

## **Water Power.**

Discourses on Modernity and Development around the Nepalese Arun-3 Hydropower Project.

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### **Research Context**

In November 2008 I visited the Upper Arun valley in Eastern Nepal for the first time. Twenty kilometers north of Khandbari, the regional center, the Indian state-owned Sutej Jal Vidyut Nigam Ltd. (SJVN) will construct a hydropower dam. Near the dam site I met a young man I will call Ajib, a local peasant who had recently returned from Saudi-Arabia where he spent three years working as a shopkeeper. Asked about his opinion on the power plant he stated that he was in favor of the project. He hoped for employment, the construction of a road and a hospital and therefore the simplification of his life. The overwhelming majority of local people I had the chance to talk to shared his opinion, often recounting the promises of modernisation in colourful pictures: then "our children may study their books in bright light instead of traditional lamps," as Durga put it (Conversation 1). But when I asked Ajib if he agreed to the fact that an Indian company will develop the project he shook his head: „There is a Nepali proverb: The local ghost is better than the foreign god. Why can't the Nepalese government build the project?" (Conversation 2).

In contrast, local elites are very concerned about the effects on the communities, the in-migration of Non-Rai and the possible deterioration of culture and identity. The frequent reference to ILO Convention no. 169 on Indigenous and Tribal peoples in Independent Countries that was ratified by Nepal in 2007 and their rhetoric of struggle shows their reception of the global movement on indigenous rights. The Upper Arun valley is characterised by a great ethnic diversity. The two directly affected municipalities (Num and Pathibara Village Development Committees) are predominantly inhabited by Yamphu Rai (cf. Rutgers 1998, Forbes 1995, 1999 and Seeland 1980). The different Rai-groups of Eastern Nepal are mountain peasants with a mixed farming system of tillage and animal husbandry. They speak Tibeto-Burman languages (e.g. Gaenszle 2000: 36-41) and descend from the Kirati, which are said to have once ruled a big part of the Nepalese Himalayas. When Prithvi Narayan Shah "unified" Nepal in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, he met strong military resistance by them, only settling for integration after he granted them a high degree of autonomy.

Arun-3 occupies a peculiar space in the Nepalese discourses on development for a number of reasons. Firstly, no other project has been in discussion for such a long time. As early as 1982, a Japanese feasibility study in the Kosi river system identified the sinuosity of the Arun river at Pheksinda as best site for a run-of-the-river hydropower plant and labeled the project as Arun-3. The construction started in 1990, financed by the governments of Nepal, Japan and Germany, the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank. Secondly, until the recent plans for the construction of a 750 MW storage power plant on the West Seti, no other scheme reached the 1,1 billion US-Dollars of investment volume. In the 1990s, it was by far the most expensive project ever to be conducted in Nepal. But thirdly, and most importantly, the discourses on Arun-3 have always been a controversy about the very nature of development in Nepal, how society should cope with modernity and the relation between citizens and the state. Until the independence of India, Nepal had had hardly any contacts with foreign countries, except for the British Empire. The 1950s were a time of dramatic political and social change, they started with the flight of King Tribhuvan to India. From 1846, Nepal had been reigned by prime ministers of the Rana family, reducing the kings to mere marionettes. Public pressure and Indian intervention forced prime minister Mohan Shamsheer Rana to resign, political parties were allowed and in 1959 the first free elections were held that brought a victory for the Nepali Congress Party. But already 18 months later the newly crowned King Mahendra changed his mind, abolished multi-party democracy and took direct control over the state. He outlawed the political parties and established the autocratic „party-less Panchayat democracy" that lasted until 1989 when the Nepali Congress and the United Left Front agreed to form an alliance for the re-establishment of multi-party democracy, again with strong backing from Indian side. At the time when the so called People's Movement (Jan Andolan) succeeded and free elections were held in 1991, the construction work for Arun-3 had already started.

The first public review of the anomalies around Arun-3 was a newspaper article by Dipak Gyawali that appeared on 13 July 1990 in *The Rising Nepal* where he engages in a political-economic critique of the scheme stating that „the entire process of power planning and development has been hijacked by Arun-3" (2003a: 149). Soon, criticism was voiced from different sides as well. Activists in Kathmandu were

concerned about indigenous rights, environmental and cultural destruction while a high-level Bank staffer resigned in protest over the economic purpose of the project and technicians were critical about basic technical features. When the Arun Concerned Group (ACG), an alliance of Nepalese NGOs with international backing, launched an appeal before the newly established Inspection Panel of the World Bank in 1994, their petition was surprisingly allowed (World Bank 1995) and the World Bank withdrew from the project in the following year, leading to a total building freeze in 1997. The campaign against Arun-3 showed how civil society in Nepal had gathered momentum in the previous years, but it was closely watched internationally as well, as the United Nations were about to launch the International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples in 1995. It was one of the first campaigns for "indigenous rights" in Nepal and was mostly carried by Kathmandu-based intellectuals with strong transnational networks (Conversations 3 & 4, Udall 1998: 408-421).

Many of the critics saw the project as a belated attempt to introduce the modernist version of national development through large-scale infrastructure projects that had failed before in so many other Third World countries. Jawaharlal Nehru had not called dams the „new temples of India“ for nothing and especially the Narmada River Project showed that these temples were mainly built for the urban elites who would not lose a wink of sleep because of hundreds of flooded villages (cf. Baviskar 1995). The Nepalese civil society actors that started the successful campaign against Arun-3 had a totally different imagination of development, they wanted to install thousands of small-scale-hydropower plants for a decentralized power supply and a strengthening of the local economy. So until now there is one fraction that bemoans the World Bank's withdrawal from the project, affirms that the recent power shortage would have not developed if Arun-3 had been built in the 1990s and celebrates the resumption of the project as the start of the golden era of Hydro Dollars (or rather Rupees) while others call the agreement between the government and SJVN an attack against national interests or even high treason.

As to the date of writing this report, SJVN is still waiting for a legal framework to start the construction of the access road. The Memorandum of Understanding of 2008 states that the company, a joint-venture of the governments of Himachal Pradesh and India, will build the access road, the hydropower plant and the transmission line at its own expenses. For that SJVN will get 79.1 per cent of the generated electricity for the period of thirty years, after which the dam will be handed over to the government of Nepal (GoN & SJVN 2008). In January 2010, an engineer at SJVN's project office in Khandbari estimated that it would only be a matter of two or three weeks until the legal basis would be put into action (Conversation 5) and the construction would commence. Two weeks later in Kathmandu I found out that the Ministry of Energy had prepared a legal framework for the three foreign financed hydropower schemes and was planning to enact it as a by-law, thereby by-passing the Constituent Assembly. When a storm of protest broke out and many critics reminded the Ministry that the Interim Constitution states that every decision concerning the natural resources of Nepal has to pass this body, the Ministry proclaimed that the legislation would not address water but only the international trade of electrons (Conversation 6).

## **Theoretical Considerations**

By analyzing the multiple discourses around the mentioned hydropower scheme the research project will contribute to the discussions on modernity and development. Modernity as a specific condition of societies has challenged a host of scholars of very different disciplines and theoretical backgrounds, often coming to contrasting conclusions (e.g. the Weberian notion of modernization as disenchantment [Weber 1919], Foucault's [1976] understanding of modernity as the shift from a society of punishment to a disciplinary society and further on to a society of surveillance [e.g. Feldman 1991] or Luhmann's [1992: 3] discussion of modernity as a process of continued dis-identification and "constant creation of otherness"). Hence, modernity is a term that has a multitude of often contradictory meanings in different circumstances, on theoretical as well as empirical level. A helpful way of coming to terms with this fact seems the abandonment of the understanding of modernity as a monolithic and linear process that will inevitably lead to a Westernization of humankind as for example in Shmuel Eisenstadt's (2000) concept of multiple modernities.

„The idea of multiple modernities presumes that the best way to understand the contemporary world-indeed to explain the history of modernity-is to see it as a story of continual constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programs.“ (ibid: 2)

The social scientific literature on large-scale hydropower projects is predominantly focussed on three topics: local resistance against dams, transnational donors and questions of accountability (most often in connection with the World Bank), and civil society and transnational networks of activists. Often, all three groups of actors are integrated in the analysis with activists forming alliances with local communities against resettlement plans and the loss of patrimonial land financed by transnational institutions as in Amita Baviskars ethnography of the campaign against the Sardar Sarovar dam on the Narmada river (Baviskar 1995). Other takes on local resistance include Erich Haag's (2004) historical account of the movement against the Urseren project that resulted in the employment of the Swiss Army in Andermatt in 1946, Kaushik Ghosh's (2006) discussion of indigeneity and the Koel-Karo dam in Jharkhand or Jun Jing's (1999) work on Northwest China. In this regard, Arun-3 is a clear exception: Already in the 1990s the overwhelming majority of locals was in favor of the project. Only this Winter, Gopal Siwakoti reconfirmed this case. He was one of the leading figures of the Arun Concerned Group and when he travelled to the Upper Arun valley after the World Bank had withdrawn from the project, he was physically assaulted (Conversation 4).

Functionaries of the Yamphu Kirat Samaj, the political and cultural organization that represents the Yamphu Rai, are very concerned about the dam. Although they do not disapprove of it totally, they frame their reservations in a narrative of the credulity of the local peasants that can easily be cheated and cunning actors from outside (SJVN, Indians generally, powerful outsiders or organized crime) that will take advantage of them. Thereby those functionaries, often highly educated activists with far-reaching networks that spend most of the year in Kathmandu or other urban centers, can act as mouthpiece and protectors of the simple folk in the villages (Conversation 7).

When speaking with those simple folk there was no blind enthusiasm to be heard. Everybody I talked to in autumn 2008 and winter 2010 agreed that there would be advantages as well as disadvantages that come along with a project like Arun-3 but for the majority the construction of the access road was seen as the major improvement. Until now, the Upper Arun valley is rather difficult to reach in European standards. But the lack of a road does not mean that the area is remote or that people do not travel. As in many peripheral regions of the Himalayas seasonal work migration has been an integral part of local economies for at least three generations. Apart from the ongoing importance of India as destination, nowadays young people apply for working visas for Malaysia or the Gulf states where they work in construction, catering, as security personnel or domestic servants. Talking with a group of young men in Hedangna, I had the impression that most of them do not return home with substantial savings but rather that they seek wage labor abroad to see the world and to participate in modern life (Conversation 8).

In rural Nepal I constantly have to justify myself. People ask me: „What are you doing here? We have no road, no electricity. Why do you come here?“ or even „We live in the stone-age“ (Conversation 9). Akhil Gupta described this attitude for Northern India as post-colonial condition and identifies it as „a pervasive feeling of being underdeveloped, of being behind the West, articulated with other identities of caste, class, region, gender, and sexuality, produces people's sense of their selves“ (1998: ix) that is „constitutive of ‚local‘ lives and ‚local‘ systems of meaning“ (ibid: 6). As far as I can tell, imaginations of modernity are central themes in the local discourses in the Upper Arun valley. Arjun Appadurai (1996: 5) points to an important „shift in recent debates“ when he suggests that „the imagination has become a collective, social fact“ and a social practice that is constantly reproduced and worked on, by all of us. Against the calls for an „end of development“ by fundamental critics like Wolfgang Sachs or Gustavo Esteva those conversations show how charismatic the promise of development is. James Ferguson's work on the de-industrialization of the Zambian Copperbelt shows that despite the important critiques of the development paradigm its simple refusal will throw out the baby with the bath water: „With the development story now declared ‚out of date,‘ global inequality increasingly comes to appear not as a problem at all but simply as a naturalized fact“ (2002: 146). Though, local imaginations of modernity are highly structured by local circumstances, cultures and identities. People in the Upper Arun valley do not strive for a simple imitation of the modernities they encounter when they leave their villages but for different forms; modernities that they themselves can reproduce and participate in.

Therefore, examinations of the imaginary based on ethnography are highly important for the understanding of globalization if we conceptualize it as a process that is shaped by the complex interplay of a multiplicity of modernities. The focus on the global employed by many anthropologists in the last decades has brought fruitful insights. On the other hand, there is no alternative to thick descriptions of the lives of particular people in particular places. The global cannot be thought of without the local – and vice versa.

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## **Conversations**

- Conversation 1 with Durga, 27 Nov. 2008 in Khandbari
- Conversation 2 with Ajib, 21 Nov. 2008 in Num
- Conversation 3 with Dipak Gyawali, 24 Oct. 2008 in Kathmandu
- Conversation 4 with Gopal Siwakoti, 31 Jan. 2010 in Kathmandu
- Conversation 5 with Dinesh Sapru, 18 Jan. 2010 in Khandbari
- Conversation 6 with Ratna Sansar Shresta, 4 Feb. 2010 in Kathmandu
- Conversation 7 with Hom Yamphu, 8 Feb. 2010 in Kathmandu
- Conversation 8 with a group of men, 16 Jan. 2010 in Hedangna
- Conversation 9 with a group of men, 30 Nov. 2008 on the way from Khandbari to Dharan