, is under-emphasized in circulation-centric readings of this social phenomenon. Adapting this insight to advertising, Mazzarella (2010,24) argues that "keeping-while-giving" also "explain[s] how consumer goods branding creates value through the mass marketing of products while nevertheless allowing corporations to retain control and ownership over the apparent source of added value, the brand itself". A similar issue of keeping-while-giving arises for the Sikkimese state, I argue, with reference to the brand of "Organic Sikkim". As the guarantor of the trademark as it were, it seeks to keep the positive value associated with organic production – be they about product purity, or just/fair conditions of production (underdefined as these value associations may be) – with itself. Yet in popular understanding the

brand identity of organic production is often associated with the ethical small farmer. The position of the Sikkimese farmer as the source of value and therefore co-producer of the brand becomes all the more threatening for the state in its drive towards keeping-while-giving against the backdrop of the discontents about the state's curtailing of farmers' sovereignty. The mediation of this problem, as I will show in this section, lies in the discursive maneuver over the significance of tradition and innovation in the phenomenon.

If we historicize this problem of legitimizing and getting political mileage for state-led agrarian reforms in India, during the Green Revolution the state strategy rested on presenting the issue as one of aggregate consumers to feed. Peasants were portrayed as an obstacle to progress, whose backwardness and lethargy had to be overcome to ensure increased production through technocratic and therefore de-politicizing⁵ interventions. Sustainable agriculture is imagined as a ground-up resistance to this depoliticization and technocratization. Alternatives such as the *beej bachao andolan* (Save the Seeds Movement)⁶ foreground community efforts at preserving seed diversity, against the homogenization perpetrated by the Green Revolution. Given this history, how does a state-led agrarian initiative “keep” the positive value of organic agrarian initiatives, given that the teleology of traditional backwardness of farmers and technocratic innovation of states has become increasingly less acceptable in current environmental paradigms?

⁵ Shiva (2016) argues that along with the loss of genetic diversity, the green revolution in increasing dependence of farmers on the state also compromised the diversity of social institutions that governed village life. We may be wary, as Pranab Bardhan (2005) is, of such a critique of development veering towards a romanticized ideal of the “village republic” of colonial and nationalist provenance. However, inasmuch as the conversation around the Green Revolution remained focused on the technological and scientific aspects of productivity increase, eliding more fundamental issues of land redistribution and other political transformations (Gunasekaran 2017; Ladejinsky 1970), the charge of depoliticization holds some merit.

⁶ *Beej Bachao Andolan* began in Uttarakhand in the 1980s as a loose coalition of farmers and activists, many of whom had roots in the Chipko Movement of the previous decade. This mobilization was to preserve and bring back into cultivation traditional varieties of seeds, as a reassertion of sovereignty and genetic diversity against the conventional agrarian landscape (Brown 2014; MacRae 2016)

At first glance, the state seems to follow the historical pattern of positioning itself within the innovation-tradition binary with respect to farmers. During a televised speech for the 2016 Organic Festival, the Chief Minister of Sikkim talked about how “difficult [it is] to break old traditions and start new ones”. This followed the origin story that had been built into Sikkim’s organic discourse since its inception. Every brochure, booklet, and “road-so-far” document about the initiative reiterates this narrative. As stated in *Journey*, “the government of Sikkim under the visionary leadership of the honorable CM Pawan Chamling made a historic declaration in the state assembly in the year 2003. With this Sikkim became the first state in the country to enact a far-sighted and visionary policy for adoption of organic farming concepts” (Bhutia 2015, iii). The CM’s address in the same book read, “I can recall in the earlier days when we came up with the novel idea. There were doubts in the minds of some; who questioned the veracity of our policy. But today with an immense sense of satisfaction and pride, I can safely say that we have been successful.... Sikkim is now considered a pioneer in the field of organic farming”.

The political and bureaucratic machinery in all such iterations is cast as the innovator and path-bearer. As the 2016 public speech elaborated further, “we explained to/educated/coaxed (the Hindi term *samjhaya-bujhaya*), Sikkim’s public (*Junta*), especially its farmers. We educated all our officers. And that is how we achieved success”. *Journeys* (Bhutia 2015, 4) crystalizes this narrative of state innovation as a well-planned, still-continuing process, where “farmers [will be made] aware of the merits of organic production and provided with the latest technologies in this field”. This will purportedly build on the “massive awareness programmes” already conducted where farmers were trained in “ICS [Integrated Control System] development, vermi-composting techniques, farm yard manure preparation, microbial use, biopesticide production etc.” (5). The innovation and foresightedness of the state begins at the apex with the CM and radiates

downwards; such that “enthused by the decision of the State Government, all the public representatives [i.e. MLAs, Zilla Panchayat and Gram Panchayat members] swung into action...appealing to the farmers in their territories to adopt organic farming” (ibid).

The farmers in such a discourse are cast in the position of recipients of knowledge and of new expertise. The *junta*, as skeptics, had to be led, sometimes against its initial wishes. According to *Journey*, “there were many questions raised by the farming community during the course of initial orientation and training”, about alternatives to chemical fertilizers, fall in productivity, methods of pest control and so on. “Providing answers to these vital questions”, the hand-book claimed, “became the most important activity of the department” (2015, 5-6).

This strategy of “keeping” innovation appeared to be reasonably successful in consolidating for the state the brand value of Organic Sikkim, given that the Prime Minister too commended the CM for his innovative “vision” against implicit and explicit opposition. “There is a plethora of experiences in the agricultural sector that give farmers just cause for disappointment or despair. It is not easy to create hope in such a scenario. The state of Sikkim has accepted this challenge. When the CM proposed organic farming in the state in 2003, must there not have been opposition? Must the farmers not have complained?”, the PM asked rhetorically in his speech of 2016. As he followed up with a commendation of the CM’s environment and development initiative against public inertia, this positive association of the organic brand with the state government congealed through news media iterations. Twitter descriptions by news outlets covering the organic festival and the Prime Ministerial tour headlined the PM’s soundbite that “Sikkim is progressing due to the thought and approach of Pawan Chamling...Chamling has transformed Sikkim into best hill destination in India” (ANI 2016; India Today 2016).

The catch in “keeping” however, as Weiner (1992, 145) writes of the kula exchange, is that “unless the promised shell or another as famous finally enters a path, the owner's own eminence diminishes”. Analogously in organic brand building, too much emphasis on keeping “innovation” with the state may allow it to consolidate the brand value while excluding farmers from the positive associations. Yet in such non-circulation of the political value of the agrarian reform, democratic credentials of the political brand are compromised. The problem becomes one of creating a distance between being pioneering and being autocratic. As *Journey* itself acknowledges, “the initial actions were of course [a] little harsh to the farmers, but to begin with it was necessary to be harsh for the betterment of the state and its people” (Bhutia 2015,10).

This harshness could potentially lead to negative value associations that undermine the political brand. “[Sikkim] is like a monarchy still. This is not something that earns the CM credit, it is like a diktat. It was forced. In Sikkim whatever the CM says goes”, an official from the organic mission remarked nonchalantly, as we sat in a small café down the hill from the office complex of the “mission” in Gangtok. I had heard this explanation of Sikkim’s political climate many times by then, from many people explaining many different situations: an ex-kingdom that has not shed its feudal-monarchical mindset to emerge into a truly democratic civil society.

Yet the legitimacy of the mission rests on this folk evolutionary theory of Sikkim’s political culture not being the only answer to the thorny question of authoritarian imposition of an alternative agrarian paradigm. Criticizing the inability of the Indian state in general to garner popular support for its neoliberal reforms of the 1990s, analysts accused the state of carrying out

“reform by stealth” (Jenkins 1999, 190)⁷ instead. A stealthy play on the ideal of “tradition” it appears, is crucial to the legitimacy of the organic reform. The malleability of tradition in the alternative agrarian imaginary allowed for it to be transformed from connoting backwardness of the farming class that had to be extricated from detrimental habits of thought and action, as was the case for Green Revolution, to a connotation of positive quality of the farming community of Sikkim that allowed them to adapt to the agrarian transformations with minimal disruption of existing ways of life. While in this latter interpretation the state’s pioneering role would appear less ground-breaking and innovative, consolidating the fame of the state necessitates this compromise towards sharing of the brand’s value with the farmers.

In the moment that the officer took to reflect on his first reaction to my questions, he proposed that the organic mission does not create a pushback from farmers because “the idea of organic [agriculture] aligns with [the farmers] traditional ways of cultivation”. While so far, the narrative built on innovation, transformation of techniques and need to train farmers towards such techniques⁸, at this juncture – i.e. whenever the authoritarianism of development becomes a point of contention – the narrative turns to traditional practices of farmers. Changing course, the discourse, instead of massive training and awareness building (Bhutia 2015, 5) dwells on the non-necessity of drastic transformations in farmers’ outlooks and practices.

Journey, after laying out heavily all the innovative approaches of the state, goes on to pose the question – “why should Sikkim adopt organic farming?” The answer, it claims lies in the fact that being “traditionally organic”, Sikkimese farmers “use very low [volumes] of

⁷ The illustration he uses are labor laws which are not changes to reflect ease of business as it were, but are simply subverted in their implementation by state authorities; and the selling off of shares of public enterprises without a visible move to privatize them.

⁸ Such as “provid[ing] certified organic manures from outside” as part of “input support” (Bhutia 2015, 22).

inorganic fertilizer and pesticides; and about 10,000 hectares is under cardamom [cultivation], where fertilizers have never been applied” (2015, 7-8). In 2003, the CM similarly argued in his address to the state legislators that “traditionally our farmers practiced organic farming and hence the possibility of reverting back to this age-old practice is not difficult”. Again in 2016 he highlighted that Sikkim’s “fertilizer use was as low as 7 kgs. per hectare when we initiated organic system of farming”. *Journey* (Bhutia 2015, 20) puts the figure as even lower, at 5.8 kg per hectare, claiming Sikkim to be “the third-lowest fertilizer consuming state in the country”.

The malleability of tradition as a value associated with the brand of “Organic Sikkim” allowed the state to elide charges of autocratically rolled out agrarian reforms. Tradition was also a marker of positive value. As another mission bureaucrat proudly explained, such traditions also showcase Sikkim’s uniqueness within the nation, as opposed to states like Punjab and Haryana with their conventional agrarian practices. In her rendition, it was only states like Sikkim that could become fully organic ones in the first place, since in places “Haryana and Punjab farmers will be up in arms”. Thus, while the characteristic of tradition made Sikkim’s farmers peaceable and malleable to state reforms, it also made them agentively unique within the nation, thereby also making them worthy of green recognition. Tradition she argued, is the “USP of Sikkim”.

Making a similar observation about the organic discourse in the state of Uttarakhand, Shaila Galvin (2014; 2019) discusses the commonly deployed terminology there of “organic by default” and “organic by design”. Taking a Foucauldian perspective on the question of the constitution of people as subjects of power, she sees the category of “organic by design” as a way of making farming practices legible to the state, where forms of acting on the self and on the soil can be read as an “expression of choice, purposive action, conscious intention” (123). Farmers themselves participate in such projects of legibility, as “organic by default” signals a

caste-class inferiority and a corresponding distance from the state. She however also points to various moments of uncertainty and opacity in “organic by design” and conversely of agentive claims in “organic by default”. My point here is that “organic by design”, analogous to what I am calling innovation, in being a mode of marking distinction, stands to lose value in too wide a disbursement of this trait. For the state this cost of losing brand value may outweigh the gain it can make in seeking better legible subjects. Moreover, while Galvin characterizes “organic by default” as a mode of denying the agentiveness of farmers as subjects who consciously choose better environmental action⁹, as the previous paragraph shows, tradition can also be deployed more ambivalently by state agents to bestow a sense of agentiveness on farmers, thereby reframing the lack of choice as a self-espoused environmental ethic.

In keeping innovation and giving tradition as a mode of political brand building, the state nonetheless makes way for the material benefits of branding to be derived by hoteliers, tourism-oriented households and villages, who also gain green legitimacy. Attracting tourists to Sikkim through the “organic brand” as a promise of new avenues of income generation¹⁰ has been a big part of the organic discourse. Writing of the Geographical Indication (GI) tag for Darjeeling tea, Sarah Besky (2014, 95) argues that its legitimacy lies in invoking a notion of “craft”, which in turn is dependent on a “Third World agrarian imaginary” about some primordial connection of farmers to their land. While the GI tag works to “make laborers relatable to consumers, this

⁹ She writes that “organic by default demonstrates continuities with colonial configurations of the relationship between farmers and the soil in that it does not recognize as agentive the ways in which farmers act purposefully within and on their environment to enrich the soil that they cultivate through the care of livestock and the application of manure. Instead, the persistence of agricultural practices deemed traditional—though they are acknowledged to resemble contemporary organic production practices—are seen to be the result of “neglect” as one official put it, or of isolation, rather than intentional and strategic actions in themselves” (2014,122).

¹⁰ The mission had come to posit Budang, in East Sikkim, as a model organic village, taking various delegations to the village for field tours. The Forest Department’s SBFP-JICA project has adopted Budang to be a model organic village for tourism. During my fieldwork, the SBFP intervention was yet to begin in Budang, assigned for the next budget year. The hope was for the organic brand to radiate into tourism footfalls, much more broadly than Budang.

relatability aligns with what consumers already think they know about agrarian life and production” (ibid). While for Besky this component of agrarian life having to adhere to what consumers already think they know is a source of alienating touristic performances for plantation laborers, for Sikkim’s citizens it is also a way of avoiding scrutiny of everyday practice, given the already achieved ratification of brand identity. In Kitam, for example, most tourists would list the “freshness” and “flavor” of the organic food they consumed as one of the highlights of their stay. Yet, when the ecotourism committee of the village held a closing ceremony to mark the success of a one-month stream of ecotourists from the Youth Hostels Association of Mumbai, they lamented their inability to procure produce from the village. They bought it instead from the bazaar in the district capital of Namchi, where supplies come from Siliguri. Similarly, in Gangtok, during the tourism policy consultation, hoteliers were asked if they would invest more money in ensuring organic meals for their customers, as a premium tourism product. Most of them, as businessmen, replied that since “organic branding” had already been a success they did not see the need for further separate investments.

The price of this economic and cultural validation from national consumers is the push towards empowerment and entrepreneurship of hoteliers and villagers, where market relations underwrite the costs of the state’s eco-political experiment. My aim here is not simply to give an empirical testimony about neoliberal processes. As this dissertation argues, neoliberal orientation towards the market is something that is both promoted by the development state and also feared by it as a competition to its authority. To allay these anxieties, the state’s political branding deploys multiple characterizations of the “market”, rather than its singular portrayal as the litmus test of all worth under neoliberalism. The mediation, as I show next, lies in posting “Organic Sikkim” as both a way to deliver farmers *to* the market while also delivering them *from* it.

BETWEEN DELIVERING TO THE MARKET AND DELIVERING FROM IT

The promise of the market looms large in the legitimizing discourse of Organic Sikkim. The Chief Minister in his 2003 address to the state legislature hinged the appeal of the reform on projections that organic produce “will fetch prices four to six times higher than chemical-based products”. This promise of the market on one hand is a mode of recruiting into the discourse “ethical consumers” concerned with fairness of labor conditions, who see their organic purchase as a way of signaling dissatisfaction with business-as-usual agro-capitalist exploitation. On the other hand, it is also a mode of legitimizing the reforms among farmers, with the promise of market-mediated justice. How does this narrative, this brand identity of better market-mediated returns to match the farmers’ superior environmental ethic and practice hold in the face of various discontents about Sikkim Organic’s actual potential of income generation?

One explanation might be to say that in the current neoliberal paradigm, marketization alone and not its outcome is the metric of good governance. As Wendy Brown (2015, 31) puts it, neoliberal rationality “disseminates the model of the market to all domains and activities — even where money is not at issue — and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors”. The market actors’ unquestioned task is to “self-invest in ways that enhance [their] value [and] attract investors through constant attention to [their] actual or figurative credit rating”(ibid, 33). This reshaping of subjectivity as financialized human capital builds on the model of “empowerment” that third world developmentalist states espouse. Such developmentalism idealizes small-equal-to-good government by shifting welfare responsibilities to non-state entities and by capacitating individuals and communities to be responsible for their own development (Sharma 2006, 64)

This “responsibilization” (Burchell 1996) then “redefines proper state work as facilitating productive economic growth – through less intervention” (Sharma 2006, 73). Moreover, this

facilitation of productive economic growth comes to hinge less on actual production. Rather, the “state charges itself with the task of attracting outside capital as a means of wealth creation, and it acts on this task by formulating national identity as a brand in pursuit of foreign investment and tourism” (Graan 2013, 165). Therein “Organic Sikkim” as a brand built by the state is not only a set of products, but also a commodified “essence of the [subnational] imagined community” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009, 128), that in turn is supposed to help local exports achieve world recognition (Graan 2013, 168)

This discursive move of *delivering* entrepreneurial subjects *to the market* has been consistently deployed in the Organic Mission. The CM in his introduction in *Journey* urged the citizens of Sikkim to “reap the fruits of labour” and “take the fullest advantage by producing commodities as per requirements of the market and sell them as pure, branded organic produce of Sikkim” (Bhutia 2015, iii). “Capturing [the] national and international markets” would in this narrative involve “farmers [being] prepared” and “youth com[ing] forward” (ibid). The role of the state articulated here is to build the brand of Sikkim as the place where quality organic produce is available. The farmers who “should be prepared” and youth who are to “come forward” are interpellated as the responsabilized entrepreneurs tasked with taking advantage of the state having set the stage for attracting investment/facilitating export.

Such speeches and written roadmaps are also suffused with the language of “value-addition”. “Young educated youths” for example are urged to “set up small and medium processing units for ginger, turmeric” etc. (Bhutia 2015, 22). Here the value to be added slips easily from the quality of the product to the quality of the producer, as a good entrepreneurial subject who self-invests to enhance his/her competitiveness. The aid from the state, rather than through welfare, comes as empowerment, wherein it promises to “facilitate loan from financing

agencies and subsidies [from the] Ministry of Food Processing, Ministry of Agriculture and other sources (ibid).

We could argue that if the organic market in Sikkim has failed to live up to its promise and hype, if many farmers have been unable to achieve value-addition, to find conducive markets and non-conventional middlemen as procurers, the logic of empowerment allows the state to shift the blame of such failures on the farmers themselves. Further, in the marketized paradigm of politics, where “democracy [is] composed of [self-investing] human capital, inequality [can be seen as] normal, even normative” (Brown 2015, 38). That is, if subjects are human capital in a state, risks of redundancy come not from individual failure alone, but from larger processes such as “fiscal crises, downsizing, outsourcing, furloughs” (ibid, 37), for which no one is purportedly to be blamed. As Graan (2013, 175) puts it, “in an age of neoliberal nationalism, national representation is increasingly realized as an economic function (i.e., representation in the service of attracting foreign capital), rather than as a political function (i.e., representation in the service of citizens’ myriad and heterogeneous interests). Nation branding assumes that the former function can fulfill the latter”. Thus, as long as Sikkim Organic projects itself as successfully facilitating representation of Sikkim’s organic produce, the actual conditions of labor and profit will not puncture the hegemony of the brand or of the state as its guarantor/creator.

However, such a reading shortchanges the complexity of the “market” in discourses of ethical consumption, and of neoliberal developmentalism in populist democracies. Organic Sikkim has to stand for more than simple neoliberal financialization and responsabilization, for the development state to retain its legitimacy. Empowerment and entrepreneurialism, as I have shown with the ethnography of the tourism fair, can be seen as a threat to state authority, if it weakens the position of state functionaries as patrons of their political constituents. To reiterate,

in the context of the Organic Mission, to simply deliver to the market does not adequately help the state “keep” the value of this intervention as a political brand. How then does the brand achieve this balance of delivering farmers to the market while also delivering them from it?

The state’s strategy for this is to foster an implicit hierarchy of markets, that the organic brand can capitalize on for its legitimacy. Fallow farms abound in Sikkim, noticeable to anyone traveling through the countryside¹¹. Agricultural officers and common citizens alike rue this agrarian condition. The problem is presented as one of low profits from conventional farming, wherein, dependence on vagaries of the monsoon, small tracts of mountainous farmland and other disadvantages that lead to low productivity (Bhutia, 2015, 7). Such untenable conditions leave, according to an officer I interviewed, only the older generation to work on farms. The “unemployed youth” of Sikkim (as the most prominently interpellated subjects of the Organic Mission) are driven to become migrant laborers in metropolitan cities, a condition often framed in the popular imagination as one of loss of authenticity and primordial connection to the land, leading to an unmooring from “home”. The organic reform is then legitimized as an attempt to “make agriculture rewarding, sustainable and respectable” (Bhutia 2015, 8), thereby delivering farmers *from* the market. The state can thus appear to deliver farmers from a morally corrupting, less ethically pure market to an agrarian market imagined implicitly as its anti-thesis. It is on the basis of this moral, ethical hierarchy of markets then, and not on the basis of an undifferentiated marketization logic alone, that the state can make demands that farmers endure “harsh conditions in the beginning” for the “betterment of the state and its people” (ibid, 10).

¹¹ Fallow lands, left to regenerate wildly in between cultivated patches have the further disadvantage of attracting wildlife. This furthers the chances of human wildlife conflict, as the animals then move to destroy crops. The farmers of Kitam for example faced more crop raids by peacocks when cultivating next to a wild-growing fallow farm. There were even proposals to offer to cultivate such fallow lands on behalf of the city-bound owners.

Yet, this maneuver of hierarchization of markets still leaves room for winners and losers. Given the newness and experimental nature of the whole enterprise in the region, both on the supply and demand sides, the issue of vulnerability and risk experienced in the market cannot be entirely elided. Here again, the malleability of “tradition” emerges as a narrative strategy. Instead of a discourse of risks as an essential unavoidable feature of neoliberal markets, the state’s move is to claim a distribution of agrarian risks as part of Sikkim’s “traditional” repertoire – in the form of “mixed farming”. Responding to the question of risks and vulnerability, one of the mission officials discussed with me the nature of Sikkim’s “integrated agrarian economy”. “If crop failure [occurs] then animal is there. It is [a] good system”, she elaborated.

The cunning here however is that these mixed modes of income to underwrite the loss of production and of income experienced because of changing agricultural techniques often include the very forms of urban migrant labor for which organic agriculture is purportedly the panacea. As an official in the planning department elaborated, “[people are not] rearing goats and chickens and ducks. Everyone come[s] to Gangtok, drive[s] a taxi”. He detailed the capabilities of Sikkim’s labor force in this regard, wherein “the kids are well groomed, they speak English...are well suited for the service sector”. He went on to discuss how Sikkimese youth can be found in the restaurants, malls and other customer-interface sectors in Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore. Self-investing human capital, as the central figure of neoliberal entrepreneurship therefore becomes the invisible guarantor of the risks of agrarian reform.

In another interview, a mission official argued that if other states implement a stringent organic initiative, “farmers will cry”, because they have “no other sources of income”. While in the official discourse these other sources of income derived from integrated farm practices, rarely do farmers themselves posit “rearing goats and chickens and ducks” as adequate resources to

underwrite potential agricultural income loss. It is therefore necessary, in practice, for the morally-inferior urban market to deliver the population from agriculture, as much as it is necessary, in the state's discursive maneuver, for organic agriculture to deliver the population from this market¹². Again, the attempt here is not simply to indict organic agriculture as being steeped in neoliberal logic. Rather, in showing the necessity of the discursive strategies about the role of the market, I hope to have shed light on how the purportedly all-encompassing normative paradigm of marketization is more ambivalent than sometimes taken to be.

The last point in this section is the ironic coda to this discursive maneuver deployed by the state of Sikkim. Having performed its green credentials, before and during the PM's visit, the state had made a request of "₹ 43,589 crores (4,358,900,000) as special development package [from the centre] over the period of 2016-2021". The justification for seeking this grant was that it would compensate for subsidies on fertilizers and pesticides that Sikkim had foregone. This economic stimulus would then help accelerate the pace of development (Sikkim Express, June 15 2016). Instead of an explicit refusal of the request, the PM focused on entrepreneurship and market-readiness of Sikkim. The construction of the airport (which was finally operational in October 2018) was the cornerstone of the discursive maneuver of the central government as investment-facilitator. "People think the airport is only for tourism. However, it will be most beneficial for transporting perishable goods to markets anywhere in the world. Everyday cargo filled with fruits and flowers can leave the state. Sikkim can scale new heights. Infrastructure

¹² Isakson (2009, 725) highlights a similar scenario, where "the income from market activities actually enables rural Guatemalans to reproduce the conditions for peasant agriculture". Wage labor, petty commodity production and long-distance migration are some activities that underwrite peasant livelihood. "Different market-oriented activities shape the viability of [a] subsistence-oriented practice [of] 'making milpa', where farmers intercrop maize with legumes, squash, herbs, and other useful plants" (726). For Isakson, the point is that such market provisioning safeguards agro-biodiversity of the region. While we can hold this to be true of Sikkim, the issue in this chapter is how this reliance on other forms of market provisioning can only be tacitly acknowledged lest the popular legitimacy of the development state, and Organic Sikkim's brand value be compromised.

development will take care of the needs of the farmer¹³”, the PM declared, quashing the regional state’s entitlement/welfare hopes. The responsabilization that the regional state passed on to its farmers was in turn passed on to the regional state by the center. How Sikkim dealt with this setback, in order to retain its political brand is explored in the next section.

BETWEEN POLITICAL ECONOMY AND POLITICAL SPECTACLE

Critiques of developmentalist discourses and their overt or governmentalizing modes of asserting power, often pay less attention to the spectacular dimensions of this power. The spectacular nature of “Organic Sikkim”, I show in this section, plays a significant role in the state’s brand building capacity. My aim is not to condemn spectacularization of development and conservation as a mode of neoliberal politics of obfuscation, through fetishized images (Igoe, Neves, and Brockington 2010; Igoe 2017), as done by those drawing on the longer genealogy of critiques of twentieth-century capitalism. The spectacularization of “Organic Sikkim” does serve a contemporary political moment, where states increasingly present themselves and their constituents as a brand (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Graan 2013). Yet, assessing how such spectacles draw on ritual, symbolic idioms of authority from an existing political cosmology is just as important in explaining the articulation and reception of this mode of legitimation.

Before I elaborate, let me reiterate what the spectacular aspects were. Upon 100% certification, the PM was invited to be the chief guest at the “Plenary Session of the National Conference on Sustainable Agriculture and Farmers Welfare” in Gangtok, where Sikkim’s agrarian knowledge was to be disbursed to other states. On this well-publicized tour, he then

¹³ The PM, ever the CEO of India Inc (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009) highlighted various routes of individual entrepreneurship and “value-addition”. These included training youth as soil health inspectors, decentralized laboratories as entrepreneurial opportunities, sale of organic fruits to aerated beverage-makers and of flowers to fragrance manufacturers.

inaugurated the Sikkim Organic Festival, staged at three venues. At the Saramsa Gardens, outside the state capital, fifty-five farmers from all over the state displayed their organic produce, some of which assumed the form of a Ganesha, a Buddha, and a Red Panda as pictured above. The Ridge Park at the heart of the city, and its adjoining road was cordoned off to showcase Sikkim's orchid diversity, boasting of "523 species". The spectacular display, as a brochure claimed, was meant to "create a wide platform for the floriculture industry in Sikkim [to] vividly exhibit its true potential in the national and global market". And at the Tathangchen Guards Ground, a few kilometers downhill, a "vertical garden" was on display, with aestheticized arrangements of ornamental flowers like pansies, gerbera, chrysanthemum. The brochure detailing the festival stated that 200,000 visitors were expected to attend the festival, comprising locals, tourists, and representatives of agricultural businesses.

The frenzy of preparations for the festival and the PM's tour, months prior to it, was keenly reported in the local media. As per such reports, gardens were being beautified on a "war-footing", roads were being tarred on "war-footing" (Voice of Sikkim, 2016). Other preparations on "war-footing" included covering archways on the highway with marigold streamers "Welcoming the Prime Minister to the Organic State of Sikkim", and municipal employees washing the tiles on the sidewalks and applying a fresh coat of green paint to the road-side railings overlooking the valley. Each lamp-post along the PM's scheduled route was adorned with two planters. When a few drunk men out of impaired judgement or malice began vandalizing these flower-pots at night, Reserved Forces from the army were deployed – one man to guard each flower-adorned streetlight through the night. By this time there were very few citizens of Sikkim who remained upswept by the organic winds of collective exuberance and anticipation.

Drawing on the Frankfurt school and also on Guy Debord, spectacles are often condemned, as a politics of distraction, that eclipses “real” relations of production and genuine dialogic politics. For Debord (2014, 4) the spectacle reduces all social life to mere appearance, where “that which appears is good, that which is good appears”. Moreover, for him, such “appearing without reply, by its monopoly”, engenders passive “contemplation”¹⁴. Framed this way, a spectacle is the “negative mirror image of theater”, since it anaesthetizes the dramatic imagination through “representation-as-reification” (Werry 2011, 95)¹⁵.

Rather than seeing the spectacle of “Organic Sikkim” as an obfuscation of some deeper truth, located elsewhere, I highlight its importance as site of production of value and meaning, as a dialogue between the state as the organizer/producer and its intended local and extra-local audience. As Werry (2011,95) writes, spectacles in being “not [only] representational but performative, [are] forms of “poetic world-making” that works across the terrain of fantasy and materiality”. In the idiom of the brand, we can also see the festival as a “baptismal events”. Beyond the commonly cited examples of trademark registration or establishment of authorized distribution, spectacles, through similar processes, consolidate “the commodity token’s capacity to index its brand type across a commodity chain” (Nakassis 2012, 628).

Underscoring the performative and world-making dimension of such events, Clifford Geertz (1980) described the ceremonial state spectacles of Classical Bali as “metaphysical

¹⁴ On the nature of this passivity, Debord (2014,11-12) argues that the “spectator feels at home nowhere, because the spectacle is everywhere”. This is because for him “the more [the spectator] accepts recognizing himself in the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires. The externality of the spectacle in relation to the active man appears in the fact that his own gestures are no longer his but those of another who represents them to him”.

¹⁵ Postmodernism, Werry argues, carries forward this distrust of the spectacle, with theorists like Žižek seeing contemporary politics as suffused by the desire for the real which nonetheless paradoxically leads things to become theatrical spectacles; i.e. reality now is nothing but the “semblance of the spectacular effect of the Real” (Žižek 2002,9-10, cited in Werry 381).

theatre designed to express a view of the ultimate nature of reality and at the same time, to shape the existing conditions of life to be consonant with that reality, that is, theatre to present an ontology and, by presenting it, to make it happen – make it actual” (1980, 104). Along similar lines, Bernard Cohn (1983, 209) saw Victorian “durbars” – i.e. events of highly ceremonial and performative gift exchange between colonial authority and native rulers in late nineteenth century India – as creating “the capacity of the government to make meaningful and binding its authority”. Drawing on these theories of state spectacles as performative actualizations, of an ontology more broadly, and state authority more narrowly, I ask here: what view of reality or political brand-identity is presented and in being presented “made actual” in the performance of the organic festival? And how is the authority of the state of Sikkim made meaningful in this ceremony-infused spectacular interface, between the regional state and its citizens on one hand, and the regional state and the central government represented by the PM on the other?

The impulse to dismiss spectacles as distraction is not only academic, but also reflected in popular discourse. During the festival, a few members of the Sikkim Subjects Committee, a civil society group that was unhappy with some of ruling government’s recent stand on ethno-political issues, called the mission a ploy of the state governments to trick the center. Tellingly, they sought to delegitimize the mission as a “*natak*” i.e. drama or theatrics of obfuscation¹⁶ (*Hamro Prajashakti*, 11th March 2016). However, as I illustrate below, for most citizens of the state, the festival held much more complex and agentive significance than can be captured by reading the spectacle as a mode of duping people into passive contemplation. The festival may

¹⁶ By this time any political opposition to the Organic Mission has been obliterated. When in 2014 an opposition party won seats in the state legislature, a few Right to Information requests had been filed about the mission. By 2015, most of the opposition legislators had defected to the ruling party. The joke in the state was how the RTIs that a certain legislator had filed as a member of opposition would now involve an answer from him to himself.

help the state express a form of “neoliberal nationalism”, by representing its constituents as potential investment entities to attract outside capital (Graan 2013). However, the affective, political and sometimes subversive stakes of marginal polities and marginal people in such representations call for an ethnographic interrogation into the open-endedness of the phenomenon. As Werry (2011, 95) puts it, a spectacle “generates networks, connections, collisions, impurities, localisms. [And] its need for participation and witness makes it inherently unstable and porous to the imaginings, actions, and investments of a range of agents”.

Srirupa Roy (2006) highlights the importance of “representative publicity” in producing state legitimacy. Beyond discourse, such spectacles, she argues, allow citizens to “see the state [while being] self-conscious spectators of a staged display of and about [them]selves” (204). The grandeur of the organic festival was a key to staging and in staging, actualizing the power of the regional state as a facilitator of recognition of Sikkim’s populace from the nation and beyond, recognition that the frontier citizens have historically perceived to be in short-supply. The feat of the state lay in organizing the festival with enough pomp and grandeur to command national and international attention. The various large displays and exhibitions both led the citizens to “see” the state’s organizational capacity, and also be its active participants, since the display was “of and about themselves”. Two of my acquaintances, who only weeks before had been somewhat skeptical of the “hype” around Sikkim’s organic status explained to me excitedly during the festival, “see, in a way we do not have a brand ambassador...this way...now Modi can be our brand ambassador”. This narrative of the PM as the state’s brand ambassador – the brand type becoming “Sikkim” itself and not its organic production per se – picked up currency in semi-official discourses as well. Ecology, as this dissertation has argued, in enjoying hegemonic authority in the Anthropocene, has increasingly become an avenue for seeking recognition and

validation of bio-cultural identities. The “organic festival” as a baptismal moment of brand identity was thus also a mode of recognition for Sikkim’s bio-cultural assemblage as a whole.

The value of the spectacle, as a performance that shifts the focus of “Organic Sikkim” from the question of its immediate economic prerogative to one of recognition of the “green” achievements of the marginal frontier, emerges in some straightforward and in some circuitous ways. Straightforwardly, Prime Ministerial visits to the marginal northeastern states are such a rarity in the country that the incumbent could boast of being the only one to have “come to Sikkim and spent the night”. The tour increased the PM’s prestige. Hashtags of being *#modified*, punning on his last name Modi, trended in the local social media. For the frontier citizens, being recognized so served as a collective psychic good (Taylor 1991). The fact that the PM gave part of his speech in Nepali, and claimed to be “enthralled” by the “simple and uncomplicated people of the state” and its clean and beautiful environment were taken as signs of the possibility of the “organic winds of Sikkim” sweeping the rest of country. Moreover, national news enterprises often have one northeast correspondent. Minimally important events in the plains become national news and major events in the hills go under-reported. The PM’s visit brought various major national and international news and print media to the state. Since the regional state was the sovereign host that made the festival happen, the spectacle allowed it to keep the value of the organic mission, while also sharing its value with the green citizens as the objects of recognition.

A little circuitously, even if the recognition afforded to the citizens through the festival veered towards misrecognition, the affective charge of a regional identity or essence finding public expression still endured; more so in the face of a few perceived slights. One such slight was a news channel that aired visuals of China, while reporting on the PM’s Sikkim tour. The

gaffe became the talk of the town¹⁷. A local journalist made public his online response to the channel, and became a local hero of sorts for the day. “We Sikkimese are Indians”, he wrote in his email. Chiding them for not visiting the state before reporting on it from Delhi, he accused the channel both of treating northeastern citizens as outsiders, and of not being a truly “National Channel” in its inability to place Sikkim on the map. The news channel issued a stock reply apologizing for its error and thanking “concerned viewers”. This infraction united Sikkim’s citizens through their shared outrage in ways that left little room for skepticism for the mission, at least during the festival when the gaze or scrutiny of the nation was assumed to be upon the state. The significance of the given-to-be-seen aspect of ethno-politics in Sikkim, that in the era of marketized conservation turns to national ecotourists for example, as granters of recognition, to overcome a sense of marginalization, has been discussed in previous chapters. Given this rising significance of the national gaze in Sikkim’s emergent ethnopolitical imaginary, a citizen rebuked a local critic on social media, “we should appreciate whatever is happening in the state coz this might be first time ever India’s PM himself is coming to Sikkim to praise/acknowledge our state’s achievement over the country. We need to think positively and everybody have to ensure their own contribution towards it (sic)”. The festival performatively actualized a sub-national pride, in which the state’s subjects positioned themselves as participants who bracketed off questions of autocratic origins and current deficiencies of the organic brand for later consideration. As the agriculture and horticulture secretary astutely observed, Organic Sikkim can “engender increased pride by local citizens who are becoming involved in taking care of the planet and its sentient life in a proper way” (Sikkim Express, January 18th, 2016).

¹⁷ The PM’s own YouTube channel was also responsible for such a gaffe. The tour being broadcast live was mis-captioning as occurring in Assam, the next state on his itinerary. As the brand ambassador being serenaded, he seemed to get a free pass.

Even more porously, the spectacle did more than interpellate citizens as conscientious environmental subjects, who espouse the characterological “organic” traits, despite its shortcomings. A few days before the PM’s visit a prominent ornithologist from West Sikkim posted a photo on Facebook of a newly tarred and painted sylvan mountain road with the tagline – *Modiji aate rahiyega* (Mr. Modi, do visit again/do keep coming back). Others joined in on the conversation. Someone wished that the PM would also pass through the pot-hole riddled Tibet Road at the heart of the city which housed its upscale pubs and hotels. Fortunately for the complainant, a road-roller worked through the night on Tibet Road under specially-provisioned flood lights – “on war footing”, as the news website described the next day. The frontier citizens’ sense of a lack of recognition stemmed not only from the lack of acknowledgement of their distinctiveness and worth within the nation, but also it appears from a lack of federal political oversight. Hence the official tour for the Organic Festival was recast as a form of surveillance of the national political gaze, which would keep the regional government on its toes.

While riding a shared taxi during the frenzy of the festival, one of my co-passengers wondered out loud whether in any other state the PM would receive so much attention. “Most likely the VIP goes his way, people go their own way”, she speculated. “I think he should come every six months, for five years. After that we don’t need. We will have reached where we need to”, another person responded to her skepticism. The driver agreed, saying “it is good for our people, see how it unites us, it will build confidence [that] even *our* roads can be like this”. Beyond representing the state as a brand, garnering recognition for the citizens’ ecological stewardship, the spectacle thus created a condition of an implicit audit of the regional state’s welfare and governance activities. In the spectacle, the citizens found themselves not only experiencing the regional state’s power but also saw power exercised over it, through which they

could agentively reclaim the value of the brand beyond what the state sought to ostensibly “give”.

The previous section on the multiple discursive positions of the market in the organic brand ended with the issue of the regional state being responsabilized by the central government. How does the regional state keep the value of the brand in the face of this specific challenge, especially to the economic sustainability of the enterprise? To unpack what the spectacle does or makes real in terms of its address to the central government, it is productive to draw on Cohn’s (1983) theorization of the hierarchical ceremonialized gift exchange between native rulers and colonial masters as a mode of making authority meaningful. Drawing on pre-colonial Mughal political cosmology, symbolic “incorporation”, he argued, was achieved by the subordinate offering *nazar* to “acknowledgement that the ruler is the source of wealth and well-being”, and the colonial ruler reciprocally offering a *khelat* that signaled “the act of incorporation” (1983, 169-70). While Mughal rule did not stretch to Sikkim¹⁸, and democratic federalism does not ostensibly follow such logics of incorporation, as I highlight below, the regional state in its ceremonialized encounter with the centre sought to strategically work out a legible form of incorporation and supplication to strengthen its own legitimacy regarding the organic brand.

Even without turning to the *nazar-khelat* complex, as I describe in the context of religio-cultural festivals in chapter three, a form of ritual prestation between the patron and the supplicant is well rehearsed in the state. A political patron, when invited to a festival, in return

¹⁸ Though Sikkim’s third to last monarch, *Chogyal* Thutob Namgyal did attend the durbar of George V in 1911. There, as *khelat* he received the title of Maharaja Sir Thutob Namgyal, Knight Commander of the Indian Empire, and a 15-gun salute. The prince received tickets to a polo tournament. Instead of the ceremonial laying down of the sword, since the *Chogyal* did not carry any, he laid down the *khata* (Martin 2012). This white scarf, derived from Buddhist customs, is still presented ceremonially to guests in Sikkim as a mark of respect. Martin wryly observes however that to lay down a *khata* instead of draping it is in fact meant as a form of disrespect to the receiver, and not a form of submission as the durbar intended.

for the honor and hospitality is expected to make a ceremonial monetary gift to his constituents. This gift cements his position as a political patron through a ritual idiom. In the Organic Festival the regional state had cast itself in the position of the supplicant and the center in the role of the patron, whether the latter chose to play it not. The agricultural and horticultural displays and the state beautification drive served to signal hospitality to the center while simultaneously signaling authority through “representational publicity” (Roy 2006) to the local constituents. The prestation par excellence, akin to *nazar*, was an orchid – named after the PM, Cymbidium NaMo. (*NaMo* is the popular nickname of the PM, combining the first two letters of his first and last name¹⁹). The orchid became the pinnacle of the spectacle, a public relations coup for the state in terms of its newsworthiness.



FIGURE 5.3: *Citizens lined up to see the PM's motorcade*

Source: The Voice of Sikkim <https://www.facebook.com/thevoiceofsikkim/>

¹⁹ The nickname is also a play on the Sanskrit word *namah* which means to bow, obeisance, reverential salutation, adoration. When *namah* is used twice for emphasis, it become *namo-namah*.



FIGURE 5.4: *The PM surveying the orchid display (left), and a farmer exhibiting organic broccoli (right).*

Source: (Loiwal 2016).

In positioning the PM as embodiment of the central state, as the patron to the festival, the regional state offered various other forms of subtle supplication. As the leader of a right-wing party, the PM's speech about Sikkim's organic mission was filled with Hindu religious metaphors. He compares the organic agriculture experiment to a "yagna" (a ritual sacrifice offered for a specific objective), performed by Sikkim's farmers, who he compared to the mythical Hindu sages. He also termed Sikkim's farming practices as "tapasya" (the literal translation from Sanskrit being "produced by heat", it refers to a personal endeavor of discipline, undertaken to achieve a goal²⁰). The agricultural conference with representatives from different states was described as a "manthan". Only instead of the churning of elixir from the bottom of the ocean like the devas and the asuras, the PM saw himself, as leader of the representatives

²⁰ This comparison seems to offer a rather self-serving intersection of religious ideology of self-discipline and sacrifice with traits that are equally valued in neoliberal responsabilization

(akin to Lord Shiva), to be extracting agrarian knowledge from Sikkim. The Chief Minister, in keeping with the center's ideological leanings, offered his own Hindu gloss to the mission. He termed organic agriculture as "non-violent agriculture, (religiously) pure agriculture, *sanatan* agriculture". While *sanatan* can be translated as eternal, incorruptible, traditional, the operative term is *sanatan dharma* as the purportedly indigenous name for Hinduism. The term *sanatan kheti* (i.e. farming) has not been used as a descriptor since the festival. If the CM's appeasement of the center's right-leaning tendencies was left to interpretation in any of these metaphors, he also explicitly referred to the replicas of the *chaar-dhaam* (four Hindu pilgrimage destinations of Badrinath, Dwarka, Puri and Rameswaram, visiting all of which is supposed to lead to moksha or salvation) as one of Sikkim's big achievements. In his speech, he cast then construction of this structure in Sikkim as an epitome of the erstwhile Buddhist kingdom's incorporation in India, that allowed Sikkim's citizens to worship "Bharat Mata" or Mother India (Hinduized depiction of India as Mother Goddess).

The position of the supplicant seeking incorporation was also made explicit in statement that "we are small state. We joined the country in 1975. That is why in many regions we are backward. So, I pray that the centre give us protection and cooperation". The "khelat" expected, to reciprocate the state's acknowledgement of the center's material and cultural hegemony were a list of monetary support measures. The first demand was for subsidy for bio-fertilizers. The bigger demand was the INR 43,589 crores special development package. As elaborated above, the center did not oblige – refusing to play the patron in the ritual of ostensible incorporation – deflecting instead towards a narrative of empowerment and market-access.

This refusal compromised the regional state's ability to use any external monetary stimulus to iron over some of Organic Sikkim's economic shortcomings. Yet on a symbolic

register it perversely bolstered the state's legitimacy, now as an undervalued eco-political pioneer. The PM's refusal to play the patron could be cast as a sign of an ungracious central polity, that broke the code of honor in a hospitality complex (Pitt-Rivers 2012; Shryock 2012), and turned its back on welfare and risk-attenuating measures for Sikkim's farmers. In a caustic interview, the CM lamented how despite Sikkim being an oasis of peace in an "insurgency"-riddled frontier zone²¹, the center had refused his request for a "peace bonus" that it would have had to otherwise spend on counter-insurgency measures. "The Centre does not give attention to States which do well" (*The Hindu*, Aug 22, 2018), he bemoaned. This was a moral indictment of a center that failed to be "the source of well-being and wealth", for a polity that has "pledged [and displayed its] loyalty" (Cohn 1983, 169). This failure of supplication circuitously allowed the region to pass on some of the fault of the economic weaknesses of the organic brand to the center, while creating a basis for affective unity between itself and its citizens.

CONCLUSION

Continuing with a concern traced throughout the dissertation, this chapter draws attention to an iteration of the anxieties of the development state in the face of neoliberalization of conservation and development, in the realm of organic agriculture as a form of green developmentalism that parallels biodiversity conservation and ecotourism. I analyze the state's addressal of this persistent anxiety about consolidating its authority over its subjects, without ceding its power to the market, while responsabilizing its subjects to increasingly rely on it. I argue that the state's response in negotiating this apprehension can be aptly evaluated through a

²¹ He claimed to have shielded Sikkim both from the Maoist movement in Nepal and the Gorkhaland agitation in West Bengal.

framework of political brand building, which best illuminates the nodes of crisis of legitimacy of this green intervention, and the discursive and performative responses to these crises.

Given that climate change is at a tipping point, strong state interventions towards green agendas are the need of the hour. An ethnographic study of Sikkim's 100% organic status by state decree in this scenario answers the need to critically examine the possibilities and limits of state-backed greening agendas. Such possibilities and limits, this chapter shows, are set by particular political stakes of the states undertaking such innovative reforms. Close attention to such contextual stakes moves us both beyond seeing state involvement in organic farming as an unequivocal compromise of farmers' sovereignty precipitated by the former's under-contextualized will to power, and beyond taking at face-value the progressivism of the state that will right neoliberal wrongs.

In framing the issue of legitimacy of state-backed organic agriculture as a problem of “keeping-while-giving” the value of a political brand, my aim has been to get at a more dynamic understanding of state-society relations in agrarian development and in green reforms. Analyzing organic agriculture as a political brand – faced with concerns similar to those of corporations seeking successful branding – opens up ways to ask about the values associated with organic production beyond its immediate material identifier as chemical-free food. It helps go beyond the immediate settings of production (such as the farm) and consumption (such as the market), looking instead into drawing rooms conversations, public spectacles and political speeches as sites of meaning-making. Even as most of us associate organic production with a superior ethic towards farmers and the earth most broadly, such value-associations upon reflection seem rather under-specified. In systematically asking about these underspecified value-associations of “affective resonance” and “characterological traits” (Nakassis 2013, 111-112), this chapter has

pointed to three fundamental ambivalences in the immaterial qualities of the organic brand. These include the place of tradition or of innovation, the place of the market as the rescuer or the aggravator, and the place and primacy of recognition of environmental stewardship or of immediate economic benefits. In the case of “Organic Sikkim”, this indeterminacy and excess of meaning is mobilized and heightened by the state. This discursive strategy aids the state’s effort to consolidate its developmentalist legitimacy, while eliding internal contradictions and discontents pertaining to the organic reform’s ability to ensure food self-sufficiency, income security and democratic choice.

However, the quest here has not been to simply present a critique of states as agents of “greenwashing”. The open-endedness in the organic brand identity cannot be seen as a travesty or gap that need to, or can be sealed. In a recent ethnography Shaila Galvin (2019) has highlighted the limits of knowability and of transparency-seeking surveillance regimes even in the process of organic certification, which, as the heart of the audit culture should ideally yield the most stable meaning of organic production. She shows how certifying agents in northern India acknowledge their inability in ascertaining organic characteristics of a farm beyond reasonable doubt. They fill the gap in their knowledge instead with a turn to the moral sentiment of “trust” in the farmer’s honesty. This trust in the farmers own statements, she shows, does not emerge from relationships of responsibility nurtured over long-term sociability between inspector and farmer, nor actual “good reason”, but rather “below the level of consciousness”, “as a way of reckoning with [and reconciling] the impossibility of complete knowledge” (204). I therefore take this uncertainty in organic agriculture as a generative condition and site of politics. This indeterminacy generates limits, inasmuch as even in setting good ecological precedent, organic interventions may fall short on other axes such as democracy, self-sufficiency, or

economic security. And such open-endedness also creates possibilities, wherein the articulation of organic brand identity with national and international recognition – given that selling a (sub)national essence is part of the neoliberal state’s mandate to represent its constituents as worthy subjects of investment – has the ability to generate affective communities committed to environmental action despite economic uncertainties.

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