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Indigenous Youth and Decolonial Futures: Energy and Environmentalism among the Diné in the Navajo Nation and the Lepchas of Sikkim, India

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Abstract: In India and the United States, Lepcha and Diné youth are articulating decolonial futures that diverge from past aspirations. Rather than demanding big infrastructure such as dams or power plants, Indigenous youth forward decolonial visions that reimagine the landscape and energy technologies. In this article, we suggest that Lepcha and Diné activists are articulating a youthful decolonial futurity—a vision for the future where their generation and the ones to follow can flourish in their own territories and on their own terms. We propose youthful decolonial futurity as a prefigurative politics specific to Indigenous youth, who view their activism as integral to creating a future where their communities have more control over decision-making processes and their ancestral territories. What emerges is a consideration of the role of Indigenous youth in building a language and politics of decolonisation against the roles of power brokers, elites, and naysayers.

Keywords: Indigenous youth politics, decolonisation, prefigurative politics, environmental activism

Introduction

In 2007, the Indian Power Ministry proposed 29 hydropower projects in the Eastern Himalayan state of Sikkim, part of a larger vision to transform the Indian Himalayan region into the country's "future powerhouse" (Dharmadhikary 2008). Seven of Sikkim's 27 projects were slated for construction in the Dzongu reserve in North Sikkim, a sacred site for the Indigenous[1] Lepcha tribe. Two Lepcha youth from Dzongu, Dawa and Tenzing, initiated a hunger strike after Sikkimese state authorities refused to meet with anti-dam activist leaders to hear out their concerns. The hunger strike snowballed into a vibrant three-year-long struggle that led to the cancellation of four of seven proposed projects in 2010. The anti-dam

movement initiated and spearheaded by Dzongu youth is regarded by many as one of the most successful civil disobedience movements in Sikkim's democratic history (Bentley 2021; Huber and Joshi 2015).

In 2013, half a world away, a group of Diné elders and youth demonstrated against the continuation of coal mining in the Navajo Nation, the largest Indigenous nation in the United States. The marchers walked the sidewalks of Scottsdale, Arizona—a wealthy suburb of Phoenix—holding signs demanding a new energy economy and an end to the use of fossil fuels. At the centre of the messaging was a call to transition Arizona's water infrastructure from a reliance on coal to solar. Although the message of the march was for "green" development, there were deeper decolonial ideals at work that inform a larger ideology of decolonisation for Diné people. The protest was also meant as an intervention in conversations about energy and energy transition in Arizona. It articulated an aspiration for a sustainable energy future, a future in which the Diné people didn't sacrifice their own lands and bodies for other people's energy and access to water.

This collaborative paper emerges from our personal and political commitment to Sikkim and the Navajo Nation. Gergan's maternal family belongs to the Lepcha tribe, and Curley is an enrolled member of the Navajo Nation. In each of our sites, we observed the mobilisations and reactions of our community members—who reside in "reserves" or "reservations" and who are defined as a "minority" or members of a "tribe"—in response to limited autonomy and claims to land within the larger colonial nation. During conversations with environmental activists in both places, we were struck by the strong parallels between the experiences of Indigenous youth and the conditions of their political marginalisation. Since 2007, Gergan's research has focused on anti-dam activism in Dzongu, while Curley's research centred on the shifting fortunes of Diné people in the declining Navajo coal industry, where he worked closely with young Diné environmental activists. While India is understood as "postcolonial", we align ourselves with scholars who argue that the Indian state functions like an imperial, colonising entity in its tribal and borderland territories (Akhup 2013; Anand 2012; Bodhi 2013; Kikon 2005; Nongbri 2006; Osuri 2017; Po'dar and Subba 1991; Xaxa 2016).

India's Himalayan borderlands, home to a diverse group of tribal minorities like the Lepchas, have a contested historical relationship with the Indian state that includes demands for secession and ethnically exclusive homelands (Baruah 2020). To accommodate such sub-nationalist demands, large parts of the region are protected by constitutional provisions like the Sixth Schedule, meant to safeguard tribal customary laws, tribal land ownership, and traditional forms of governance (Hausing 2014). Increasingly, however, tribal communities in the region are being pressured to lease or cede their land for extractive industries, and infrastructural development including hydropower projects (Dharmadhikary 2008; Gergan 2020). Though the sale of hydropower energy is expected to benefit the region economically, growing ecological precarity has generated a "great unevenness in the distribution of potential gains and losses—and of vulnerability to risk" and a "serious legitimacy deficit" in the Indian state's commitment to its borderland citizens (Baruah 2012:41, 42).

The environmental activism of Indigenous youth in Sikkim and the Navajo Nation has implications for questions of energy transition, sustainability, and climate change for these communities. However, the social change underway among Lepcha and Diné youth, as one might expect, is uneven, inconsistent, and at times in opposition with an older generation of leadership. In Dzongu, fault lines emerged between the younger Lepcha anti-dam activists and members of the tribe mostly closely aligned to state and corporate interests, such as pro-dam political leaders and village governance officials. The hunger strike and anti-dam activism sharpened generational divides as competing visions of Dzongu and the future of Lepchas within India and the region, provoked intense debate and disagreement within the tribe (Bentley 2021). These tensions were also present between Diné community members as they debated the future of energy and development in the Navajo Nation. Elected Diné officials accused Diné youth-led organisations and movements that galvanised against the construction of a new coal-fired power plant of challenging tribal sovereignty and working against the collective interest of the tribe.

A central argument we put forward here is that through their environmental activism, Lepcha and Diné youth are articulating decolonial futures that are divergent from past aspirations. Rather than demanding big infrastructure in the form of dams and power plants, Indigenous youth are putting forward decolonial visions that prioritise restoring waterways or investing in alternative energy technology. In doing so, young Indigenous activists expose the collusion between colonial state powers and tribal elite, i.e., members of the tribe who benefit the most politically and economically from this collusion. In both contexts, we observed that in conditions of heightened economic and ecological precarity, Indigenous youth are forced to contend with an accretion of political power in the hands of an older generation with conflicting visions for the tribe or nation. Lepcha and Diné activists direct their critiques towards both the state *and* members of their own community whose complicity is understood to threaten an imagined decolonial future. We suggest that discursive and political practices of Lepcha and Diné activists articulate *youthful decolonial futurity*—a vision for the future where their generation and the ones to follow can flourish on their own territories and on their own terms.

Our study contributes to understandings of decolonial practices among Indigenous youth organisers and activists—a *making* of decolonisation praxis. This praxis isn't always consistent, and contains some glaring contradictions. But here we highlight the specific forms of decolonial politics in two globally distant places in order to connect what is being said and understood transnationally as a growing *global indigeneity*. Through the juxtaposition of these cases, we build our argument along two lines of thinking. First, decolonial practices are rooted in very specific and grounded environmental and territorial questions, whether that is the imposition of hydropower infrastructure or coal-fired power plants on tribal lands. Decolonisation, as a future-oriented political practice, emerges as a response to the incorporation of Indigenous lands into state-driven capitalist and ongoing territorial expansion. We extend this theorisation in the Indian context, demonstrating how state-led infrastructural expansion in India's Northern borderlands

exposes the "coloniality of (post)colonial sovereignty" (Osuri 2017:2348). Second, in challenging state authorities, Indigenous youth are taking radically different political strategies from existing (recognised) Indigenous leaders, who often try to work out agreements between their communities and the state in the interest of expanding development and investment in otherwise neglected places.

For us, these tensions illustrate the friction between different notions of sovereignty and the future of Indigenous territories. Here, we provide context to the politics of recognition, resource extraction and Indigenous youth politics in both Diné and Lepcha communities, followed by case studies that illustrate how Lepcha and Diné youth are enacting decolonial futures through their activism against extractive industries and their critiques of tribal-state collusion. In conclusion, we discuss the intersections between our sites and how they expose the potential for dramatic political shifts in Indigenous politics. While Indigenous youth are excluded from institutionalised forms of power and lack institutional support to enact their desires, we argue that their vantage point at the margins allows them to critique and offer a potential challenge to prevailing state-Indigenous arrangements in the ideological construction of decolonial futures.

Decolonisation and the Politics of Recognition

Colonisation is a violent process that uproots and subsumes everything in its path. After more than 500 years of settler-colonialism in the United States, it is sometimes difficult to imagine decolonial futures. According to Tuck and Yang (2012), decolonisation requires the undoing of colonial structures of power, and a return of Indigenous land into Indigenous sovereignty. As they write, "decolonisation is not a metonym for social justice" (Tuck and Yang 2012:21); in this regard, decolonisation becomes incommensurable with "human and civil rights based approaches", instead it is to be found "elsewhere" (Tuck and Yang 2012:36), in present practices of "Native futures without a settler state" (Tuck and Yang 2012:13).

The ongoing contestations between youth and elders in our communities show how decolonisation is an idea in motion—at times incommensurable with the history and futures of a colonial state, and also with existing practices that build on colonial policy. Decolonisation is a hybridisation of ideas, ideologies, and governing practices. For example, Dennison (2017), writing about her tribe the Osage Nation of Oklahoma, illustrates how contemporary forms of Native sovereignty function through "colonial entanglements". She writes that the Osage "have maintained sovereignty only by becoming more involved with other structures of power, such as French and US trade networks, oil and gas extraction, US Congress lawmaking, environmental-impact statements, federal accreditation processes, and audits by the US Homeland Security Department" (Dennison 2017:689). Similarly, Indigenous scholars Clint Carroll (2015), Nicholas Reo and Kyle Whyte (2012), and others are infusing Indigenous environmental governance (often built on systems that operate through institutions inherited from colonial governments) with recovered Indigenous knowledges, practices, and frameworks. Although seemingly "incommensurable" (using Tuck and Yang's [2012]

language), these practices are consistent with Indigenous decolonial imaginations that preserve Indigenous life for a future when the settler state is gone.

Within so-called "postcolonial" nation-states, Indigenous peoples are not entirely removed by settlers, but are similarly assumed into racialised hierarchies of domination and displacement (Gergan 2020; Rai 2021). For instance, Indian anthropologists like Ghurye (1963), believed that tribal groups were essentially "backward Hindus" and the states should attempt to assimilate them into mainstream Hindu civilization. Critical of such assimilationist strategies, Indigenous leaders from Manipur, Nagaland, and Mizoram in Northeast India, demanded complete secession from the Indian Union (Lalfakzuala 2017; Walker 2019; Wouters 2019). Today most of Northeast India, like Kashmir, is heavily militarised and under the draconian Armed Forces Special Powers (AFSPA), that grants military personnel legal immunity and indiscriminate rights including the authority to shoot-to-kill (Baruah 2020; Kikon 2005). Influential anthropologists like Burman and Bettiele (in Karlsson 2003; Van Schendel 2011) reject the term "Indigenous" in India—arguing that we simply cannot differentiate between an "original" and a colonising settler population. However, tribal scholars and activists argue this is a simplistic dismissal of the potential for Indigenous politics in India (Karlsson and Subba 2006; Kikon 2006; Nongbri 2006; Po'dar and Subba 1991). As Longkumer's (2020) ethnography of the Hindu Right's proselytising mission in the Northeast demonstrates, an assimilationist framing remains pervasive in India's treatment of its non-Hindu, borderland tribes.

Although the form and practice of colonialism is different in India and settler-colonial contexts in North America, Indigenous demands for territorial autonomy and sovereignty provide important points of comparison. Dene (First Nation in Canada) scholar Glen Coulthard (2014), building on the work of Frantz Fanon and Charles Taylor, and to an extent Povinelli (2002), warns against the "politics of recognition in colonial contexts". Indigenous-colonial relations, as Coulthard (2014:7) explains, can be understood as "inter-related discursive and non-discursive facets of economic, gendered, racial and state power … that ha[ve] been structured into a relatively secure or sedimented set of hierarchical social relations … that facilitates the dispossession of Indigenous people of their lands and self-determining authority". Here, we add onto the way the politics of recognition plays out within longstanding histories of colonial injustice, and how it is refracted through notions of indigeneity and decolonisation.

For 100 years, the Navajo Nation has been the site of extractive industrial development (Yazzie 2018). Starting in the 1920s, oil was leased to powerful energy companies dominating the mining of federal lands at the time. Eventually industries of coal, uranium, and natural gas were developed across the reservation. But after years of cancers, pollution, and death associated with these industries, the Navajo Nation revisited its relationships with these industries. In 2005, the tribal council banned uranium mining and processing on the Navajo Nation. This was a significant reversal on an industry that was once the most profitable for the tribe, one that came after years of pressure and activism from Diné environmental groups.

In India, the decolonial imperative parallels how contemporary movements against extractive industries and national development projects on tribal lands, are being theorised as extensions of historical struggles for tribal self-determination and territorial autonomy (Gergan 2020; Karak 2016; Kikon 2006; Xaxa 2016). Indian tribal scholars and activists have reframed "Indigenous" from an understanding of "native" or "original settler" to societies and communities whose histories and knowledge systems are today subsumed under dominant Indian nationalist historiographies and Hindu caste hierarchies (Longkumer 2020). Unpacking the nuances of terms like "Indigenous" in India then is also instructive of how tribal political histories and demands for sovereignty persist in postcolonial contexts (Karak 2016; Karlsson and Subba 2006).

However, as Van Schendel (2011:26) notes, there is a schism along generational lines in who uses the term Indigenous in South Asia, where an older generation of tribal leaders with a stake in "state largesse" reject the term, while those with a stake in international or non-statist largesse adopt the term, "leapfrogging their state … by claiming a global citizenship and seeking refuge in the transnational category of 'Indigenous people'". In India, state largesse for tribal groups includes, among other things, affirmative action benefits known colloquially as "reservation", but as Hausing (2014:183) argues, the "explosion in the ranks of the tribal elite competing for the state's sizeable largesse" requires an urgent reframing of the "whole edifice of tribe recognition". With a rapidly shrinking public sector and high rates of educated unemployed youth, it is no surprise that the younger generation of tribal youth in India are growing increasingly sceptical of state largesse (Gergan and Smith 2020).

In both Sikkim and the Navajo Nation, tribal leaders who believed in the promise of development for their communities aided energy and extractive industries into their territories. These leaders worked through formal mechanisms of limited forms of state recognition, such as tribal governments and *panchayats*, which provided the legal-political frameworks for prevailing economic and political institutions within these communities. In North America, this politics of recognition has perpetuated colonial domination of Indigenous governing institutions (Coulthard 2014:7; Daigle 2016; McCreary 2013). Likewise, writing in the context of tribal governance in Nagaland, India, Kikon (2005) critiques the national electoral process for "systematically destroy[ing] existing Indigenous institutions and creat[ing] a group of parasitic elite 'managers' for New Delhi". Today, we find a younger generation of tribal activists in India "leapfrogging the state" (Van Schendel 2011:26) by building transnational coalitions[2] with other Indigenous groups across the globe. As Diné and Lepcha youth develop their ideology and politics in opposition to formal structures of colonial recognition, their activism also puts them in direct confrontation with their own elders and political leaders.

Youthful Decolonial Futurity

Dyson and Jeffrey (2018:573) have proposed that young people's agency enacts a "prefigurative politics" wherein "people channel political effort into demonstrating in the present the types of social relations and practices sought at a future

point in time". Drawing on the politics and practice of Lepcha and Diné youth, we propose *youthful decolonial futurity* as a prefigurative politics specific to Indigenous youth who view their activism as integral to creating a future, where their communities have more control over decision-making processes and ancestral territories. Indigenous peoples have long witnessed their communities lose control over ancestral lands either through settlements, dams, or development projects. This loss of land is also tied to broader fears about loss of "culture" such as the decline of first language speakers among the younger generation (Bentley 2007; Lee 2007). This endangerment of Indigenous languages, as Roche (2019), writing about Tibetan minorities[3] in the People's Republic of China reminds us, cannot be separated from colonial histories of development and present-day extractive industries threatening these territories.

The pathologies that states use to define contemporary Indigenous life are often problems experienced particularly by younger populations—high suicide rates, unemployment, migration, substance use—to name only a few (Dhillon 2017; Ningshen 2011; Smith and Gergan 2015). Writing in the context of western Canada, Dhillon (2017) argues that these alarming statistics cannot be separated from their colonial legacies as "ongoing colonial assaults are lived, breathed and fought against by Indigenous youth every single day". The accretion of political and structural limitations that have resulted in reduced life chances for Indigenous youth are also bolstered by powerful racialised tropes that cut across time and space (Stoler 1995, 2010). Indigenous youth then have to contend with the layering of tropes of the "lazy native" *and* the "apathetic youth" (Gergan 2014) in how state and community members might view them as a site of "moral panic" and inadequate citizens who are simply "passing time" (Jeffrey 2010; Neyzi 2001; Smith 2013), further contributing to their exclusion from political spaces.

This experience of political exclusion is not unique to Indigenous youth. Writing in the context of politically affiliated student union politics in Nepal, Snellinger (2016:28, 34) notes how being sidelined within the political establishment "motivates students to seek out creative ways to differentiate themselves as political alternatives to the parties' old guard", sustaining their political aspirations by cultivating a politics of hope, summarised in the oft-repeated phrase: "not-yet, let's see what happens". For young people in Koskimaki's (2017) account, the lack of regional development in the Western Himalayan state of Uttarakhand has had a stifling effect on future aspirations—employment, marriage, raising a family—all key events in transitioning from youth to adulthood. Therefore, while the revolutionary potential of youth is invoked by a range of political actors, young people occupy a liminal political status viewed as "adults in waiting" or "political apprentices" rather than as political agents (Skelton 2010).

We therefore centre Indigenous youth in our analysis not only for their involvement in activism and environmental movements but also given how state and community members mobilise the figure of "youth" as a proxy for hopes and fears over the future (Aitken 2001; Cole and Durham 2008; Jeffrey and Dyson 2008; Smith 2020). We also find that the category of youth in extractive contexts is a "social shifter" (Durham 2004:589)—a relational category in part built on

age, but also tied to politics and ideology. "Youth" in the minds of tribal governing authorities are those who are in opposition to them. As Gergan shows in the case of Sikkim, Lepcha politicians and village leaders discipline and dissuade young activists from challenging the status quo by withholding state benefits. In the Navajo Nation, elders working in opposition to extractive industries can paradoxically be lumped into the category of uninformed publics alongside youth.

The tension between structural limitations and individual agency, and the liminality of their social and demographic position imbues young people's actions—both within and beyond formal political spaces—with a speculative quality. Writing from the lens of feminist geopolitics that understands intimate everyday practices as enacting political futures, Smith (2020:103, 104) examines how young people's "bodies and lives are the bridge connecting the territorial configurations of today with those of the future", a premise that pushes her to ask "if the future of place and territory is lived and embodied, what futures do young people envision and embody in the present?". Extending this line of theorising, we understand youthful decolonial futurity as Indigenous youths' response to the myriad threats facing their communities; a response that attempts to move beyond a politics of fear and anxiety, and cultivates a politics of hope (Snellinger 2016) and refusal (Simpson 2014).

Research Context and Methods

From 2011 to 2014, Gergan conducted fieldwork in Sikkim, following the lives of a few prominent anti-dam activists as they made their way back to Dzongu after the three-year-long relay hunger strike ended in 2010. Sikkim, a Tibetan Buddhist monarchy, was annexed by India in 1975 through a controversial referendum process. Lingering bitterness at the Indian state for annexing Sikkim, is slowly giving way under the weight of more pressing concerns. Alongside a high rate of unemployment (Labour Bureau 2015) and a shrinking public sector, ecological precarity has recently taken centre stage in Sikkim following a 6.9 magnitude earthquake in 2011, whose epicentre was located close to two under-construction hydropower projects. Unlike their Diné counterparts, Lepcha anti-dam activists do not frame the Indian state as a coloniser. Still, their critiques of the Indian and Sikkimese state are rooted in a deep sense of historical injustice.

Gergan's fieldwork was conducted in the heightened political climate of the 2014 state and national elections, where many anti-dam activists came out in support of a new political party, the *Sikkim Krantikari Morcha* (Sikkim Revolutionary Front, and henceforth SKM). Dawa Lepcha, a prominent anti-dam activist, contested for the Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) position of Dzongu where he ran against incumbent Sonam Gyatso, a vocal advocate of hydropower development. Interviews in Dzongu, centred on Lepcha youth identity, ranging from struggles with unemployment, self-employment initiatives, involvement in village and state-level politics, and Lepcha cultural heritage. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with anti-dam activists, non-partisan youth from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, local bureaucrats, and *panchayat* (village governance) officials. Most young people quoted here identified as "educated

unemployed youth"—an official state category. Interviews were conducted in English and Nepali and translated by Gergan.

Curley conducted fieldwork in the Navajo Nation between 2012 and 2014. The author met with Diné environmental organisers and activists, Diné coal workers, and elected Diné officials. Diné environmental activists questioned resource policies of the Navajo Nation, including a proposed water settlement over the Little Colorado River and the extension of a lease for a power plant on Diné lands. The observations used in this article occurred during a time of coal renewal on the Navajo Nation. While the tribal government considered the extension of long-term coal contracts with regional utilities, Diné environmental organisers created spaces for alternative politics. This took the form of workshops, trainings, and political demonstrations. The locations of these events were also intentional. While the decolonial workshops and training happened in the heart of Diné lands—on a sheep camp far away from paved roads, grocery stores, or other modern comforts—the demonstration was held at a place of consumerism in the affluent Arizona city of Scottsdale.

Diné Decolonisation, Youth, and Energy Transition

In the summer of 2013, climate change in the western United States was in full effect. At the end of June and into July, the Yarnell Hill Fire, one of the most damaging wildfires in Arizona's history, killed nearly 30 volunteer firefighters. Concerns about the future of the environment were on many people's minds. Earlier in the spring, the Navajo Nation Council extended the land lease for a 2,250-megawatt coal-fired power plant on the western edge of the reservation. The infrastructure was decades old. It consumed land, water, and made precarious the possibility for future survival in one of the oldest settled areas on the continent—Black Mesa, Arizona, the centre of the Navajo and Hopi nations. The extension of the lease wasn't without controversy, and many Diné people and environmental groups questioned the wisdom of continuing in the coal industry.

Also in June of that year, the Black Mesa Water Coalition, a Diné-run organisation founded by Diné youth, organised workshops in a remote Diné homestead on Black Mesa. The workshops were held on the lands of prominent Diné activists just west of the small community of Piñon. Hidden behind rocky hills, bushy juniper trees, and far from a paved highway, the workshops were intended to teach young people the history of extraction in the Navajo Nation. The practice of workshops as a form of education was itself a decolonial pedagogy, bringing Diné young people out of the classrooms of formal education (colonial institutions) and back onto the land. Under a makeshift tent and using portable power generators, white paper, markers, and folding chairs, Diné and non-Indigenous peoples discussed environmental challenges facing the community, the United States, and the planet. They talked through core issues of environmental justice and the finer details of direct action organising.

Organisation leaders designed the workshops to teach young Diné participants how to challenge surrounding colonial institutions through direct action. In the workshops, participants discussed future strategies for defeating coal and colonial

resource politics across the reservation. These strategies were designed to increase the visibility of the issues through community organising, sign-making, letter-writing, and protesting. Workshop leaders discussed where in the US political system youth could apply pressure. Overall, the forums brought awareness to energy challenges facing Diné, Black and rural white communities. Organisers from Michigan and Kentucky also joined. Diné organisers presented on the history and legacies of extractive industries in the Navajo Nation like natural gas fracking and uranium mining. They talked about the nature of water rights and water settlements facing tribal nations and articulated future possibilities for sustainable living in the Navajo Nation that reinvigorated traditional agriculture and gardening techniques alongside new energy technologies like wind and solar.

Organisers drove workshop participants to Phoenix. In the morning of the next day, they hit the streets wearing shirts that read "Power without Pollution, Energy without Injustice". The message was for a future without coal and other extractive industries in Arizona and across the state's 22 Indigenous nations. The message called for social mitigation, the resolution of a system of environmental injustice, from the coal mine to the power plant, that was at the core of Diné environmental justice movements. Alongside the protest, members of the coalition parked a truck over a nearby bridge spanning the Central Arizona Project and siphoned water into the tank. It was a symbolic recapturing of water that Phoenix had appropriated for itself at great costs to Indigenous nations.

Nearly two-dozen activists and organisers rallied outside of a mall in Scottsdale while the water was drawn into the tank. The protest was also a diversion for police. Diné activists who identified as women wore long skirts to symbolise a sense of Diné indigeneity and as a gesture of decolonial affirmation. Like the sites of the workshop and demonstration, the use of dress was purposeful and done to challenge western dress patterns. In wearing traditional clothes, women activists linked tradition to a sustainable future. To the participants, this spoke back against colonisation. The imposition of short hair and western clothes was a core assimilation tactic. In the 1930s and 1940s, just as the extractive economy was taking root in the reservation, many Indigenous children were forcefully removed from their parents and forced into boarding schools (Denetdale 2006). Sometimes parents volunteered their children, as the economy of the reservation made it difficult to feed families. By rejecting modern dress, the activists spoke to this legacy and gestured to a recovery of traditional ways (e.g. Gökarıksel and Secor 2014).

Although the Navajo Nation stood in total commitment to the coal industry, organisers did not directly challenge tribal officials in their support for coal. Rather, they addressed the outside institutions like the Salt River Project (SRP) that relied upon Navajo coal to pump water from the Colorado River to Phoenix. The organisers implied that it was among Arizona institutions, not the tribal government, where power was concentrated. During the march, organisers demanded that SRP invest in solar and other alternative energy technologies. Demonstrators chanted for "solar" and support for "green" businesses.

When coal entered the region, there were few jobs in the Navajo Nation, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs was pushing assimilation. For a generation, coal was viewed as a source of sovereignty and self-determination. The federal government

paid families to move from the reservation into expanding cities. In the early 1970s, some tribal officials believed coal could reverse this process and keep Navajo people employed at home. By 2013, however, the environmental damage of the industry was well known. Strip mining had destroyed coal mine and mine-adjacent landscapes. Climate change added new kinds of considerations to the environmental consequences of coal mining. This brings the discussion to a point of interest in Tuck and Yang's (2012) notion of decolonisation, as coal was seen at one time as a source of enhanced tribal sovereignty, and then a generation later as a source of neocolonialism. Tuck and Yang (2012:13) write, "tribal sovereignty has provided for an Indigenous present and various Indigenous intellectuals theorise decolonisation as Native futures without a settler state". Coal is the present and the decolonisation is the future. The difference in this context, is that organisers believed that Diné people need to abandon what they viewed as a colonial government and return to traditional forms of social and political organising. When Curley asked a young Diné woman, who worked for the organisation leading the demonstration in 2012, about the ideal form of Diné governance, she said:

> Prior to Westernisation … prior to this IRA [Indian Reorganization Act] government for Navajo, how would they have approached coal? Let's say they understood its potential, and they understood a little bit of the economic systems?

In the quote above, the former member of one of the central organisations involved in the demonstration equated "westernisation" with "colonialism" and "IRA government". The interviewee asked how Diné leaders, or "*naat'áanii*", would conceptualise and act upon coal in a traditional leadership forum. And not only in a traditional leadership forum, but within a political-economic context that prioritised subsistence economies. In other words, it was the purpose of the tribal government to sign coal contracts in accordance with American ideas of capitalism and development. The demonstration was a method to incorporate Diné youth into the struggle against extractive industries in the Navajo Nation. It was to give Diné youth a direct stake in the conversation in action. Digital photographs were taken and posted on social media. Participants were tagged on Facebook, Twitter, or Tumblr.

Under this notion of "decolonisation", the *community* was the ideal site of Diné politics. The centralised Navajo Nation tribal government, in the eyes of many organisers, misrepresented the interest of hundreds of Diné communities for the benefit of a colonial administration. For some Diné youth, the tribal government was an artificial creation of the federal government that was designed to help outside corporations and non-Navajo interests pillage their lands. Diné youth challenged the legitimacy of the tribal government as a part of the colonial configuration of governance (Alfred 2006; Bruyneel 2007; Corntassel and Witmer 2008; Coulthard 2014), within the United States.

When asked to respond to the argument that coal provides hundreds of jobs for Diné community members, a Diné organiser argued that sustainability was key. The respondent reversed the framing. It was not coal that was preserving jobs, but destroying the environment. Coal used water that threatened future

survivability for Diné people. For Diné youth challenging the coal-industrial complex, coal was not separable from water.

> We have no idea about what the impacts are of overconsumption. This leaves us in a very precarious situation where if we don't plan now and create a water budget that's sustainable … we're not going to be able to live here—screw jobs, we're not going to have water.
>
> That's the reality of climate change that no one is talking about. We are already past the tipping scale, we are in a particular vulnerable space.

Many younger Diné people describe decolonisation as a return to traditional notions of culture and economic practices. They read and incorporate critical Indigenous scholarship into their ideological frameworks, such as the works of Waziyatawin and Michael Yellow Bird (2005, 2012), Leanne Simpson (2017), Sarah Deer (2009, 2015), Winona LaDuke (1999, 2005), and others. Not only are Diné youth challenging the continuation of extractive industries within their communities, but they are also contesting development.

For many Diné youth, decolonisation refers to social and political practices that existed prior to colonisation, including belief systems, notions of gender and gender roles, and political philosophies. This was the ideology under construction. It is still under construction and has taken on new, more radical directions in recent years. As Curley's interlocutors explained, decolonial ideology frames what Diné activists and organisers consider a real or more authentic form of tribal sovereignty compared to the practices of tribal governments. In challenging the coal-industrial complex, Diné youth distinguish decolonial politics from self-determination "nation-building" that defined Indigenous resistance for the older generation of Diné leaders currently in tribal government.

Increasingly, younger Diné people are defining themselves against colonisation. Among Diné youth, critiques of capitalism, heteropatriarchy, the future role of the tribal government in development, etc. are all active terrains of new political practices broadly understood as decolonial practices. Diné youth are reshaping the interface of colonial-capitalism within reservation lands. They call into question the legitimacy of the Navajo Nation, both as a colonial and colonising set of institutions and as an expression of Diné political values. Diné youth promote the idea of "community" as a decolonial space—a space for a resurgence of traditional values and governance. Diné youth believe that the tribal government pillages Navajo lands while "the community" preserves historical relationships Navajo people have with the land, air, water, and other natural resources. This is not to say that utopia follows such expressions of belief. The pushback from tribal officials can be severe, censoring youth and reducing their criticism or resource contracts to a language of uniformed publics (Curley 2019).

Contesting State Largesse in Sikkim

Dzongu is a protected reserve for the Lepcha tribe located in the Upper Teesta valley, home to roughly 5,000 people. Reserves earmarked for specific tribes are rare in India, but it is believed Dzongu was home to the Lepchas prior to the

inception of the Tibetan Buddhist monarchy in the 17th century. Many important sacred sites, and Lepcha mythologies and origin stories can be traced back to Dzongu (Foning 1987; Tamsang 1983). However, the reserve was politically marginalised under both the Tibetan monarchy (est. 1642), and the post-annexation Sikkim state. Dzongu has dismal health and education infrastructure and most anti-dam activists had left the reserve at a young age to pursue their education in Sikkim's urban centres.

Since its annexation to India in 1975, Sikkim's "old laws", i.e. its pre-annexation laws, have been protected under an asymmetric federalism that guarantees constitutional protections for tribal customary laws, land ownership, and preferential federal financial assistance (Hausing 2014). In addition to federal subsidy packages, special category states like Sikkim also receive complete exemption from income tax. Such constitutional protections exist across India's Himalayan and Northeastern states and serve to accommodate subnationalist demands (Hausing 2014), yet are often read in paternalistic terms by lay Indians as "special" treatment for borderland states. Sikkim's "old laws" are enshrined in Article 371(F) of the Indian constitution, and have been critical in maintaining tribal territorial autonomy since they restrict the sale of tribal land to non-tribal people. In interviews, Lepcha anti-dam activists pointed out that while protections for tribal land were necessary, federal financial assistance made Sikkim dependent on the central government, stifling citizens' ability to critique federal policies like hydropower. Moreover, they argued, constitutional protections were not guaranteed since hydropower developers bypassed them to acquire land from Dzongu residents.

Among government officials in Sikkim, a critique of federal assistance policies had morphed into a narrative of a state that coddles its people. The author of Sikkim's 2001 "Human Development Report", for instance, suggested that "past [federal] subsidies were used as government handouts and had *spoilt the people* by killing local initiative and traditional self-help" (Dixit 2003, emphasis added). Sikkim "state largesse" (Van Schendel 2011) manifests most clearly in the provision of secure, stable government jobs with the state government being the single largest employer in the area, although agriculture and horticulture remain the dominant kinds of work for everyday people. The last decade witnessed a steady decline in the number of jobs in the public sector, while the number of educated unemployed youth grew exponentially. This led many younger, educated activists to question the role of the state in Sikkim and the work associated with hydropower projects. During fieldwork in 2014, Gergan attended a government workshop on youth issues, where the state official moderating the workshop, in response to concerns around the lack of public sector jobs in Sikkim, gave the following patronising speech:

> Now what has happened in Sikkim is that it is a "chopey ko state, maya gareko state" [a state that protects and spoils its people]. The government does so much for those who are unemployed, we give trainings, we give loans. When I was the Block District Officer I've seen this youth who got a loan for a poultry farm. I asked him, "Will you actually open a poultry farm?". And he said, "No, I just want to buy a motorbike".

The condescension aside, this framing illustrates a striking mismatch between "state largesse" and the desires of a youthful, educated population—desires also articulated by Lepcha anti-dam activists. Gergan's fieldwork in Sikkim took place after the anti-dam movement successfully pressured the state to cancel four of seven proposed dams within Dzongu. When the movement began with Tenzing and Dawa's hunger strike in 2006, many Dzongu youth involved with the movement were those studying in college or high school in Sikkim's urban centres. In 2010, they found themselves back in Dzongu, some after many years away. Energised by the success of the movement, they were motivated to get involved in grassroots politics and strategised how to establish more sustainable livelihood opportunities for educated unemployed youth. Eco-tourism emerged as a key sector that could support youth aspirations across party lines. Not only is tourism the most important economic sector in Sikkim, the younger generation in Dzongu was moving further away from its primary economy—agriculture and horticulture. Eco-tourism was also seen as a counter to hydropower projects that promised electricity for Sikkim and jobs for its educated youth—both promises it ultimately failed to deliver on.

Despite the success of the anti-dam movement, activists received little support from panchayat officials and older, respectable community members (many of whom were public servants) (Gergan 2014). Instead, they were unofficially blacklisted by the ruling SDF party and found their organising efforts stymied by Dzongu's dense political networks, controlled by panchayat officials backed by the SDF. Since panchayat officials wield considerable influence over the allocation of jobs and ancillary benefits within Dzongu, they withheld jobs, government loans, and aid towards projects initiated by anti-dam activists. I interviewed a few officials, hoping to better understand their vision of Dzongu's future. In interview after interview, the earlier framing of an entitled youth that is "spoilt" by the state was reiterated. I was told anti-dam activists had no right to complain about the lack of job opportunities within Dzongu since they refused to participate in state-sponsored trainings on handicrafts and horticulture targeted at unemployed youth or participate in the popular rural employment scheme, MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act). Later when I asked one of the anti-dam activists the reason behind this refusal, Pempo, who had participated in some trainings, explained why they were an exercise in futility:

> At the end of the training [for unemployed youth] they say you have to take these documents from office to office, to get a loan. Before that you have to go to the MLA and you have to get a NOC [No Objection Certificate] from the panchayats. Then they [panchayats or MLA] will say this boy or girl was in the anti-dam movement or they are in the opposition party. They won't do your work on time and that's how you get discouraged. The department people say, "You don't support our government; what can we do?".

Not only does state largesse have little regard for people's actual needs and desires, more importantly, it can be withheld when necessary and deployed as a disciplinary tool. This disciplinary power of state largesse was on full display during state election campaign rallies, where panchayat officials and pro-dam MLA

Sonam Gyatso Lepcha spoke openly and at length about the repercussions for those supporting anti-dam activist Dawa Lepcha, the opposition party's candidate. Sonam Gyatso, likened the anti-dam activists supporting SKM as "dangerous bulls trying to gore people", adding that when he came back to power, he would "discipline these bulls with a rod". Much of this political landscape has shifted drastically, in part due to the concerted efforts of the anti-dam activists, but more significantly due to the defeat of the SDF in April 2019, and the ousting of Pawan Kumar Chamling after a record-breaking 25-year term as Sikkim's Chief Minister. However, during 2013–14, the battle lines were drawn starkly.

If we are to understand decolonisation as challenging the structure of colonial recognition that "facilitates the dispossession of Indigenous people of their lands and self-determining authority" (Coulthard 2014:7), this manifests most clearly in Lepcha activists' critiques of the SDF's insidious control over grassroots politics in Dzongu. Young activists argued that their tribe could only have territorial autonomy if and when they weaned themselves from state subsidies. As young activists explained, their express reasons for staying back in Dzongu despite the lack of infrastructure and employment opportunities, was to enact a vision of Dzongu's future where educated Lepcha youth had the power to shape the reserve's material and political realities. Kalzang, who had not participated in the anti-dam protests but was sympathetic to their vision, expressed how important it was for anti-dam activist Dawa Lepcha to win in the upcoming elections. He explained:

> First we need to change the entire political scenario of Dzongu. Because power is the most important thing, you know? If hopefully we come to power tomorrow, we will only implement good things and not like putting NHPC [National Hydro Power Corporation] forcefully. No, like getting self-employment, doing organic farming, we will concentrate more on that.

Mayalmit, a prominent anti-dam activist and one of the few who secured stable employment and had stayed back in Gangtok, Sikkim's urban capital, explained how she felt heartened by the efforts of activists who, despite the absence of institutional support, were running successful independent eco-tourism ventures. Lauding their efforts, she noted:

> The youngsters, they are really determined to do something for the village … At the end they can tell the government with full confidence that we are not even dependent on you. Instead, they are showing the government the alternative of development. Young people are trying to explain what is development.

Youth activism in Dzongu is also a product of a generational shift in the tribe's economic, ecological, and spiritual relationship with the landscape. Until the early 2000s, household income in Dzongu was tied primarily to the cardamom cash crop; but a mysterious blight linked to climate change led to the gradual decimation of the crop. Since property rights disallowed the sale of reserve land to non-reserve residents, the loss of cardamom revenue devastated agriculture-dependent families. The declining revenue potential of reserve land coincided with the entry of hydropower projects where an exception was made for developers to acquire land from reserve members. But for the younger generation who were not bound

to agriculture, the protection of Indigenous territory—their future inheritance—took primacy.

While the anti-dam activists represent a minority voice within Dzongu, their discourse of indigeneity marks a shift from the more prevalent institutional discourse and its appeal to "state largesse", and is closer to the global discourse of indigeneity that views the state as a product of colonial and neoliberal machinations (Gergan 2014). For this generation of young Lepchas, threats from hydropower development are read as a "wake-up call" for the tribe, signalling a shift to a more vocal critique of state interventions including, even, its benevolence. As the façade of state largesse slips and the number of educated but politically disenfranchised tribal youth swells, an active and articulate reformulation of indigeneity is emerging from this demographic not only in Sikkim but across other Himalayan and Northeastern Indian states.

Conclusion: Indigenous Youth as Agents of Decolonisation

Indigenous youth activism is articulating new pathways toward decolonisation, as a praxis, as an on-the-ground set of contingent politics responding to colonial forms of domination. Globally, Indigenous peoples are challenging state forms of recognition that marginalise political and cultural identities to a limited "minority" interest or ethnic identity. In both Sikkim and the Navajo Nation, forms of official tribal recognition were used to make governing authorities legitimate in the eyes of the colonial state to sign agreements for extractive industries or new energy projects. In both cases, a circumscription of identity and rights to land were built into the law, from the "old laws" of Sikkim and eventual incorporation of the Tibetan Buddhist kingdom into India, to the process of federal recognition for tribes in the United States.

Drawing on Amina Mama and Sylvia Wynter, Upadhyay (2013:264) invites scholars to analyse the "pernicious continuities" between colonial logics and violence across the global North and South. They argue that entangled histories of colonisation and racialisation demonstrate the spatiotemporal continuities across contexts but also present opportunities for building solidarities that allow us to question and "un/settle identities, genealogies, histories, and spaces". We see our conversation as an exploratory and evolving response to this call, and in conclusion briefly summarise the intersections in our case studies, and the challenges inherent in comparing our contexts.

For Diné people, reservation lands and resources are under the control of settler-colonial communities. In the Navajo Nation, decolonial practices focusing on alternative energy technologies, decentralisation of tribal authority, and sustainable agendas as bases of Indigenous governance are forged in opposition to selective recognition of kinds of modernisation and development projects acceptable to settler-colonial institutions. Importantly, Diné youth are articulating alternatives to these regimes, ones that are not completely separate from neoliberal green energy proposals, but nonetheless understood as decolonial praxis. For the Lepchas in Sikkim and tribal communities in postcolonial contexts, the loss of

control over ancestral lands and resources are just as old as the U.S. context. What is more, although India has been conceptualised as a postcolonial space, the dynamics around resource control exemplified here are hardly distinguishable from settler-colonialism (see also Anand 2012; Osuri 2017; Xaxa 2016).

In both contexts, the "politics of recognition" produces structural constraints to challenging existing networks of power and patronage that advance state and corporate agendas. In Sikkim, the "politics of recognition" is tied to state largesse which is wielded by both the Indian and Sikkimese state to maintain the status-quo and discipline dissenting voices. In Dzongu, this disciplining was carried out through Lepcha politicians and panchayat officials. For Diné youth organisers, the federally-recognised Navajo tribal government functions as a colonising entity that is working against creating a sustainable future for the tribe. We understand Indigenous activists' and organisers' critiques of tribal governance structures and representatives as beholden to the state's colonising mission, as an act of decolonisation.

Ultimately, we find that environmental activism in both our contexts is changing how a younger generation of Indigenous peoples are theorising their relationship to dominant nation-state powers, and their role in building their tribe's future. While hydropower and coal are at two ends of the energy spectrum, Indigenous activists in Sikkim and the Navajo Nation argue that extractive industries jeopardise future generations' relationship with the landscape, and must be countered with alternative, sustainable projects that generate both energy and wealth, and engender viable futures. Indigenous environmental activists turn a critical gaze at the role of modernising state institutions and infrastructures, arguing that they, the younger generation, are the future and that colonial practices of big energy projects, whether it be dams or coal, are a thing of the past. This activism acknowledges a sense of indigeneity that is distinct from modernising projects. No longer are Indigenous peoples' practices impediments to development, but are instead the sustainable alternatives to it.

Lepcha and Diné youth involved in environmental organising and activism have a strong analysis and critique of the collusion between state power and tribal politics and officials. Diné youth, in the heart of US colonialism, are reshaping the interface of colonial-capitalism on tribal lands. Lepcha youth activists understand their efforts to capture political power and develop eco-tourism as a sustainable livelihood alternative, as a challenge to the disciplinary tactics of state largesse. While Indigenous youth organisers are not above critique, their location at the edges of institutional spaces of power and privilege allows for a different vantage point as compared to tribal representatives in positions of power. Among tribal actors, critiques of capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and the future role of the state, remain active areas of dispute. What decolonisation will ultimately look like in practice is hard to predict, but following the direction of Indigenous youth activists and organisers points us in this direction.

In bringing our field sites together, we document decolonisation in action, in its ideological and rhetorical formations, and call attention to nuanced practices and strategies on the ground. Although there are many differences between Dzongu and the Navajo Nation, there are important similarities. These similarities

were striking, surprising, and motivated us to write this paper. At the core in both sites are cohorts of youth building on grounded notions of decolonisation to challenge existing political arrangements set in place by colonial institutions. The tensions and frictions between youth activists and tribal representatives stem from systemic power differentials and colonial histories that have undermined tribal sovereignty, self-determination, and territorial governance. What decolonisation means for tribes in India and the United States will vary vastly, but what emerges here is a consideration of the role of Indigenous youth in building a language and politics of decolonisation against the roles of Indigenous power brokers, elites, and naysayers. We view this as opening a dialogue for understanding the multiple and grounded ways in which decolonisation is conceptualised and implemented across settler-colonial and postcolonial contexts.

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Endnotes

[1] Since the late 1990s, in response to both institutional interventions such as the UN and global Indigenous movements, there has been a growing self-identification as Indigenous among certain Scheduled Tribe groups, i.e. India's constitutionally recognized tribes. Scheduled Tribes (ST), constitute 8.6% of the total population. The terms, Indigenous and *Adviasi*, sometimes used interchangeably, are political and not constitutional categories. However, in the Northeastern and Himalayan states the term Adivasi, used primarily by Central and Western tribal groups, has not gained traction due to its roots in Sanskrit which is considered hegemonic. Here, only Indigenous or "Tribal" are used in popular parlance. Moreover, the term "Tribal" though considered archaic is widely used in the Indian context (Van Schendel 2011).

[2] See for instance the Adivasi Resurgence website and #AdivasiLivesMatter handle on Twitter and Instagram.

[3] See discussion on Tibetan indigeneity (Lokyitsang 2017; Yeh 2007).

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