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The Promises and Perils of Highland Infrastructure: A study of Pakyong Airport in the Eastern Himalayas

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Abstract

In recent years, state-led infrastructure creation in the name of progress and development has occurred across the Himalayan region. It has increased the presence of the state in places formerly regarded as relatively isolated. Despite being aspirational, infrastructure creation projects have uprooted people from their lands, deprived them of their livelihoods, and transformed their identities. This paper focuses on Pakyong Airport in the state of Sikkim, which has provoked huge protests in recent times. Through the study of this mega-infrastructure project, the paper addresses everyday processes associated with rampant change, transformation, and the formation of social memory forged through resistance and struggle in the form of counterpublics. Considering different processes, the paper assesses how Himalayan infrastructure development has a varied impact on the people and politics of the region.

Keywords

Highland; infrastructure; Eastern Himalayas; counterpublics, land

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Introduction

Large-scale progress and development are integral to the modernist project of creating infrastructure, particularly in the Eastern Himalayas, as evidenced by the introduction of several new mega-infrastructure projects in the region. Infrastructures are often seen as physical forms of networks that transfer and communicate objects, people, and ideas over time and space, especially in development settings where they are aspirational and carry great promise. However, recent studies have demonstrated that infrastructures are not just material structures, rather, they can be seen as semiotic vehicles that symbolize and connect identities, experiences, and aspirations for a society (Larkin 2013). They play a pivotal role in augmenting the national imaginary, as they act as the harbinger of modernity and progress in remote regions. Simultaneously, they carry threats of unwelcome change, of destabilization, and increased vulnerability. As materialized articulations of imagination, ideology, and social life, infrastructures provide a generative site to investigate questions that have long been of interest to anthropologists (Simone 2004, Ferguson 2012, Anand 2018). They combine social memory and future imaginaries in complex ways that must be worked out, as these temporal dimensions of infrastructural forms are also always heterogeneous (Harvey and Knox 2015). Infrastructures, as Larkin argues, are both ‘fantastical as well as technical objects’ and they address multiple forms of emotions and experiences, from ‘stimulating emotions of hope and pessimism, nostalgia and desire, frustration and anger that constitute promise (and its failures).’ The state-building project associated with infrastructure development has also been widely acknowledged (Bel 2011; Docwra and Kolsen 1989).

This paper examines infrastructure development in the Eastern Himalayan region, using Pakyong Airport in Sikkim as an example, which, despite public protests, has been built but mostly remains non-functional. While spatial mooring is central to all infrastructure creation, its impacts, manifestations, and experiences are not limited spatially or even temporally. As Harris (2021) shows, in the context of Kathmandu, how development zones can extend to the sky and span multiple time zones, and how fixing or ‘tinkering’ (Mol, Moser, and Pols, 2010) with time and space in aviation can have specific political implications for a Himalayan state located at the borders. In that sense, airports are fixes that can also provide a sense of possibility. They are jumping-off points that generate new connections, new politics, and new investments, while often erasing pre-existing land and lives (Harris 2021). Such airport-centred areas are often billed as investment magnets for businesses, resource extraction, and territorial expansion, both on the ground and in connection with other international hubs or regional airports. Therefore, airport construction can create new possibilities for a region and increase both its visibility and people’s aspirations.

Carse et al. (2023) writing on the anthropology of ‘chokepoints,’ refer to sites that constrict or choke the flows of resources, information, and bodies upon which contemporary life depends.’ The chokepoint, they argue, can serve as an analytic that renders unexpected and significant spatiotemporal connections and social relationships visible, recasting a range of contemporary problems, including migration, trade, geopolitics, and statecraft, as well as the idea that such sites can both constrain and facilitate movement. Additionally, chokepoints also disrupt conventional paradigms of power and agency, where the weak can become strong and the everyday tactics of getting through and getting by can become the grand strategies of capital and security. In the case of Sikkim, an airport is viewed as an alternative to the kinds of spaces that transcend the issues of chokepoints. This would not be possible in the case of roads in Sikkim, which are a good example of chokepoints. However, the creation of spaces without chokepoints, like the Pakyong airport, is also embedded in other kinds of issues. At the same time, chokepoints are not local phenomena. What happens at chokepoints can spread far and wide, so the effects become geographically distributed (Carse, Cons, and Middleton 2018; Carse et al. 2023). The location of infrastructure projects at the border always has an underlying national security narrative, and any compromise with security has far-reaching effects. Nevertheless, while studying transport infrastructure, speed remains at the core of understanding. Especially at the borders, speed and accessibility are crucial. With the building and advancement of border infrastructure, the state's major concern is to be able to get troops there as quickly as possible in case of skirmishes. At the same time, there is a sense that life has been speeding up everywhere in late capitalism (Duclos et al. 2017; Wacjman 2015). Like Carse et al (2023), I use chokepoints in this paper to think against speed. At chokepoints, the movement of people, commodities, and information is neither completely fluid nor obstructed, but somewhere in-between: slowed, filtered, controlled, and 'choked' in ways that ripple across space and time. Chokepoints expose the underside of global circulation—the situated processes through which deterritorialized flows are channelled, diverted, and bogged-down in the murky, sticky particularities of localities (Carse et al 2023).

Additionally, comments by Ziipao (2020) relating to infrastructure development in Northeast India, also apply to Sikkim. According to him, the fundamental

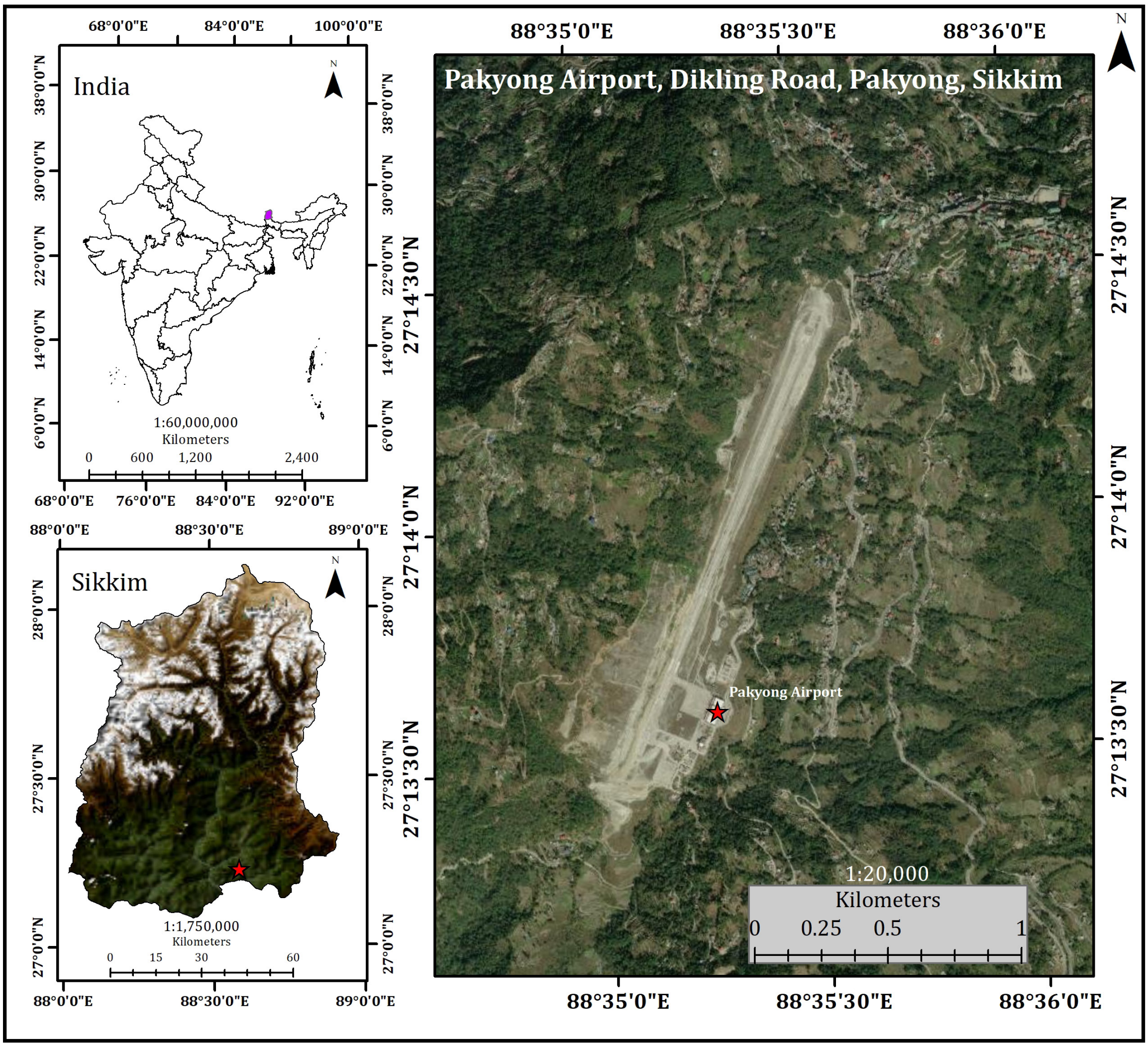
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Figure 1: Map of study area (Source: Archana Pathak)

questions in the development of infrastructure include: who is implementing the project; the nature of the nexus between politicians–bureaucrats–contractors–local elites–insurgent groups; the web of corruption; social and political processes of building infrastructure; law and order, manipulation of the project on ethnic lines; subversion and diversion of development funds; the nature and pattern of land ownership; ethnic contestations; and extortion both by state and non-state actors. All these elements play a crucial role, as will be seen in the case of Pakyong airport. Thus, it becomes imperative to understand what kind of subjects are produced in the case of infrastructural development and how they negotiate between the narrative of national security and their attempts to survive while taking care of their livelihoods. The infrastructure development in the region leads to the creation of various kinds of subjects for the state. However, due to the fragmented formation of subjects, it is impossible to group them into a single cohesive category. Also, the emergence of counterpublics is a type of subject formation that occurs in relation to mega-infrastructure projects. Counterpublics, in this case, typically form in response to unfair land acquisitions. Inadequate compensation becomes the basis for court cases, while at the same time giving rise to new elites who have received hefty compensation. The court cases may continue for years, draining petitioners of their wealth, resources, time, and hope. Despite that, infrastructure creation has emerged as a new metric for gauging a country's development. Using ethnography, court cases, and detailed interviews, this study focuses on understanding the fragmented subject formation occurring in Pakyong, Sikkim, due to the building of an airport. Understanding the opposition or support for any infrastructure project is complex, as distinct categories cannot be drawn. Much information lies within the blurred boundaries, in the liminal space that varies from one place to another.

While delving deeper, one realizes the diverging impact of infrastructure on different sets of communities and their distinct imaginations, which forges varied social memories and creates newer conditions[1]. Campaigns against an infrastructure project are undertaken by several sections of society, irrespective of their level of marginalization. The subalterns, as well as the elites, engage in different kinds of resistance. This paper attempts to broaden the category of the subaltern counterpublic coined by Fraser (1990) and present a fresh picture of the category in the context of state infrastructure projects. The term 'counterpublic' emerged from the writings of Habermas (1989) on the public sphere, where the latter is seen as a domain of social life in which public opinion can be formed. (Habermas 1989). This idea was criticized by several scholars, including Nancy Fraser and Michael Warner. Warner argued that a singular public, often presumed to represent a social totality, is really composed of an infinite number of publics (Warner 2002). Fraser, however, posits that subordinated groups that assert counter discourses are 'subaltern counterpublics' (Fraser 1990). In the later section of the paper, the protests and developing discourses against infrastructure projects will be analyzed through the lens of Fraser's subaltern counterpublics.

Methodology

For this study, I adopted a hybrid methodology based on walking ethnographies, participant observation, interviews, case studies, and visual documentation. Walking ethnographies were mostly conducted in and around the region, trying to make sense of what the local population thought about the new development. During fieldwork at Pakyong, walking across the area helped me build rapport with the locals, familiarize myself with the situation, and understand their concerns; no other form of locomotion would have been so effective. Detailed interviews and the use of a case-study approach provided clarity and depth in understanding the impact that infrastructure development pushed by the state has on local people. Based on the above methodology, the paper begins by problematizing the understanding of infrastructure in contemporary times, especially in the Himalayan Borderlands, where infrastructure creation is a new development. Thereafter, I will move on to the newly built Pakyong Airport in Sikkim and focus on the promises made by the state and how they have influenced people's understanding of the temporality and materiality of infrastructure. The paper will then explore how these mega-projects are generating newer forms of negotiation within the counterpublics who are opposing them and what kind of subject formation is occurring. Simultaneously, a newer class, comprising beneficiaries of these projects, is emerging. All these groups have their own distinct forms of negotiation, ultimately influencing whether any mega-project will have timely completion or not.

Actualized Promises, Languishing Hopes

Pakyong is a district in the Indian state of Sikkim, in the Himalayan foothills[2]. The project to develop Pakyong Airport was approved in 2008 by the Government of India. But, according to the locals, the land survey, acquisition, and compensation began as early as 1999[3]. Ranka (a Gangtok neighborhood) was the first choice for an airport, but people refused to part with their land. Finally, Pakyong, about 27 km from the state capital of Gangtok, was chosen by the state government, and the project was awarded to the Airports Authority of India (AAI), which brought in private construction agencies. Initially, the airport was expected to be completed by 2012, but several rounds of protests by local villagers demanding proper rehabilitation and compensation resulted in the work being halted (Global Atlas of Environmental Justice 2019). The work began in 2013, after the government had acquired 201 acres of land[4]. When the heavy machines were brought in to excavate and blast the mountain, landslides became frequent. Huge cracks appeared in nearby houses, and the land itself began sinking, a process that continues to this day. Prior to this greenfield project, Sikkim had been the sole state in India with no functional airport. The nearest airport was in Bagdogra, 124 km away in the state of West Bengal. Since the beginning, anti-airport protests have been vigorous, with the central issue being inadequate compensation[5].

While 100–150 families received house-damage compensation, no compensation was given for their land, which is still sinking (Sharma, Januka. Interview by the author, November 21, 2022). The previous state government has been accused of randomly giving out money for house rent; to some people, they paid Rs.10,000 for six months, while others were paid only a one-time amount of Rs. 5,000, and so on. No standard parameter was followed to compensate the affected people (Mangar, Bindiya. Interview by the author, December 1, 2022). The project comprises one of the tallest reinforced soil structures in the world. It is spread over 400 ha (990 acres). Around 800 households have been experiencing the impacts of the greenfield airport construction[6]. According to various sources, 250 households have been considered major impact areas; the affected areas are Karthok, Dikling, and Bhanu Turning (Pakyong Bazaar 02) (Global Atlas of Environmental Justice 2019). The areas where minor impacts are experienced include Dhamlakha, Mamzay, and Chalamthang villages. All these settlements are within Pakyong district and approximately 20–30 minutes' drive from Pakyong Bazaar. While the project was in process, Pushpanjali School, near the airport site, collapsed. Now it has been relocated to a far-off area and takes about an hour to reach for many families. Similarly, the land acquisition process has deprived many people of their agricultural livelihoods. Mr. Thupden Bhutia, in his 50s, is a member of the Pakyong Airport Affected Families Committee, a group formed to negotiate with the government. He stated:

> Many of us were engaged in agriculture activities earlier, but now we don't have enough land to do so. Some younger people have migrated to other places in the state, in search of jobs. The airport has destroyed our

> sense of livelihood. (Bhutia, Thupden. Interview by the author, September 7, 2022).

In a similar vein, a prominent official in the State Government who has worked with the affected people for a long time responded as follows (Dhakal, Prem. Interview by the author, November 29, 2022):

> The proposal to build an airport here in Pakyong, at such elevation, has been a mistake. Not only is it expensive (if other location was chosen in the southern region of the state, it would have cut down costs), but it is also a disaster in the making. The reinforced structure doesn't have deep foundations; it has been built on the support of an already existing older wall and may collapse any time. The cracks have already begun emerging in the wall.

Many respondents reported that, due to the sinking of land, it is impossible to grow anything, and the compensation received is insufficient. Not only has the land become unusable for agriculture, but several houses have also become unfit for habitation. One huge area near Lower Pakyong Bazaar, with 120–170 houses, collapsed completely. Now, it is completely deserted. The affected population received compensation for the houses but not for the land. A new class of people who have received compensation has emerged from this area. They have relocated to other places, like Namchi and Gangtok. Their houses, which collapsed because of the airport, are now inhabited by migrant laborers from Bihar and West Bengal.

During fieldwork, I met several laborers staying in these semi-ruined houses and paying rent to the erstwhile owners. The owners received compensation from the government, relocated to other places, and

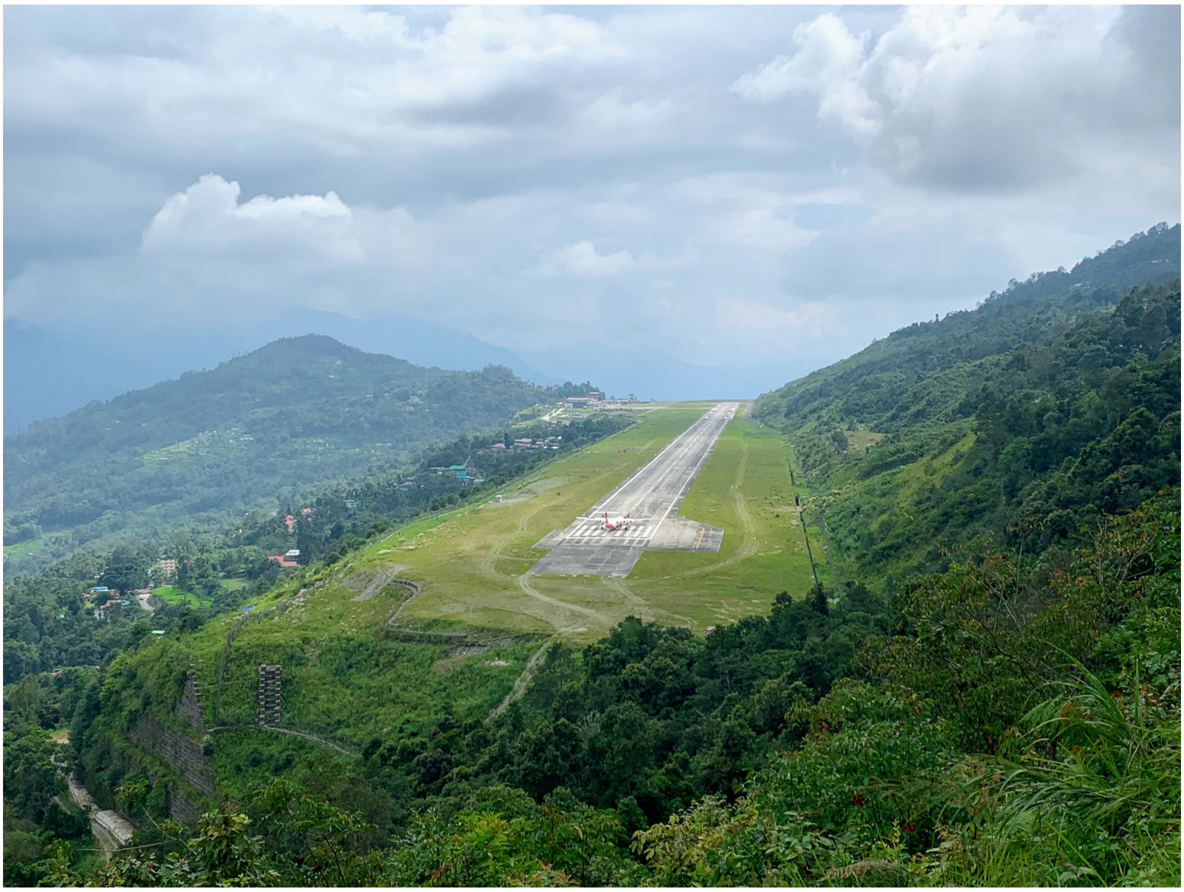

Figure 2: Built Airport. © 2022 Archana Pathak

built new houses; however, they still own their broken houses and have rented them out to the laborers. Thus, a rental economy exists in the ruins. I met two families, one from Islampur in West Bengal and the other from Samastipur in Bihar. The former family works in a cement warehouse, previously part of the primary school that was destroyed due to the airport construction. The latter family pays about Rs. 2,000 per month to the house-owners, who now live in South Sikkim. As an infrastructure project progresses, it gives rise to newer classes. The migrant laborers, uprooted from their native places and involved in the construction work, also become entwined in the infrastructural imagination of Sikkim. They become equal recipients of the effects of the projects, even if they are not equal stakeholders. In all the conversations with the locals, the common theme was that the local Sikkimese people do not like undertaking construction activities. The migrant laborers from Bihar, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Assam, and Odisha thus become an indispensable part of these projects. Most migrant laborers in Pakyong have rented houses situated just below the damaged houses. These houses, tilted and with broken walls and doors, support already damaged structures that could collapse at any moment. Thus, one individual's ruin becomes a shelter for another. Some long-stay laborers become permanent settlers and open small shops or businesses. Other migrant laborers go back to their home states and return whenever work is available. As Karen Till (2005) notes:

> […] places are never merely backdrops for action or containers for the past. They are fluid mosaics and moments of memory, matter, metaphor, scene, and experience which create and mediate social spaces and temporalities.

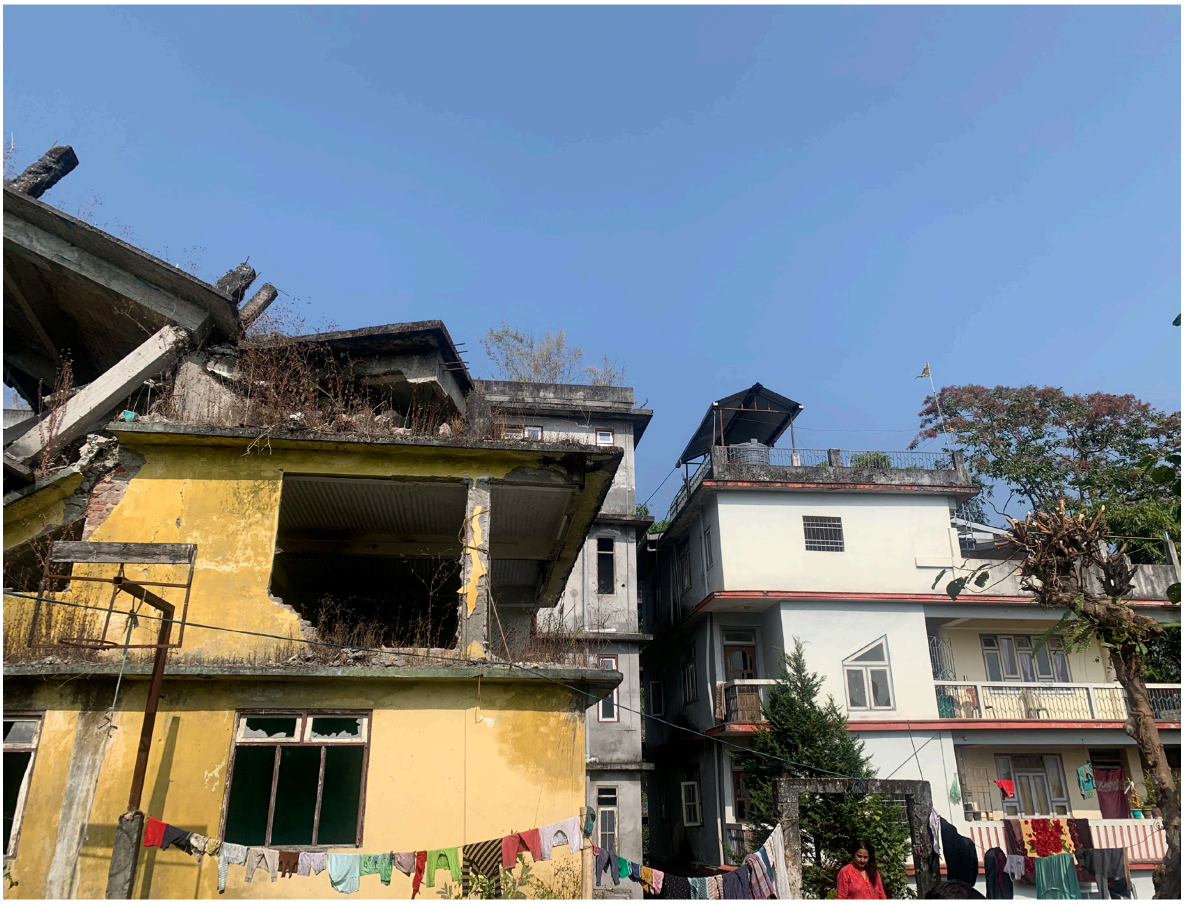

Figure 3: Broken houses tilting over neighboring buildings. © 2022 Archana Pathak

Mr. Pankaj Sharma owns a medicine shop at the far end of the Pakyong Bazaar. While showing me around the Lower Pakyong area, adjacent to the Bazaar, he pointed toward the debris and ruins of what was once a bustling neighborhood of 30–35 households. Some of the owners have received compensation and moved on to other places; others still await justice and live in temporary settlements. He lamented that such a large-scale project had failed to provide any kind of benefit to people. Later, he said, ‘Big airports like this are not meant for normal people like us. We still use sharing taxi to reach from one place to another’ (Sharma, Pankaj. Interview by the author, October 20, 2022).

Thus, certain spaces become laden with emotion. The constant presence of debris, rubble, and broken houses near the Pakyong Bazaar creates a different social space altogether. On the one hand, there is a sense of loss among the erstwhile owners, who have left for better prospects; on the other hand, the new occupants, who have no other option, are creating homes for themselves among the rubble. Geographical cure[7], as suggested by Maddrell (2016), can also be understood here, though in a very different context. In this case of displacement due to the airport, erstwhile owners were forced to relocate, lose their livelihoods, and begin their lives at a new place. It is necessary for the bereaved to move away to break the circular reiterative co-production of emotional pain and place (Maddrell 2016). However, as Maddrell mentions, the landscape is a palimpsest not only of life but also of the social relations and practices associated with death and remembrance; similarly, the constant presence of debris and broken houses due to the building of Pakyong airport, exemplifies how pasts and futures fold into the experience of the present: as loss or gain, but also as contingency or necessity, rupture or continuity, chaos, or order (Maddrell 2016).

At the same time, with the increasing push for infrastructure creation by the state, the distinctions between urban and rural have dissolved across the Himalaya as a whole and Sikkim in particular, where concrete narrates the transformation of these landscapes and assemblages and holds them together. Not only does Sikkim become further ‘entangled’ in concrete as a material that enables and constrains people’s experiences of development, but concrete also ‘entraps’ Sikkim further as a territory within India, dependent on the supply of cement and other building materials, cheap labor, and tenuous highways (McDuie-Ra and Chettri 2020). The new mega-projects are built at an accelerated speed to showcase the nation’s wealth and progress, but the aftermath of these projects is disregarded. However, the projection of loss made visible to the people in Pakyong has also given new recognition to the area, and Pakyong is projected to be the next ‘big thing’ in Sikkim. The people’s memories and their sense of loss thus become possible sites for the experience of the presence of an absence. One local, who has had to relocate his entire family several times, finding shelter in temporary settlements, described his situation as follows:

> Our entire savings are gone. Earlier we lived off our farm, which was enough. Now the land is sinking due to the airport and it is no longer fertile. I have a job in Gangtok but it does not pay much. We have lived in Karthok our entire lives, now that my children are growing up, they will not be able to live here. We have been asked to relocate, but where do we go with such meagre compensation? How do we leave our home? (Mangar, Bikram. Interview by the author, November 13, 2022).

Another resident, a social activist, said, ‘Well-off individuals negotiated with the government and got higher compensation, but others could not. They got very less or nothing at all.’ (Subba, Sunil. Interview by the author, November 21, 2022).

Gergan (2017) describes the connected cosmology of deities and earthquakes in Sikkim, but the places in Pakyong where I conducted fieldwork were different. Here, the locals mostly analyze the damages caused by the airport materially, not spiritually. Sensibilities vary depending on the respondents' vantage point and the popular image. Rivers in Sikkim are considered deities in various imaginations; damming them and the subsequent destruction are not looked at in terms of materiality, but the tabletop structure of the airport is beyond these sensibilities. This borderland area is now actively monitored by the state due to the increased building and infrastructure development on the other side of the border. Like Mustang, as described by Murton (2017), Sikkim has for a long time been treated as a peripheral space by the Indian state, with little infrastructural development. Road-building, and, for that matter, any infrastructure development, is a fundamental project of national state-making, and the impacts are both heightened and complicated in border regions (Murton 2017). Disastrous infrastructure in this Himalayan border state reveals the unequal burden of nation-building infrastructural projects borne by minority Indigenous populations. Sikkim's experience with disastrous infrastructure is not unique, and comparable scenarios with similarly devastating consequences are playing out in other frontier spaces, whether it is the Kachin people resettled by the State Power Investment Corporation's projects in Myanmar or the Sindhis and Pashtuns in Pakistan's North West Frontier provinces protesting against dams and other mega-infrastructures (Gergan 2020). At the same time, the manifestations of these projects in terms of scale at the borders are also quite different.

Scale-jumping is also quite evident and can be understood as one important outcome of creating mega-infrastructure (Smith 1996). It refers to the ability of certain social groups and organizations to move to higher levels of activity, for instance, from urban to national[8]. In the context of infrastructure projects, those who negotiate better compensation also gain the ability to jump scales, or rather, to expand scale. The compensation paid in lieu of the land creates a new affluent class that can jump the scale, for example, from rural to urban settings. Several people have relocated from rural centres like Pakyong to more urban areas like Namchi and Gangtok within the state. Infrastructure-induced scale-bending[9] is also a reality (Mackinnon 2010). Many individuals in Pakyong with good political connections have managed to get better compensation than others. These projects enable those already well-networked in society to gain more, right from when the official from the Land Reforms Department, locally called the *amin*[10] arrives to measure the dimensions of the land or check for the extent of damage to the house. The issue is further compounded by the ethnic nexus. If the *amin* belongs to your ethnic group or region, the chances are that he (it is usually a male; I did not find any woman doing the *amin's* job, or for that matter, any job in the infrastructure business) will enter a larger area of land against your name in his records or show more house damage, so that you become entitled to a larger share of the compensation package. These network and social capital privileges are not available to everyone[11]. Also, the idea of mutual understanding plays a critical role in the acquisition and compensation processes.

Mangar[12] village in Karthok, which lies closest to the new airport, has been one of the worst affected settlements, with cracks in houses and sinking lands. Anjana Mangar (Interview by the author, October 12, 2022) and her family of four, which includes her husband, a daughter, and a son, live in Karthok and own about 0.2 ha (0.5 acres)[13] of land. The family has lived there for generations, farming and pig-rearing. When officials came to survey the house and the land and evaluate the damage, the family was promised compensation. It arrived, but the meager amount was insufficient for them to resettle in any other location or rebuild their house. Some people from the nearby area received better compensation on account of their good rapport with the government surveyors; however, Anjana's family and several of her neighbors did not. They were also promised jobs once the airport came up, none of which materialized.

The scholarship on the anthropology of the state has contributed greatly to the functioning of and operations carried out by the state (Sharma and Gupta 2006). In many cases, the state's responses to people with respect to infrastructure projects are what I term 'state delays.' These delays are deliberate or happen due to exogenous factors like, in this case, a lack of coordination between the state and the central government, the involvement of multiple contractors and agents, shifting accountability, and a complete lack of concern toward the affected. The delays and unmet promises create a vicious cycle for the victims, stretching the time so that they stop pursuing their rights any further. The peculiar way in which bureaucracy keeps people engaged in trivial paperwork, requiring them to produce and reproduce one document after another, is one of the major reasons behind 'state delays.'

In 2018, several of these people from Mangar village and the larger Karthok, Dikling, and other areas gathered at the airport site to halt the construction work. However, the police were called to quell the unrest, and the protestors had to withdraw within a week. Without better prospects and with new cracks in their house appearing daily, Anjana's family kept moving from one temporary residence to another during the airport construction. She described the experience as follows:

> During the construction phase, the whole house used to vibrate the entire night whenever they used heavy machines. Green leaves turned brown due to deposition of dust and other construction particles. The land is very fertile here, but now that it is sinking, we cannot grow anything. (Mangar, Anjana. Interview by the author, October 7, 2022).

Finally, along with 34 other families, they filed a case with the help of a local lawyer. The number of petitioners gradually increased to 66 households, none of whom had received adequate government compensation. The state's lackadaisical approach to identifying the actual number of affected households was also reflected in the court-room discussions. In most of the court-room cases that I attended during my fieldwork, the lack of clarity on the part of the lawyers representing the government on the number of affected households was astounding. This deliberate hiding of details, which I term 'bureaucratic masking', is one of several methods the state uses to delay court cases and maintain confusion among the affected. The dramatic enactment of this entire exercise inside the court premises is reminiscent of the words of Goodrich (1990):

> The day in court is likely to be experienced in terms of confusion, ambiguity, incomprehension, panic, and frustration, and if justice is seen to be done it is so seen by outsiders to the process. Nor is justice likely to be heard to be done by the participants in the trial. The visual metaphor of justice as something that must be visible and seen enacted has a striking poignance in that it captures the paramount symbolic presence of law as a façade, a drama played out before the eyes of those subject to it.

In these situations, an attempt is made by the state to dismiss these court cases as quickly as possible without assessing the actual situation; alternatively, court hearings keep getting extended until the petitioners tire out (Bhutia, Wangchuk. Interview by the author, September 12, 2022). During one of these hearings, a petitioner, who had traveled all the way from Pakyong to reach the State High Court in Gangtok in a shared taxi, said, 'We can't attend the hearings regularly, as traveling requires a lot of money, which is beyond our affordability' (Gurung, Martin. Interview by the author, September 15, 2022). Only a few people, mostly males, attended the court sessions and relayed information back to others in the village. I never saw women attending court because their household duties did not allow them to do so. Additionally, Gangtok High Court is an expensive one-hour drive from

Pakyong. From the residents, shopkeepers, taxi drivers, landowners, and restaurant managers to the squatters and daily travelers, there seemed to be apprehension regarding the consequences of the airport.

Creative Destruction and Narrativization of Corruption

The destruction due to airport construction is most visible during monsoons. Because of the airport runway's table-top structure, debris and sediments wash down the slope to the houses below. The road adjacent to these houses gets flooded and breaks up due to the downward-flowing debris. Sometimes, when the locals call the airport authorities, they comply and clear the debris; other times, the road remains flooded, inhibiting movement. These human-made disasters create contexts in which power relations and arrangements can be more clearly perceived and confronted, which transforms political consciousness, shapes individual actions, and strengthens or dissolves institutional power arrangements (Oliver-Smith 1996).

Raju is an old man whose house lies at Bhanu Turning. He sees maximum destruction due to the sliding of the debris from the airport every monsoon, and says:

> I cannot shift my house from here. They should have taken debris sliding into consideration while they were building the airport. All the engineers come from outside, and without any knowledge of the topography here, begin their construction work. Every time when it rains, the entire road gets flooded, and it stays like that, hindering our movement. For the airport to function, the road has to be dismantled. (Raju. Interview by the author, November 7, 2022).

The image of rubble and ruins is an ever-present theme in the aftermath of the development of this airport. The dialectic of 'destruction and resurrection,' which Gordillo (2014) talks about in the case of ruins, is a framework that can be used to understand the situation in Pakyong. As much as the airport has destroyed people's lands, livelihoods, and spatial and temporal sensibilities, it has also opened new possibilities. People affected by massive levels of disruption usually begin to rebuild and try to remake their lives immediately (Gordillo 2014). As Rebecca Solnit (2009) has described, ruination, or in this case, destruction due to infrastructure creation, often triggers notable forms of collective solidarity. Furthermore, it can also become, as Mark Healey (2011) has put it, 'an invitation to transformation' and offer the possibility of building something better. In this case, one of the newer elements that has emerged is the collective solidarity that has developed among people. Collective solidarity also leads to collective knowledge and conversations about the interactions people have had with the state, which, in this case, mostly involve corruption. Akhil Gupta (1995) points out that the discourse on corruption serves as a crucial platform for imagining the state, citizens, and other organizations and aggregations. Instead of treating corruption as a dysfunctional aspect of state organizations, I, like Gupta, see it as a mechanism through which the state itself is discursively constituted.

The narratives of corruption involving multiple state actors are part of everyday conversation in Pakyong. At small eateries and taxi stands, or in the organic[14] and non-organic vegetable market areas, locals animatedly discuss the political affiliations of those who are benefiting from the mega-projects. This is the site where most people construct their ideas about the state based on their interactions with multiple state actors like land record keepers, panchayat officials, local police, and courts. Narratives of corrupt officials diverting funds to their friends are familiar to everyone in Pakyong. Michael Taussig (1999) has famously argued that a public secret is 'that which is generally known but cannot be articulated … knowing is essential to its power, equal to the denial. Not being able to say anything is like testimony to its power.' Further, citing Walter Benjamin, Taussig (1999) emphasizes that '… it is the task and the life force of the public secret to maintain that verge where the secret is not destroyed through exposure, but subject to a quite a different sort of revelation that does justice to it'.

The discourse on corruption centers on who has reaped the most benefits. The locals are adept at leveraging the newly introduced projects. One common statement that resonated with the respondents was, 'If you are well-placed politically and have good connections, then everything is possible in this small Himalayan state.' Everyday conversations revolve around 'how once when they met the current Chief Minister (CM)'... to 'how CM promised this and that'. At first glance, it feels like everyone knows the CM. This can be attributed to the small geographical scale and lesser population, unlike many other states in India, where such a situation is uncommon. This can also be construed as the subaltern's method of dealing with the situation. The corruption discourse is the best kept public secret. Everyone knows who has benefited from the project and who has not. In the case of mega-infrastructure projects in India, especially in Sikkim, the public secret plays out differently. Some want to protect it in the hope of making some future political connection that will benefit them, while others have no interest in guarding it, as it has already harmed them enough. However, for this latter category, justice remains a remote possibility.

People living outside Pakyong, in Gangtok and other districts, talk about how this project is part of a nation-building initiative and an answer to China's massive infrastructural push in the trans-Himalayan region, which lies about an hour from Sherathang[15]. The skirmishes at the border with China, especially in the wake of the Doklam crisis, were critical in pushing the state to develop border infrastructure, and the people living outside Pakyong have a good understanding of the issues. However, the scale of imagination is narrowed down for the locals in Pakyong, as they are the immediate recipients of the damage caused by the construction.

The Micropolitics Behind Mega-Projects

Loss of land and livelihood has created a sense of alienation among the people. Many cases against inadequate compensation have been filed in the High Court and Consumer Forums. One of the respondents stated that 'neither the state government nor the AAI Authority of India took responsibility for payment of compensation or resettlement. There is only confusion' (Mangar, Anjana. Interview by the author, December 6, 2022). More than 135 families protested against the delay in compensation by the state and the lack of grievance redressal. Under The Sikkim Greenfield Airport, Pakyong (Settlement of Claims for Loss and Damages) Act, 2018, a Claims Commissioner was appointed to adjudicate the claims within 60 days. The notification for appointment of this body was out two months after the High Court of Sikkim in Benup Dhakal & ORS. v. Union of India & ORS stated that, despite several directions to the state authorities, they had not responded. It also directed the Secretary, Agriculture Department, Government of Sikkim to appoint a senior responsible officer to visit the place, assess the loss of agricultural land, and submit a report to the court. There were 206 petitioners, including 35 families from Karthok and other surrounding areas. Earlier, there were 66 petitioners[16]. This case was ongoing while I was doing fieldwork, and I attended several hearings along with the petitioners.

Court cases serve as crucial platforms for studying not only the rules of adjudication and the processes that resolve disputes and elaborate norms, but also the workings of society through the perspectives of litigation and arbitration (Berti and Bordia 2015). The principles of judicial hierarchy that rest on isolation, privilege, and exclusivity, embodied in the judicial persona, stand dramatized to their fullest realization in a courtroom (Baxi 2014). Berti's courtroom scene from Mandi was played in front of me while attending these hearings in Gangtok. The petitioners from Pakyong, mostly villagers, less educated than the lawyers, and unaware of the ways of the court, would occupy the last few corner seats in every hearing. Some, a little upwardly mobile and knowing how to negotiate, sat a little ahead but never occupied the front seats. Lawyers from the government side would come in big groups with heavy dossiers and documents and take the front seats. The petitioner's lawyer would be accompanied by two or three people. The judge translated and narrated each sentence, and everything was recorded by the typists. The petitioners, especially when they were from rural areas and had little or no knowledge of English, were unable to follow the negotiations, which constantly shifted from the vernacular to English and often turned into animated discussions filled with interruptions. Also, in cases of land acquisition and compensation, it is difficult for a lay person to understand the legal complexities, and they remain completely dependent on the lawyer. In such cases, the will of the lawyer becomes supreme, and lawyers have their own ways of dealing with situations. Sometimes, they also suggest out-of-court settlements, which happened in this case, thus creating a 'culture of compromise' (Baxi 2014).

In some court cases, two issues were particularly evident, namely compensation and the shifting of blame and accountability. For instance, in the case of Hantey Gyatso Kazi v. The State of Sikkim and Others, it was reported that huge cracks developed in the already-built house of the petitioner due to construction of the greenfield airport. The Buildings & Housing Department of the State, which calculated damages for the petitioner's loss, was deemed incompetent by the Additional Advocate General and other authorities, and the petitioner was asked to approach the Claims Commissioner. In a different case, Pema Namgyal Kazi vs. The Senior Manager, New India Assurance Company Limited, and Others, the insurance company declined to provide compensation because damage to the house during airport construction was not covered by the company's terms and conditions. I attended the last hearing of Benup Dhakal & ORS v. Union of India & ORS on November 9, 2022, at the High Court of Sikkim. In this case, back in 2018, the Secretary, Tourism and Civil Aviation, Sikkim State, along with the Airports Authority of India, submitted a report. The report acknowledged that cracks in the houses were due to airport construction and that the buildings had been abandoned by their occupants for safer locations, creating stress for the families due to the dislocation.

The report also recorded evidence of cracks in the ground that made farming difficult. The report said that slope stabilization would be complete in two to three years' time, after which the land would become reusable, but this has not happened. The state government is under obligation to acquire the land and pay the compensation in terms of the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013[17]. However, despite this directive by the court in 2018, the land has not been acquired. In this case, 66 families were compensated out of the state budget, but those whose lands were assessed and not acquired did not qualify for compensation, as their holdings were not contiguous with the proposed acquisition. After the hearing, old Mr. Chopel Bhutia looked visibly upset. His land was surveyed but not acquired. Because of its proximity to the airport, he can neither farm there nor build a commercial establishment. The court has directed the state to pay compensation to some of the petitioners, but there is no guarantee when they will receive it. Several court cases have been filed by the Pakyong residents, but, like Mr. Bhutia, not everyone is being compensated. Even if they are, the amount is insufficient to start afresh. There is apparent apprehension in discussing the amount of compensation, as it is sensitive and involves myriad stakeholders and stories (Sherpa, Kritika. 2022. Interview by the author, September 7, 2022). At the same time, some members of the younger generation are eyeing the opportunities that may come with the airport. One taxi driver, in his late 20s, said:

> Sikkim, despite being a state, never had an airport, which is a matter of shame. More tourists flock to Darjeeling instead of Sikkim due to connectivity issues. Now, with this airport, things will change. (Chhetri, Mausam. Interview by the author, August 21, 2022).

According to a local contractor, Pakyong did not previously have district status, so infrastructure was bad. Now that it has acquired the status of a district, the government is focused on building better infrastructure like the airport and the roads, which is a ‘good thing.’ Other people are optimistic about the ease with which they will be able to travel to Kolkata and other destinations. A woman in her late 50s who had never been outside Pakyong hopes she will be able to meet up with friends in Kolkata in one hour. Her husband, who is an orchid-seller and runs a homestay, also believes that, due to the airport, his orchids will reach better markets. However, everyone is primarily concerned about the compensation, which is not being paid to the people in its entirety and is already significantly delayed.

Despite the airport, flights are scarce and frequently cancelled, particularly during the monsoon and winter seasons. Also, one airline has a monopoly, leading to high prices that are beyond many people’s means. In the rare cases when flights function, there are only two outbound destinations: Delhi and Kolkata. There is no significant evidence to prove that the airport has led to increased tourism, the motive behind the construction of this new facility. As Scott (1998) observes, the state’s ability to deploy distance-demolishing technologies—railroads, all-weather roads, telephone, telegraph, airpower, helicopters, and now information technology—has changed the strategic balance of power between self-governing peoples and nation-states, something that is evident in the Sikkim-Darjeeling region. The state of Sikkim is protected under Article 371 F of the Indian constitution[18]. However, infrastructure becomes a way to demolish physical and political distances. Indeed, infrastructure creation allows the Centre to establish control over the region, transcending limitations imposed by the constitution. Mr. Gopal Subba, a political science lecturer from the northern part of Sikkim, made the following observation (Subba, Gopal. Interview by author, November 7, 2022):

> After the Doklam crisis, Pakyong airport has acquired much significance. It was built, especially for security issues like this. The airport’s impact on landscape and environment is secondary. The national security narrative dwarves all other issues.

These narratives run widely across the region. The fact that the state can trample on people’s lives and livelihoods for national security reasons is obvious. The materiality and temporality of mega-infrastructure projects are often perceived very differently by different sections of the population. People are aware of the malpractices and the inferior material used in mega-infrastructure projects, and the idea of infrastructure being deliberately ‘rigged’ is discernible in most conversations with the locals (Chhetri 2023). The narrative of the airport’s probable usage in case of emergency to counter China is an exciting prospect for some. Many believe that of all the states in Northeast India, Sikkim has had the most amicable relations with New Delhi. Thus, having an airport here connecting the state to the nation would be a matter of pride for them.

Subalterns, Public Sphere, and Counterpublics

The term ‘subaltern counterpublic’ was conceptualized by Nancy Fraser (1990) as ‘parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.’ Emanating from a critique of Jurgen Habermas’ (1989) articulation of a common public sphere predicated on consensus and the bracketing of difference, Fraser argued that the creation of subaltern counterpublics offers subordinated social groups a means of support and collective resistance. Fraser elaborates:

> In stratified societies, subaltern counterpublics have a dual character. On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics. It is precisely in the dialectic between these two functions that their emancipatory potential resides.

However, what is interesting in this case is that the opposition to the airport came not only from the marginalized non-elites who traditionally form the counterpublics but also from the elite sections. Within the counterpublics, a more privileged group, typically the leadership, often shapes the narrative. They have the agency and knowledge to negotiate with the state, and they can afford to get embroiled in legal and bureaucratic processes. It is they who form the collective action frames to oppose state policies. These action frames are quite broad in scope, functioning as a kind of master algorithm that colors and constrains the orientations and activities of other movements and protests (Benford and Snow 2000). This group can do so because their master frame includes rights frames, choice frames, injustice frames (Balochi 1996, Davies 1999), and environmental frames, all specific frames that are comprehensive enough to accommodate the demands and represent the concerns of the people affected by the mega-infrastructure projects (Carroll and Ratner 1996; Capek 1993).

According to Swart (1995), the above-mentioned frames reflecting people's opposition and social movements function as master frames as they are 'culturally resonant to their historical milieu.' Though there was no big, organized movement against the airport, people resisted in whatever way they could. In all these instances, the socially dominant groups, or the comparatively more privileged ones, have been responsible for deciding the master frames for opposition. Given various factors, such as the region's diverse ethnicity, the state's patronage of certain groups, state delays, incessant bureaucratic masking, and corruption narratives, the master frames devised here vary from one group to another. Injustice frames, rights frames, and environmental frames certainly have the potential to mobilize more and more people to oppose mega-infrastructure projects. But in the case of Pakyong and the larger Sikkim area, it can be said that political opportunity structures can constrain rather than facilitate collective action framing processes. Since the outcome the groups are seeking in this case varies, it is difficult to sustain such a movement for long. A dialectic tension persists between collective action frames and collective action events (Ellingson 1995). In this scenario, the counterpublic that emerges tends to be fragmented and susceptible to diffusion.

In the Pakyong area, Mangar village, the most affected sector, has a significant Mangar population, but other caste groups, like Sharmas and Dhakals, also reside there. The whole village filed the court case as a collective unit; however, the Mangars complained that the Sharmas and Dhakals made an out-of-court settlement and received better compensation. They also benefited from connections with politicians and bureaucrats. Additionally, the Mangars are solely dependent on farming, pig rearing, or other less-paying jobs in comparison to the Sharmas and Dhakals, who have comparatively better-paying jobs[19]. In such a situation, the formation of a collective counterpublic against the state is difficult. However, in other cases, people did come together as a collective unit to resist the state. In Bhanu Turning, adjacent to Pakyong's main market, people from diverse ethnic groups such as Bhutia, Lepcha, and Nepali combined and petitioned the court for better compensation for their land. In such situations, the state must devise new methods to maintain control, and thus the negotiation continues. The best way for the state to connect the borderlands with the center is by building large infrastructures. However, the approach is always top-down, leading to numerous conflicts. Sometimes, class divisions within the counterpublics lead to gains rather than actual harm to society.

The state mostly tries to make arrangements with the more privileged (the subaltern elite) among the opposition groups, and the rest of the people (the subaltern non-elite) asking for equal compensation are left behind[20]. This categorization among the subalterns can be understood through multiple sites, as Baviskar & Ray (2011) explain in ‘Elite and Everyman’ in the context of the middle classes. As observed in Pakyong’s case, there is a more privileged section among the subalterns that negotiates with the state and makes arrangements for itself, unlike the less privileged categories, who lack the social capital to do so.

Infrastructure development also brings the rise of new elites, those whose lands have been taken but who received good compensation, or those who were able to negotiate with the state on better terms due to their agency and social standing. In his work on ‘infrastructures of injustice,’ Ziipao breaks down in detail the social fabric of vested interests in society, such as politicians, local leaders, and business personnel, and explains that these supposedly nameless labels are attached to one’s family and friends. Thus, he focuses on the multi-faceted lived realities of minoritized cultures and the fact that the building of infrastructure reinforces the same kind of social dynamics that are already prevalent in society. According to him, such a situation is characterized by an ‘unholy trinity’—corruption, an inflated economy of ever-increasing prices, and state plus private (contractors, middlemen) stakeholders. This situation is prevalent in the case of Pakyong. There is always a reason why only those who are politically well connected and who are already well off become richer, while the poor become poorer once an infrastructural project is introduced in any place. The locals are acutely aware of this situation. As Heslop and Murton mention in Highways and Hierarchies, such projects are more profitable for some powerful actors than the originally intended recipients (Heslop and Murton 2021). This was evident when interacting with the locals during fieldwork. During one of my first visits, I happened to meet two people who have shops in the main market area of Pakyong Bazaar. While they were showing me around the affected area, consisting of rubble and debris, a swanky new Mahindra XUV passed us by. Seeing this, one of them sarcastically said (Sharma, Raju. Interview by the author, October 21, 2022):

> Look at that guy, he received good compensation for his house damage. Now he owns a big car and has also built a bigger house. Earlier, he used to live here.

To this, the other replied, laughingly (Nar Bahadur. Interview by the author, October 21, 2022):

> How I wish the government had also taken our land! At least we would have bought a new big car.

This jumping of scale, in terms of wealth and agency in society due to compensation, is evident across Pakyong. Infrastructure development, as seen in the borderlands of South Asia, also creates new elites by virtue of the compensation that they receive. This pattern of who is gaining from these mega-projects and who is not often escapes state scrutiny. Rather, the state remains indifferent. But the disparity does not escape people’s notice. News of who received better compensation spreads rapidly across town. During my fieldwork, I also observed that the elites shape infrastructure projects by infusing the state with ideas of where the development should happen. The local elites are at the center of these dynamics and play a huge role. Because of their privileged network, they are able to influence decisions through corrupt and dishonest means. Within such a milieu, the question of whether people can act as a counterpublic and develop the power to stop the state from creating infrastructure that transforms their lives gains further currency. There is no denying that infrastructures are aspirational, but, at the same time, whether this aspiration is inclusive in nature poses a plethora of other questions.

Conclusion

Every infrastructure project starts with the state promising the public better opportunities and improved livelihoods. However, these promises become mired in a maze of unrealized dreams, hopes, and aspirations. It all begins with the acquisition of land, which complicates the process. Every state has its own distinctive land laws. In the challenging terrain of the Himalayan region, it is very difficult to develop infrastructure. The alluring promise of infrastructure is promoted by the state, but the everyday challenges faced by the people are often erased from this narrative. Mired in these processes, infrastructure development is accompanied by fears of corruption and irregularities, thus offering 'sites of thriving sensibility to all that cannot be seen, all that is not available to public scrutiny' (Anand, Gupta, and Appel 2018). A consensus must be reached before the introduction of mega-projects. However, this rarely happens, and such a situation gives rise to new forms of counterpublics and political engagements between the people and the state. This scenario leads to new subject formations who are the recipients of the infrastructure building process. This paper reveals that the subjects, who either oppose or support the infrastructure project, form a fragmented category that encompasses several complexities based on ethnicity, land relations, property ownership, and the region's history. The subtle art of negotiation thus garners maximum benefit and is a central feature of these mega-infrastructure projects. However, successful negotiation necessitates certain social capital, a lack of which limits one's ability to negotiate or voice one's concerns.

These major projects involve multiple actors from many different backgrounds. They include: the officials concerned with land acquisition and land survey, or the recording of crops and other agricultural products; the experts who measure cracks and sinking land; the lawyers who take up the cases; the officials who identify the affected; the judiciary who hear the court cases; and finally, the people whose lives are changed by the construction. The scale of the process and the huge state machinery at work make these projects incredibly complex undertakings. External factors such as connections, negotiations, and persuasion play a critical role at every step, and they affect each stakeholder differently. The people who are questioning the dominant narratives of the state do not necessarily belong to historically marginalized groups. New groups are emerging to challenge the dominant narratives, motivated by broader interests in society, culture, and the environment. However, other groups are willing to follow the dominant narrative. Therefore, understanding the process of building infrastructure in the Himalayan borderlands requires consideration of the fragmented categories that infrastructure development creates.

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All the names of the respondents have been changed, to protect their identity.

Endnotes

1. There are three different ethnic groups in Sikkim, viz., Lepcha, Bhutia, and Nepali. Many people from the rest of the country, such as Marwaris, Biharis, Bengalis, South Indians, and Punjabis, have migrated to Sikkim, so the population is an intermix of all these communities. Pakyong has a similar population mix.

2. Pakyong was created as a district in December 2021 by the Sikkim Legislative Assembly's Reorganization of Districts Act, 2021.

3. According to the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement 2013 (RFCTLARR Act 2013), public hearings shall be conducted in all Gram Sabhas where members are directly or indirectly affected by the land acquisition to gather consensus. However, the dominant groups, who are mostly in favor of the state's projects, ensure that the participants are in agreement through fear, threats, or blackmail.

4. According to the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways, Government of India, land for the development of National Highways and associated purposes of building mega-infrastructure projects is acquired under Section 3 of the National Highways Act, 1956, and compensation is determined in accordance with the First Schedule of the RFCTLARR Act, 2013. The popular narrative is that about 201 acres of land were acquired for Pakyong airport. However, the Ministry of Civil Aviation mentions that the Airports Authority of India (AAI), the agency responsible for building the airport, paid compensation for 210.14 acres of land. Also, in rural areas, the market value of land is to be multiplied by Factor 1.00 (One) to Factor 2.00 (Two) based on the distance of the project from the urban area, as may be notified by the appropriate government. For compensation in urban areas, the market value is to be multiplied only by Factor 1.00 (One).

5. Land acquisition for airports and the compensation payments to the rehabilitants are done by the concerned State Government/Union Territory (UT) Administration for development/expansion of airports owned by the AAI. The Ministry of Civil Aviation, Government of India, does not maintain any data in this regard for AAI Airports or Private Airports. According to RFCTLAAR Act, 2013, compensation for the owners of the acquired land shall be four times the market value in the case of rural areas and twice in the case of urban areas.

6. Greenfield airports are built from scratch on unused land, offering a blank canvas, unlike brownfield airports, which have existing infrastructure for airport development, such as runways and terminal buildings.

7. One well-documented spatial manifestation of bereavement is the so-called 'geographical cure,' which Maddrell mentions. It refers to cases where grief is so focused on a particular location or set of locations and associated relations that it is necessary for the bereaved to move away in the hope of breaking the circular reiterative co-production of emotional pain and place.

8. The concept of the 'politics of scale' is, closely associated with the writings of Neil Smith, reflecting a certain broadening of his approach to include struggles over social reproduction, gender, and identity in addition to capital accumulation and state regulation. He also introduced the concepts of 'scale jumping' and 'scale bending', highlighting the fluidity and openness of scale. The introduction of these terms reflects how scales and scalar relations are shaped by the struggles between powerful social actors and subaltern groups. The former seek to command 'higher' scales such as the global and national and strive to disempower the latter by confining them to 'lower' scales like the neighbourhood or locality, something which may be resisted by subaltern groups.

9. As Mackinnon notes, 'scale bending' is concerned with how certain social groups and individuals challenge and undermine existing arrangements that tie particular social activities to certain scales.

10. *Amin* is a field-level official in the Department of Land Revenue in every state of India who surveys land and property for sale and purchase.

11. Social capital theory contends that social relationships are resources that can lead to the development and accumulation of human capital.

12. Mangar/Magar is an ethnic community of Sikkim. The Mangar community is settled in various parts of India, e.g., Sikkim, Darjeeling, Kurseong, and other places in the northeast of the country. They are also found in Nepal. Most of the population of this village are Mangars, although other caste groups like Sharmas, Dhakals, and others also live here. Many have relocated after receiving compensation.

13. Acre is a unit of measuring land. One acre is equal to about 43,560 square feet or 0.4047 hectares.

14. Sikkim is the first state in India to become fully organic. In Pakyong, an organic vegetable market was launched in 2018. Although it is more expensive than the other vegetable market (near the Panchayat office), it is cleaner and sells sustainable produce.

15. Sherathang is a town in Gangtok district, near the Nathula Pass in Sikkim, India. The location has been identified as the site for excise, customs, and checking for trade between India and China. Rinqingang is the corresponding location in China.

16. In this case, the number of petitioners is on an individual basis, but one individual may represent one household, as having two petitioners from one household is not a possibility. Determining the beneficiary creates a lot of difficulty.

17. The Indian government approved the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013 to provide a transparent rehabilitation and resettlement process and equitable compensation in the event of land acquisition.

18. Under Article 371F, Sikkim has been granted several provisions that are unavailable to other states of India in terms of citizenship, land revenue, and taxation.

19. The Dhakals and Sharmas are upper caste categories in Sikkim and nearby regions. They also live in other states of India, like Uttarakhand, and in the neighboring country of Nepal.

20. In the case of Sikkim, the subaltern categories cannot be clearly defined, as the context varies. Subalterns are present across all the ethnic groups (Nepali, Bhutia, and Lepcha). Additionally, within the subalterns, some are more privileged than others.

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