

Chungthang: an emerging urban landscape in Sikkim



The Indian border state of Sikkim has remained relatively detached from the rest of India owing to its cultural distinction and geographical isolation from the Indian mainland. However, over the recent decade state-induced economic liberalisation, evinced in private hydro-power projects, pharmaceutical companies and educational institutes, has been the predominant cause of social, economic and spatial transformation in the region, visible in infrastructural growth, rapid urbanisation of rural and semi-urban areas, increased consumerism and changing aspirations. This paper focuses on state-induced development in Chungthang, north Sikkim, and the creation of an urban landscape that raises questions and concerns about belonging and identity.

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The road to development

A long convoy of army trucks laden with *jawns* (military personnel), guns and horses meanders slowly through the hills of Sikkim-Darjeeling Himalaya to the northern borders of Sikkim. This is a familiar sight on National Highway 10 that draws neither alarm nor panic amongst other drivers on the road, who are at the worst frustrated over traffic jams and delays caused by the passing trucks. The army trucks jostle for space with other vehicles plying the narrow hill roads carrying passengers, vegetables and provisions, construction materials and pharmaceuticals. National Highway 10 is the artery through which hill cities experience globalisation, change and development. It connects India to Sikkim, the erstwhile Himalayan kingdom where until recently – except through Bollywood films, Indian television programmes, isolated army cantonments and a few chapters in history textbooks – ideas of mainland India had remained distant and almost enigmatic for generations.

Prior to the merger with India in 1975, Sikkim was a feudal kingdom that had been territorially consolidated and politically unified by the Namgyal dynasty (1642-1975), which maintained close familial and political links with Tibet. Sikkim was made a British Protectorate in 1861 and an Associate State of India in 1951. Keen to secure its borders with China, especially after the Sino-India war of 1962, India imposed a constitution on Sikkim in the early 1970s leading to its eventual merger in 1975.¹ The 1975 merger brought an end to three centuries of rule by the Namgyals and the multi-ethnic feudal kingdom was transformed into a democratic, federal unit of India.

The merger made Sikkim one of India's official borders with China and a permanent military base was established in north and east Sikkim. Along with permanent army battalions, special constitutional provisions to safeguard

pre-existing 'Old Laws' in the form of Article 371F,² Sikkim also became a recipient of major financial contributions from the Indian government, a vital resource for a state with very few natural resources, no income tax (for Sikkimese citizens) and a population engaged in subsistence agriculture. The 2012-13 report released by the Comptroller and Auditor General of Sikkim stated that only 22.42 percent of revenue receipts came from the state's own resources (tax and non-tax), and the balance was made up with contributions by the Indian Government.³ Despite the decrease in financial contributions over the last few years, the financial dependency on the Central government remains intact. To raise internal revenue and decrease dependency on the Central government, the Sikkim government has been proactive in opening its borders, eliminating bureaucratic hurdles and easing the entry of private finance into the state. For instance, in 2007, the Sikkim State Assembly introduced changes to the Sikkim Registration of Companies Act (1961) to "ensure speedy industrialisation of the State and to attract more industries and companies to the State".⁴ By the end of 2007, Sikkim had signed contracts with private and public developers for the construction of over thirty dams on its rivers, and by 2016 there were fifteen private pharmaceutical companies operating in various parts of the state.

Pharmaceutical plants and hydropower projects are now dominant features of the landscape in almost all districts in Sikkim, and for many people these private ventures are their first introduction to the Indian state. In Sikkim, development has acquired a tangible form – roads, buildings, bridges, dams, temples – structures that can be seen and paraded as 'development' to India and other north-eastern states. In Sikkim, infrastructure has become the medium through which to express and claim modernity,⁵ for the state as well as the citizens.

The expansion of the urban sprawl in the capital city Gangtok can be attributed to increased employment opportunities in the booming retail sector, growth of educational institutes, and other tourism-related opportunities that draw people in from the rural areas of Sikkim, Darjeeling hills and from other parts of West Bengal and Bihar. In a state where anxieties over land and property ownership have been institutionally recognized and safeguarded through various constitutional provisions, specifically Land Revenue Order no.1 (1917),⁶ the coming of infrastructural development and the concomitant in/out migration, environmental degradation and new forms of political impunity, have transformed the social, religious and economic landscape of Sikkim.

This transformation is evident in changes to public spaces, over-crowding of neighbourhoods and the formation of ethnic enclaves, which play an important role in aggravating pre-existing insecurities over land and the influx of 'outsiders'. Paramount amongst these concerns are migration and villages and towns being 'taken over' by outsiders, concerns that are discussed in hushed whispers and private conversations. Change in the urban landscape fuels these concerns further. Under the veneer of mandatory green buildings, butterfly-themed flyover bridges and organic food stalls, lie the slums; poorly built, over-crowded with minimal access to water or sewage that give shelter to the thousands of people who flock to Gangtok. Yet the increase in numbers of buildings, slums and traffic jams in cosmopolitan Gangtok is not as stark a change as it is in other parts of Sikkim. Development has opened the Buddhist *sbas yul* [sacred hidden land]⁷ to new people and experiences, and has led to the transformation of urban as well as rural spaces; the impact of these changes is visible most explicitly in northern towns such as Chungthang, which have experienced the combined onslaught of developmental projects and permanent occupation by the Indian army.

Above:
The last stretch of the Lachung River before it meets the dam. Army barracks and town sit above the reinforced riverbank. Chungthang. December 2016 (Photo by Mona Chettri).

Chungthang: emerging urban landscape

Gangs of migrant workers from Nepal, Bihar, Assam and other parts of West Bengal work on Highway 310A, which connects the northern borders of Sikkim to the main towns of Mangan and Gangtok. They have been hired by contractors and sub-contractors working for the Border Roads Organisation, a "symbol of nation building and national integration",⁸ which constructs and maintains roads in border regions. Border roads are maintained primarily to ensure swift and easy passage to army vehicles, but the building of good roads has been beneficial for the locals as well as tourists travelling to and from north Sikkim.

Highway 310A leads to Chungthang valley, the gateway to the Lachung and Lachen valleys in north Sikkim and the border with China. Situated at the confluence of the Lachen and Lachung rivers, it is a small town with a population of 3970 people (2011 Census) pre-dominantly belonging to the Bhutia-Lepcha ethnic group. Land transfer in Chungthang is guided by legal provisions under Land Revenue Order no.1 (1917), which prohibits the sale or transfer of Bhutia-Lepcha (tribal) land to anyone outside the Bhutia-Lepcha ethnic group, the Sikkimese-Nepalis included. However, the Sikkim Land (Requisition and Acquisition) Act of 1977 empowers the government to acquire tribal land for 'public purpose'. This has enabled the government to circumvent the rules and facilitate acquisition of tribal land for private hydropower developers. Chungthang, the bastion of Bhutia and Lepcha communities is now the site of the biggest hydropower project in Sikkim, Teesta Stage III, developed by Teesta Urja Private Limited, in collaboration with the government of Sikkim, also the primary shareholder.

The 1200-MW Teesta Stage III hydropower project dominates the physical landscape of Chungthang – the reservoir walls rise high above the riverbed, cutting off the downstream water flow, concrete walls line the confluence and the reservoir of green water waits to be diverted to the tunnels that burrow through the hills. This project embeds a strategic border region within a national narrative of economic progress and sustainable development. Given the scale of construction, the small town has seen a significant increase in population and must make room for construction workers, administrators, engineers and other transient travellers associated with the project. The construction workers hail from various parts of India and live in shacks near the dam; the engineers and administrators in rented apartments, creating a temporary boom in the local housing market. Now that the major engineering work is complete, a considerable number of administrators and engineers are moving out of Chungthang, leaving behind empty buildings as there are no occupants to replace them. Other hydropower projects in north Sikkim have already been theatres of conflict between local communities and the state,⁹ and the Teesta project is also not without its own share of controversies around land ownership, environmental degradation and influx of migrants.¹⁰ The project was once stalled temporarily only to be revived in 2015, this time with the government increasing its financial investment to fifty-one percent.

Below:
Army traffic and signs indicating various barracks. Central Chungthang. December 2016 (Photo by Mona Chettri).

Beyond the dam, another structure dominates the visual landscape of Chungthang: a Sikh Gurudwara (temple) built by the Indian armed forces. The imposing Gurudwara with its shining, golden dome is visible from a distance, and what originated as a small place of worship for the *jawns* stationed in the area has become one of the most visible representations of the army, composed of different ethnic and religious (pre-dominantly Sikh or Hindu) backgrounds than the local Buddhist and/or animist population. This Gurudwara was built next to a pre-existing monastery and advertises an alternative, competing version of the cultural history of the town. In this version, Chungthang became Changi Than (meaning 'beautiful place' in Punjabi) blessed by Guru Nanak on his way to Tibet and China as opposed to the Tibetan version wherein the valley was consecrated by Guru Rimpoche, the patron saint of Sikkim. The competition over cultural and spatial legitimacy is evident from the respective notice boards within the same compound, with the local community and the army each displaying their versions of origin story, which has catalysed social tensions between the two.¹¹

The permanent presence of the Indian army adds another complex layer to Chungthang's urban landscape. Large sections of the hills leading up to and surrounding Chungthang are occupied by the army, making it look like a town within a cantonment rather than the other way around. The town is filled with locals, migrant workers and army personnel who share the same space. The local economy has grown over the years and is now sustained by the business that the army and the migrants provide. However, in their interactions with one another, the three groups never cross the pre-determined boundaries that define their roles and rights over the town. This relationship is also mapped onto the urban landscape where the physical location of every group is well defined as if not to disturb their uneasy co-existence.

A small road lined with liquor shops and provision stores passes through the main town. Apart from army trucks that traverse this road daily, tourist vehicles carry Indian tourists to the Lachen and Lachung valleys, which have developed into major tourist destinations over the last decade with the coming of reliable road networks, better facilities and the state government's relentless emphasis on tourism as a means of sustainable livelihood. On either side of the main road are buildings, shanties, an unused gymnasium, banks and a large army base. While the riverfront is occupied by the construction workers, the upper-end of the town houses a large cantonment area complete with a football field inside its gates. In addition to distinct spaces within the town area, the army oversees access to grazing grounds and foraging in the hills, whereas the hydropower project prohibits locals from using the river for fishing and swimming. Stuck between these prohibitions, the local community finds itself backed into a corner with no control over its land and environment, which deepens social ruptures and further heightens 'insider-outsider' discourse in a town that is filled with migrants from across the region.

In Sikkim, development is accompanied by political silence as there are no major opposition parties or civil society organisations to contest the path that has been chosen by

the state. This silence can also be attributed to the expansive network of political patronage that determines access to public goods and services. In a state with limited sources for income and high dependence on the Indian state for almost everything – ranging from employment, houses to subsidised rice – there is very little room for political contestation.¹²

Development creates ruptures manifest in slums and shanties, resource conflicts, and rising land and housing prices, but Chungthang, like many of Sikkim's emerging urban areas has acquired a distinct local characteristic that makes it different from other emerging urban areas. Urbanisation in Chungthang is a by-product of resource extraction by the private hydro-power companies and occupation by the Indian army; a town with temporary residents and permanent infrastructure that represents the Indian nation-state. Developmental projects, the presence of the armed forces and the various levels of socio-economic inequality have given rise to a fragile form of urbanisation with the potential to change with the vagaries of the developmental state. Here, urbanisation is temporary, ushered in by the *jawns*, migrants and transients related to the developmental projects that have been initiated by the state. For instance, once the hydropower project is completed, the shanties will be deserted, the buildings that housed the engineers and other administrative officers will be vacated and the associated small businesses will disappear. The development projects will move elsewhere, taking their fragile urbanisation with them. In Chungthang, the physical presence of the Indian army and the construction of the largest hydropower project in Sikkim has changed the urban character of the town by creating spatial and social distinctions, contestations over the cultural history of the land and restrictions to traditional land use.

Conclusion

Hydropower projects in Sikkim are displayed by the state as examples of modernity, development and success, in spite of their detrimental environmental and social impact. Infrastructural developments, especially hydropower projects and pharmaceutical plants, have transformed Sikkim from a remote Himalayan kingdom to a rapidly liberalising mountain state. Simultaneously, the increasing prowess of private finance and the retreat of the state has, ironically, led to a greater integration of a border region into the political and cultural fold of the Indian nation-state. Infrastructure, therefore, not only represents a desire for modernity, but at a subliminal level, furthers the process of modern state-building.

However, despite its claims to modernity and progress, infrastructural development is perceived by locals as a threat to their sense of belonging and identity, a perception that finds representation in the spatial organisation of Himalayan towns and cities around ethnic enclaves where interaction with the 'outsiders' is limited and merely functional. The re-organisation of public and private space, limitations over access to resources and the gradual erosion of constitutional rights all contribute to the creation of distinct urban formations, the social and political ramifications of which are yet to be seen.

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