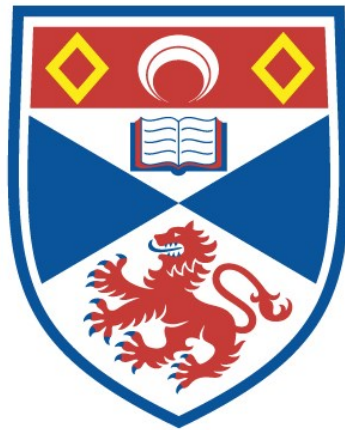


**Performing purity:
the ethical worlds of public servants in
Sikkim's organic conversion**

David Lawrence Humphrey

A thesis submitted for the degree of PhD
at the
University of St Andrews



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PhD Thesis

Performing purity:
the ethical worlds of public servants in
Sikkim's organic conversion



David Humphrey
University of St Andrews
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26th March 2024

Abstract

This dissertation explores the ways in which officials engaged with the government-mediated conversion of the Indian Himalayan state of Sikkim to a 'fully organic farming state,' a process declared complete in 2016. My research was conducted within the agriculture and horticulture departments of the state government. I interrogate the tension between the mobilisation of notions of Sikkim as embodying a state of nature bypassed by India's green revolution and hence 'organic by default', and the bureaucratic work of 'organic by design' entailed in bringing about such a state and presenting it to the world. In keeping with the global basis of the organic movement, Sikkim's organic conversion was significantly outward-facing in focus, and relied on notions of authenticity, and technologies of authentication, including centrally that of certification. As the global organic movement promoted notions of the 'yeoman farmer' (Guthman 2004), so department officials valorised the figure of the 'hardworking farmer'. This valorisation was reflected in their own practice, with 'the field' as a site of authentic official work, set in opposition to 'the office'. The field featured prominently in representations of officials' professional formation and early careers in agricultural colleges, research stations and demonstration farms, and even in those of hard rural childhoods. But it sat uneasily with their aspirations for an escape from these histories through their careers in the office.

Dedication

Notwithstanding the subjunctive space of the declaration which accompanies this thesis, Shohana Shabnam has been instrumental at every stage of its development: in the inception and the questions that prompted it; in her patience and understanding during field research; in her patience and understanding during writing; in her patience, understanding and frustration during not writing; in our perplexity over the questions that organisations embody; and in discussing complex, abstruse and often futile ideas, most of which I fail to represent here. It is dedicated to her.

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I would firstly like to thank my supervisors, Dr Adam Reed and Dr Mette High, for their advice, wisdom and calm, for showing me a way to write up this research when I didn't think I could, and for the rigour and insight of their comments, provided unreasonably quickly and often outside of 'working hours'. I thank Prof Tanka Subba, then Vice Chancellor, Sikkim University (now Northeastern Hill University) for his help in securing affiliate status with Sikkim University, a relationship which assisted my research in innumerable ways. Dr Charisma Lepcha, my supervisor in the Department of Anthropology, Sikkim University, gave much valued support and encouragement and help with Nepali terminology related to work. She and the Head of Department, Dr KR Rama Mohan, made me feel welcome in the Department of Anthropology. I benefited greatly from interactions with their colleagues and students in the seminars that Drs Mohan and Lepcha arranged.

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I thank Dr Anna Balikci-Denjongpa, Tsewang and Michelle Topden and Hope Leezum Namgyal for their friendship, support, insights (anthropological, in Anna's case) and flat (in the case of Tsewang and Michelle). Sanghita Sen, Syamal Basak, Dristi and Chuti also provided emergency accommodation in Kolkata, as well as friendship and inspiration. For granting permission to conduct research within the agriculture and horticulture departments, I am most grateful to Shri Somnath Poudyal, then Minister for Food Security and Agricultural Development, Horticulture and Cash Crops Development, Animal Health, Livestock, Fisheries and Veterinary Services, and Irrigation and Flood Control. I thank Khorlo Bhutia, then Secretary in the agriculture and horticulture departments for his openness, enthusiasm and support in arranging for the research to take place.

Lastly, most obviously, but most profoundly, I wish to thank the officials in the agriculture and horticulture departments, several of whom remain friends, for their exceptional openness and generosity with their time and thoughts. I also owe a deep debt of gratitude to the family that generally hosted me in the village I refer to as Tuksum and provided advice on my renditions of Nepali terminology, as well as friendship and reflections on Sikkim society. The greatest recognition for this dissertation would be for these people to read it and recognise in it something of their experience. Much of the difficulty I have experienced in writing it has originated in concern over whether it would ring true to them. I trust they would recognise my reflections on some of the complexities of that experience as an inevitably flawed attempt, born out of deep respect, to understand and portray the work they do.

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Map of Sikkim within India



Administrative map of Sikkim

Language abbreviations used in explanation of non-English terms

Bhu	Bhutia
Hin	Hindi
Lep	Lepcha
Nep	Nepali

Introduction

Organic by default?

On 18th January 2016, in the presence of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Chief Minister Pawan Kumar Chamling declared Sikkim had become “India’s first organic state [Hin: jayvik rajjya]” (*Sikkim Organic State Declaration, 18/01/2016 (Mero Sapanako Sikkim, Vol-2)*. - *YouTube* 2016). The setting was the first ‘Sikkim organic festival’, arranged to mark the conclusion of a phased five-year process during which every hectare of cultivable land in the mountainous northeast Indian state had been certified as conforming to organic farming practices. The phrase ‘organic state’ was central for the state government in two distinct ways. Firstly, not only had Sikkim’s farming been declared to operate wholly according to officially prescribed ‘organic’ rules, but this status had been achieved almost entirely at the initiative of its government. Secondly, this ‘organic conversion’, as officials referred to it, had been instigated on a compulsory basis. The import into the state of the fertilizers and pesticides on which much conventional, non-organic, farming relied, had been prohibited, and, in principle at least, the land of every farmer in the state had undergone the process of organic certification. This totalism is reflected in the language that officials used to discuss the organic conversion in official documents and publications, as well as in conversation. The ‘declaration’, or resolution, adopted by the state government in 2003 referred to the ambition of “declaring Sikkim as a ‘Total Organic State’” (Government of Sikkim n.d.a). In speeches, conversation, and departmental literature, the Chief Minister and department officials gave two main rationales for embarking on the organic conversion: a duty to protect Sikkim’s natural environment from the adverse effects of modern farming, and a desire to revitalise that farming by providing viable livelihoods on the land for a younger generation, in a state where agriculture was perceived to be in long-term decline.



Figure 1: Sikkim organic festival, 2016 (photo reproduced in (Government of Sikkim 2017:70).



Figure 2: topographic map of Sikkim.

Later in the same year that Sikkim was declared a ‘total organic state’, I first contacted officials in the Food Security and Agriculture Development Department and the Horticulture and Cash Crops Development Department of the Government of Sikkim (henceforth referred to, respectively, as the agriculture and horticulture departments) about the possibility of conducting research on the conversion. I was referred to AK Shreshtha, a senior official in the agriculture department. During the course of my fieldwork, I came to understand that he was a central figure in the department and in Sikkim’s ‘organic conversion’, as officials referred to it. AK Shreshtha was an articulate advocate of the conversion: passionate and serious, with a mastery of information technology that was rare among senior officials. This made him the natural choice of department directors for official presentations in the national and international fora into which the conversion had drawn Sikkim and the department. Our first conversation took place in his room on the third floor of the Krishi Bhawan¹, where the headquarters of both the agriculture and horticulture departments were located. He shared with me a long PowerPoint presentation he had prepared for a recent international conference, which he swivelled his monitor to show me. The presentation consisted of over 50 slides, each illustrated with crisp graphics, charts and many professional photos. Early in the presentation, AK Shreshtha quoted an analysis that would later become familiar to me in discussions with many of his colleagues in the department:

Sikkim is a very small state. It has only 77,000 hectares of cultivable land. So tourism and visitors are priorities. Our environment is a priority. In 2003, when the government began its organic journey, Sikkim was by default organic. Inputs were low because we couldn’t get access to these inputs. Sikkim only used 11 kilogrammes of fertilizer per hectare, and about 1Kg per hectare of insecticide. This is compared to a national average of 70 Kg fertilizer per hectare, and perhaps 200 Kg per hectare in Punjab.

Officials frequently deployed the notion of Sikkim’s relatively small area of ‘cultivable land’ as justification for its organic conversion, quoting various closely spaced values (see Chapter Four). They often presented this measure in conjunction with the figure for Sikkim’s total land area, which was equally precisely cited as 7,096 km². Cultivable land thus

¹ Literally, the agriculture, or farming, building. The building also housed the livestock department, which was not a central focus of my research.

represented a small proportion of what was already a very small state, amounting to just under eleven per cent. According to this argument, organic produce had the potential both to increase incomes through the 'premium price' it could attract beyond the state, and to contribute to a broader perception of Sikkim as 'in harmony with nature,' thus boosting the state's already significant income from (mainly domestic) tourism. Echoing AK Shreshtha's presentation, Dorjee Wangyal Bhutia, another senior department officer, told me in one of our first meetings,

Sikkim is a very small state; we have only 77,000 ha of cultivable land. Most of our land is forest areas, or mountain areas, or steep slope, or rock. We currently produce only nine months' supply of food, so we cannot feed our entire population. So tourism and visitors is a priority; employment is a priority, and this can be helped by organic, and by an increase in tourism. Prior to 2003, we were organic by default. Our fertilizer use was twelve kilogrammes per hectare, [though] people did use some pesticides and fungicides. People in the rest of India had never heard of Sikkim. Now it has become that organic Sikkim is known throughout India. Productivity is one aspect, but it's a small state, and can't significantly contribute to production of the country [India]. But now it's a model. It's a model of the conservation of water and air.

This analysis, foregrounding the connection between the limits on Sikkim's agriculture and its 'by default' suitability for organic farming, would become familiar to me during my research, as would the statistics that accompanied it.

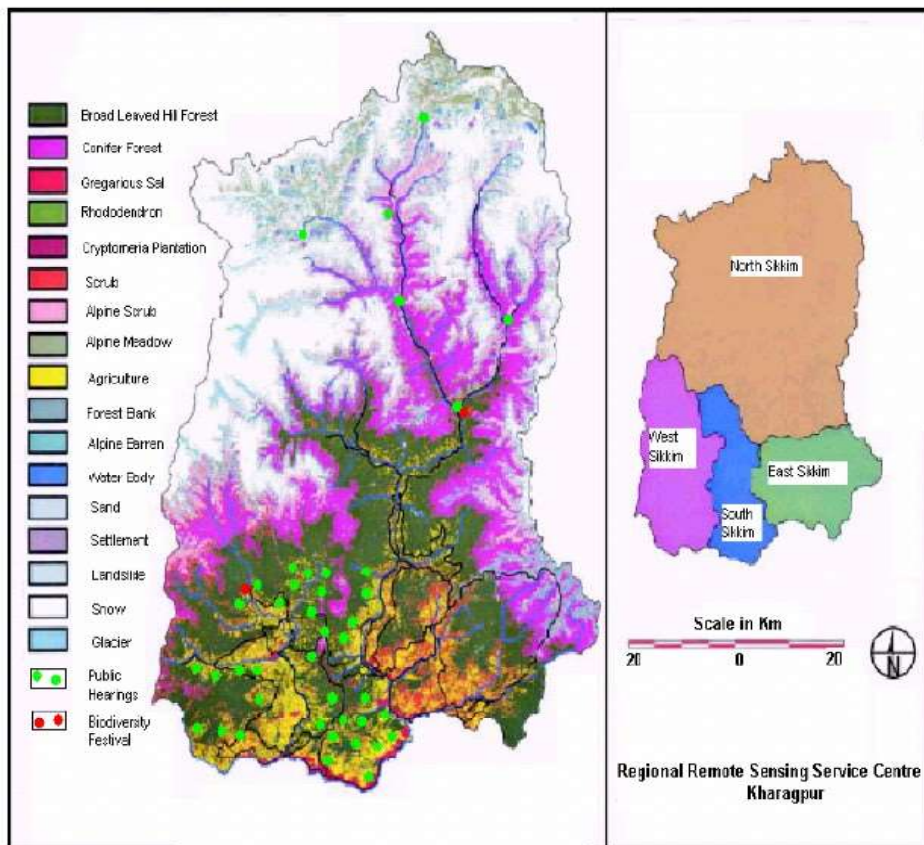


Figure 3: Sikkim vegetation map (Government of Sikkim 2016a).

The agricultural ‘inputs’, to which AK Shreshtha referred, had long been the bread and butter of departmental officials’ work. The term itself speaks to a rationalistic and state-led approach to agriculture in which the object is to maximise output, in terms of crop ‘yield’, through the most efficient possible application of the material prerequisites of plant growth. This instrumental approach to agriculture reached its apotheosis in the so-called ‘green revolution’: the state- and technologically-driven package that transformed global agriculture from the 1950s onwards, and extended the hope of feeding rapidly growing populations in the global South (Cullather 2013; Gupta 1998). Under India’s green revolution, the developmental state (Gupta 1998; Mathur 2016) was given a central role in efforts to dramatically increase agricultural production and feed a growing population. Much of its role was in the supply of such inputs: artificial fertilizers; crop treatments such as pesticides and fungicides; and seeds (or planting material, where crops are vegetatively propagated) improved through scientific breeding to make maximal use of the former two. In India and many other previously peasant-based agricultural economies, the package also

included the mechanisation of farming and thus a conversion of much the work of farming from human and animal power sources to fossil fuel. It further included the expansion of irrigation to increase the number of cropping cycles possible in a year (Leaf 1980). The enormous state-mediated effort of the green revolution was celebrated at the time as a spectacular success in feeding a growing population, particularly in the breadbasket states of central-northern India, such as Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. Mountain states, such as Sikkim, were for long seen as lagging behind, due to the problems posed by their difficult terrain, poor roads and small farm sizes.

More recently, anxiety over the negative impacts of the green revolution has become widespread. It has focused in particular on the use of agrichemicals; the newer technologies of genetic modification; and the increasingly centralised control of agriculture by global corporations. In India, these misgivings have crystallised around a nascent alternative agriculture movement to become a focus of widespread popular concern (Srinivas 2006). They include a broad array of ills: the long-term health impacts on consumers of the pesticides and fertilizers used to produce food; chronic poisoning in farmers and farm workers due to pesticide exposure; damage to agro-ecological systems, such as soil depletion, compaction and biodiversity loss; the reported increases in fertilizer and pesticide use needed to sustain crop yields; spiralling debt in the farming population, whose causes are complex, but include this more intensive use of agrichemicals and other proprietary technologies; and the ‘epidemic’ of farmer suicides, linked to this chain through both indebtedness and the frequent choice by farmers of pesticide as a means of ending their own lives.

In the conversations I relate above, AK Shreshtha outlines particularly eloquently a theme which I found recurred constantly in my interactions with department officials: that of Sikkim’s ‘by default organic’ status prior to the conversion. I suggest that the notion of a Sikkim ‘organic by default’ converts into a virtue what would previously have been perceived as a failure in the department’s central mission of bringing the green revolution to Sikkim. The notion of organic farming is centrally predicated on an absence of the ‘chemical’ inputs on which the green revolution was based. For department officials such as AK Shreshtha, the poor penetration of these inputs into Sikkim rendered its ‘conversion’ from a ‘chemical’ to an organic farming system in many senses already complete.

The central tension explored in this dissertation, though, is that between the notion of a Sikkim ‘organic by default’ and the centrality of bureaucratic process to Sikkim’s organic conversion, and indeed to organic farming regimes more broadly. Farming is located at the interface between the ‘work of nature’ (Battistoni 2017; Besky & Blanchette 2019) implied in the phrase ‘organic by default’ and intentional human action (see also Godelier 1980). It is my contention that organic farming in particular is defined not only by a specific set of cultivation technologies prioritising environmental sustainability and enacted in the labour of farmers, but also, intrinsically, by the action of the state. Fundamental to the latter is the regulatory framework common to all organic regimes, which centres on the bureaucratic technology of certification. Julie Guthman (2004) argues, in her study of the early history of the organic movement in the Central Valley of California, that the nascent organic movement in the US was characterised by a number of competing ideological tendencies. Alongside a commitment to environmental protection, human health and labour rights, she argues that an entrepreneurial element was influential to the evolution of the movement. Many of the early proponents of the organic movement argued that, in order to stand a chance of influencing world food systems, the movement would need to operate at scale, on a commercial, profit-making basis, and use the tools of mass marketing. To do so, it would also need to build trust among consumers that its produce reliably met the environmental, health and labour standards embodied by the movement. This need led to the centrality of certification to the organic movement, under the auspices of the US Department of Agriculture (Guthman 2004). In most jurisdictions, the term ‘organic’ is a legally protected one which can only be attached to produce approved by the relevant certification regime, which is almost always regulated by a government body. In India, this is the National Programme for Organic Crop Production (NPOP), administered by the Agricultural and Processed Foods Export Development Authority (APEDA), under the Ministry of Commerce and Industry. Sikkim’s organic conversion, with its state-mediated and compulsory nature, serves as an excellent example of the centrality to organic regimes of government action and bureaucratic process.

Officials referred to the period from 2010 to the end of 2015, and the declaration of Sikkim as an ‘organic state’ in January 2016, as the ‘implementation phase’ of the conversion. During this period, the principal effort of department officials in relation to

the organic conversion was dedicated to certification, and this effort focused primarily on Sikkim's 74,000 Ha of 'cultivable land'². The majority of this land was certified for the first time during the implementation phase. One of the central questions that this dissertation addresses is that of the precise nature of this 'conversion', and of the work that effected it. In what ways did officials consider that their work in certification and allied bureaucratic processes contributed to this transformation?

The certification of land occupied a fundamental position in Sikkim's organic regime, as it does in most such regimes worldwide. As Shaila Seshia Galvin (2018) points out for the case of organic farming in Uttarakhand, certification can be seen as "the farming of trust," operating as it does on the basis that produce sold to consumers is traceable back through the supply chain to the land, techniques and inputs used in its cultivation. While Sikkim's certification system was the responsibility of the department, much of its operations were contracted to private bodies. The regime operated on the basis of the 'third party guarantee' system, in which certification is undertaken by independent 'certifying bodies' licenced by NPOP. Farmers were additionally assisted to comply with the bureaucratic demands of certification by a second tier of privately contracted companies and NGOs, termed 'service providers'³. During the implementation phase, the department charged service providers with visiting each landholding and monitoring the farming practices, inputs and crop treatments applied to it for three consecutive years, verifying that they conformed to NPOP protocols. The land could subsequently be certified as officially and formally 'organic', a category which could be transferred to the crops grown upon it, and which, in principle, would significantly increase the value those crops could fetch at market.

Besides certification, the organic conversion involved a number of other significant areas of action for the department. One of the most significant of these consisted of efforts to regulate trade and transportation across Sikkim's border with wider India. During the implementation phase, the import into Sikkim of artificial inputs, such as fertilizers and pesticides, which had previously been supplied by the department, was progressively

² Official estimates of the state's cultivable land varied in different sources and at different points in time, as discussed in Chapter Four. This explains the discrepancy between this figure and that quoted by AK Shreshtha, above.

³ See Chapter Four for a fuller explanation of the roles of the various contracted bodies in the certification process.

phased out, culminating in their complete prohibition. In 2018, during the time of my field research, a similar prohibition was introduced on a range of non-organically grown produce. The ‘vegetable ban’, as it was popularly termed, proved unpopular in a state largely dependent on food imports. It initially applied to a wide range of common produce, including tomatoes, cabbage, cauliflower, beans, maize, aubergines and bananas, but excluded what were considered essentials such as rice, onions and potatoes (Sikkim Express 2017). However, the goods covered by the ban, as well as the extent of its enforcement and observance were often unclear, and several reversals of policy ensued.

A 2015 publication by the department (Bhutia 2015) provides a comprehensive table outlining other tasks planned for the implementation phase. According to this, the department would deliver organic agricultural inputs to farmers, including fertilizers, pest control measures and seed. These were provided through a combination of purchasing commercially produced products from specialised companies in wider India and abroad; production in government-organised facilities, such as the network of district-level government farms; and providing farmers with the equipment and materials necessary to produce inputs for themselves. Farmers would be trained in organic farming practices by department staff and the same network of service provider companies that supported farmers through the certification process. Consistent with the priority of the organic conversion to generate revenue for farmers and the state, and to sell Sikkim produce in wider India and beyond, the department’s plans included a central emphasis on marketing, with the development of a ‘Sikkim Organic’ brand (see below) and specific marketing and processing channels – a ‘value chain’ – for Sikkim Organic produce.

All these planned activities had to be accommodated within the institutional, operational and physical space of the department. The majority of funds for them were included in the ‘development budget’: the portion of the state budget dedicated to transformatory projects and largely resourced by central government ministries. Senior officers in the agriculture and horticulture departments spent much of their time elaborating and managing projects, or ‘schemes’, mostly funded by the central agriculture ministry, whose aims were to bring about the changes envisaged in the organic conversion. A unit, titled the Sikkim Organic Mission, was established, formally within the agriculture department, but working between the agriculture and horticulture departments, as a focal point for the prosecution of the

conversion. It was formally tasked with the activities prioritised by the government to spearhead the conversion, principally the organic certification of land; training in organic farming techniques; and the supply of organic inputs. Accompanying the Sikkim Organic Mission, the Sikkim Organic Cell was created to handle the administrative and financial aspects of contracting service providers.



Figure 4: the brand logo developed for Sikkim Organic.

The ‘work of nature’ (Besky & Blanchette 2019) implicated in a Sikkim ‘organic by default’, then, was not in and of itself equal to the task of Sikkim’s organic conversion. The remainder of this work, insofar as it entailed a central role for the planned action of institutions of the state, could be described as the constitution of a Sikkim ‘organic by design’. This work fell to the officials of the agriculture and horticulture departments, and forms the main focus of this dissertation. In keeping with the emphasis of the organic movement on the ‘farming of trust’ (Seshia Galvin 2018), much of the work entailed in the production of a Sikkim ‘organic by design’ can be seen as instances of the bureaucratised work of authentication, with the state assuming the role not only of guarantor of these processes, but also as principle actor in their realisation. Instances of the work of authentication include the central task of certification; the elaboration of specialised marketing infrastructure and value chains to prevent contamination with non-organic produce; the attachment to produce of a brand logo to distinguish Sikkim Organic produce; and the bounding of Sikkim to regulate the passage across its border of materials that would risk its ‘total organic’ status. In highlighting official representations of a Sikkim ‘organic by default’ and juxtaposing them with the work of department officials in bringing

about what I refer to as a Sikkim ‘organic by design’, I do not mean to imply that either of these two notions is a more valid representation of the organic conversion. Officials did not seek to disguise the work they undertook to bring about an ‘organic Sikkim’; rather they took pride in this work, while simultaneously celebrating the natural bequest that, they argued, made Sikkim so well adapted to organic farming. They often invoked the January 2018 declaration of Sikkim as an ‘organic state’ as a benchmark of the achievement, as recognised by the Prime Minister, in which this work had resulted. I will argue that the tension between these two notions of a Sikkim ‘organic by default’ and the achievement represented in the bureaucratic production of an ‘organic state’ constituted an important structuring principle for their work and for the ways in which they viewed that work.

Criticising Organic Sikkim

Around twenty minutes into our meeting, shouts began to become audible from outside. It was early April 2018 and the department had just begun attempts to implement the vegetable ban. I was meeting with AK Shreshtha, the officer to whom I was initially referred when developing my research project (see above). As I entered the Krishi Bhawan, the corridors seemed unusually animated. AK Shreshtha’s room on the third floor looked steeply down on the building’s car park. The national highway zigzags up the ridge on which Gangtok is built, forming the backbone of the city, and the car park took the form of a narrow platform raised against the steeply sloping hillside, providing just enough flat ground to accommodate the official cars that packed it. Over the course of a few minutes, the noise of a crowd gradually became more distinct, until it was clear that it was coming from the car park itself. AK Shreshtha peeped down once or twice through the drawn curtains beside his desk. When I did the same, I could see a gathering of about a hundred people, scattered in the spaces between the cars, with placards borne by one or two of the members closest to the building’s main entrance. He was visibly nervous and avoided discussing the protest happening below us. As I came to learn, meetings with AK Shreshtha were usually disjointed affairs, as he often received calls from more senior officials, was called away to meetings at no notice, or was required to sign urgent approvals. This morning, he was called upon even more frequently than usual. We became aware of some commotion in the corridor, and presently AK Shreshtha stood as a director entered from across the corridor to view the scene for herself. “Is it the Lal Bazar traders?” she

asked, referring to the stallholders of Gangtok’s central market and the transport operators who supplied it. The traders plied the route between Siliguri in West Bengal, the major wholesale market hub for Sikkim and the rest of Northeast India, and Sikkim’s retail markets. The largest part of this trade followed the single road between Siliguri and Gangtok, via the border town of Rangpo, a road which constituted a lifeline for Sikkim’s population. Indeed, another figure often quoted by agriculture and horticulture department staff was that Sikkim “only produces nine months of food”⁴, implying that one quarter of the agricultural produce consumed in the state was imported from wider India, via the wholesale markets of Siliguri. Almost all of this produce was grown using conventional, non-organic methods. The dependence of Gangtok markets on Siliguri produce was even higher than this figure would suggest, and, apart from on Saturdays, when the market was given over to ‘farmers’ selling produce from Sikkim, almost all produce sold in the Lal Bazar originated in Siliguri.



Figure 5: the Krisbi Bhawan, headquarters of the agriculture and horticulture departments, and its car park.

AK Shreshtha confirmed the crowd was indeed made up of Lal Bazar traders, and that the demonstration was organised by the All Sikkim Traders’ Association (ASTA). That morning’s local newspapers had carried front page stories detailing discontent among

⁴ I do not know the original source of this statistic, and data on volumes of wholesale or retail market trade in Sikkim are not systematically collected at state level.

traders. Stallholders complained of “acute shortages of vegetables” and “zero supply of organic vegetables” from within Sikkim (Sikkim Times 2018). Department officials who had been deputised as ‘enforcement officers’ had been visiting the market warning traders that so-called ‘inorganic’ produce would be confiscated. Two days previously, one truckload of vegetables had been seized by enforcement officers as it arrived at the Lal Bazar. Meanwhile, the supply of ‘organic’ produce from within Sikkim was the responsibility of SIMFED (Sikkim State Co-operative Supply and Marketing Federation), a state-owned company which at that point was only nominally under the purview of the agriculture department, but traders complained they were not receiving deliveries from SIMFED. AK Shreshtha and the director talked agitatedly, she expressing shock at the presence of such a crowd outside the doors of the department, he answering respectfully and to the extent of his partial knowledge of the rapidly evolving situation. They were joined by another senior officer, also making use of the vantage point AK Shreshtha’s window afforded. After the pair left, he appeared shaken. He returned the conversation to the more general merits of the organic conversion and I avoided pressing him directly on the protest.

Of the seventeen sustainable development goals⁵, organic agriculture has the potential to contribute to eight. Mostly people say “save the earth,” but I say the earth will be here. The question is whether we can live with the earth. The earth is the only planet where there is living soil, where the soil contains micro-organisms. In the past, we have destroyed Sikkim’s environment. Some species of vulture have died out in the mountains⁶.

It was hard to avoid the conclusion that he was pointedly ignoring the protest, which still continued, clearly audible, outside. This is understandable. I was a foreign researcher, we had met on only three occasions previously, and I was proposing to conduct my research from within the department, accompanying officials in their daily work. The importance placed by officials on presenting the conversion to wider India and the world made my presence a sensitive one, and AK Shreshtha was unsure of my agenda. The protest provided stark evidence that support for the conversion within Sikkim was some way short of universal. But, while his ignoring of the protest did appear a defensive reaction, I was

⁵ The goals of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development, agreed by UN member states in 2015.

⁶ Conversation in English.

again struck by the apparent conviction with which he related the government's environmental rationale for undertaking the conversion. I had the impression that, beyond this defensive bluster, AK Shreshtha's restating of the fundamentals of the organic conversion also represented a rejoinder to the critics outside his window, and reflected a sense of genuine hurt at the betrayal of these fundamentals. As my research continued, I became familiar with both the intrusion of criticism into Sikkim's organic conversion and with similar passionate reaffirmations of conviction on the part of at least some officials.

To its supporters outside of Sikkim, the state-mediated transition to organic farming was a pioneering initiative. For the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Missions (IFOAM), Sikkim

set an ambitious vision and achieved it, reaching far beyond organic farming production and proving to be truly transformational for the state and its citizens. Sikkim sets an excellent example of how other Indian states and countries worldwide can successfully upscale agroecology.

(IFOAM 2019)

Within Sikkim, however, this very state-mediated character of the conversion made it the target of significant criticism from within Sikkim's population. As well as the market traders, whose business was largely based on the import of non-organically grown produce from Siliguri, many of those who purchased produce shared this criticism. A friend and neighbour, Pemu Lepcha, over tea one afternoon in her boutique on Gangtok's modish MG Marg, asked the topic of my research. She snorted when I came to the word 'organic'. "Do you think these vegetables are organic?" she asked, pointing to the bag of shopping she had brought from the Lal Bazar that morning.

These are all from Siliguri! So how do they get them here from Siliguri? They've banned vegetables and the prices have gone up 20, 30 per cent, but I go to Lal Bazar on my way home every day, and it's the same produce. It's all a sham! And the vegetables that do come from Sikkim, do you really think they're organic? Don't you think the farmers will give fertilizer if they can get more profit?

⁷ Conversation in English.

Criticism of the organic conversion tended to take a few quite specific forms, and Pemu Lepcha's complaint illustrates one of the most prominent of these: a focus on what I will term the conversion's 'authenticity'. As I outlined above, and will detail in Chapter Four, the authenticating technology of certification was central to Sikkim's organic conversion, as it is to all organic regimes. But the fraught way in which the conversion was often viewed, by Sikkim's citizens and department officials alike, indicates that more was at stake in discussions of authenticity than the provenance of crops and the methods used to grow them. Pemu and I were speaking in May 2018, around a month after the department had begun attempts to impose the vegetable ban. There was widespread confusion over the extent to which it was being enforced. A truck had been seized at the Lal Bazar and others had been turned back from the state border at Rangpo. But, as Pemu observes, produce from Siliguri, which she will have been able to recognise by its generally larger sized cultivars, was still on sale in the Lal Bazar. Prices fluctuated depending on type of produce and from day to day, but at this point they were generally around 20% higher than they had been prior to the ban. This will have had a significant impact on Pema's family, who were relatively affluent professionals but, like much of the population of Gangtok and other towns, they relied mostly on purchased food imported from Siliguri. But Pemu Lepcha's claim of 'sham' goes beyond the ban's direct impact on her household finances and implies that the department in some way misrepresents the conversion. Such a claim is in part made possible by the high ideals which the Government of Sikkim espoused for the conversion – those of environmental protection and the revitalisation of farming in Sikkim – and by its positioning of Sikkim as the 'world's first organic state'. Specifically on the vegetable ban, Pemu implies that the government's portrayal of the ban as an effective measure itself constitutes a misrepresentation, as vegetables from Siliguri are still on sale, albeit at an elevated price. More broadly, she doubts the claim that no artificial inputs are used on Sikkim's farms, and therefore questions the very notion of Sikkim as an 'organic state'. As such, Pemu Lepcha assigns the bans on the import of produce and inputs from outside Sikkim, and potentially the conversion as a whole, to the category Cris Shore and Susan Wright (1997) term 'performative policy': measures undertaken more for the image that they present than for their functional efficacy. Authenticity is also at play in the tension between the notions of organic by default and organic by design. The phrase 'organic by default' is in part a claim to authenticity: a framing of Sikkim as uniquely untouched by the industrial-scientific-bureaucratic complex of the green agricultural revolution.

As further evidence of the prominence of questions of authenticity, I would cite a question which arose frequently in my field research. I found that people within and outside of government would often ask me, “so, is Sikkim *really* organic?” assuming I possessed some privileged expertise on the issue. The questioner invariably adopted a sceptical tone, and the question seemed to hinge on whether the rhetoric of government policy on the conversion corresponded to some objective ‘reality’ of an organic status. On one occasion, I shared a taxi with Gayatri Sharma, returning from a ‘school awareness programme’ on organic farming. Gayatri had been recruited by the department as a Village Development Officer two years previously, and had recently completed a training programme herself, as she had not been formally trained in agriculture. “They tell us about integrated farming, and it all sounds so nice and fine, but my father brings non-organic feed from Siliguri for his cows every month. I’m sure other farmers bring pesticide. Who would stop them?” Similarly, one of the concerns expressed frequently by officials was the efficacy of the bans on artificial inputs and on non-organic vegetables, responsibility to which had been allocated to some of their colleagues, as deputised ‘enforcement officers’ working at the border checkpoints and urban markets. “They confiscated a few trucks after the ban started,” one mid-ranking officer told me three months after the advent of the vegetable ban. “But every other truck had vegetables. The enforcement officers know it. Sometimes they take money [to allow a truck to pass]; sometimes they just let them through. How can they stop them? There are so many! And all the tourist hotels have to have vegetables!” Such instances show a very similar criticism of the conversion articulated by officials and the general public; indeed, in making such criticisms, officials often seemed to be commenting in their capacity as member of the public, employing the indeterminate ‘they’ to refer to ‘government’ officials rather than acknowledging their own membership of that category. I argue that in these instances, officials question the adherence of Sikkim’s organic regime to the regulations its government had put in place to isolate Sikkim from non-organic produce and inputs. As such, they also invoke the rubric of authenticity to criticise the conversion, while AK Shreshtha and other officials, in their defensive reactions to similar criticisms from outside of the department, display a similar sensitivity to this rubric.

As I have argued above, any such status is produced purely through the bureaucratised processes of authentication, most notably, that of certification. As Fillitz and Saris (2013) argue for objects of material culture in international art markets, the notion of authenticity and its absence has historically often tended more to follow essentialised qualities defined and sought by outsiders than by the producers and users of those objects. This is a misrepresentation in which anthropologists have often been complicit. Nevertheless, as they continue, “The irony in this understanding of the material is that, a social science understanding that the authenticity of an object is clearly not an inherent quality or essence coexists with the social production of authenticity investing various experts with the ability to discover precisely such a quality or essence” (Fillitz & Saris 2013:12). I argue that Pemu Lepcha’s ascription of ‘sham’ to the conversion, AK Shreshtha’s impassioned defence of it, and the bureaucratic processes of authentication which underpin it, all mobilise different versions of a rubric of authenticity. As Fillitz and Saris also observe, following Kwame Anthony Appiah (1992), being constructed, such notions of authenticity may be multiple and incommensurate, and reflect the plurality of the actors involved. Thus, Pemu Lepcha’s ascription of ‘sham’ refers to the claim, which she contends to be false, of the absence of non-organic inputs in crop production and of non-organic produce in Sikkim. AK Shreshtha’s defence hinges on the sincerity of officials’ espousal of the conversion’s aims of environmental protection. As a technology of authentication, the certification regime, though it evaluated land and produce according to technocratic categories, nonetheless mobilised a notion of authenticity to the core principles of organic farming. I use the notion of the authenticity of the organic conversion purely in the sense of a constructed quality conferred through bureaucratic process or through the judgements made by officials and the public in the instances I relate above, not as one inherent to organic produce, to Sikkim, or to the conversion. I argue, then, that the centrality of technologies of authentication to Sikkim’s organic conversion also implicate judgements, on the parts of officials and the public, which are couched in the rubric of authenticity, and that this rubric inflects much of officials’ positioning with respect to the conversion.

Pemu Lepcha’s complaint was atypical in its directness and robustness. By contrast, much of the criticism of the conversion adopted a particularly qualified form. Belonging to a middle-class professional family not dependent on government for resources, and not politically aligned with the then ruling party, Pemu was relatively free to speak openly.

Others would express general support for the idea of an ‘organic Sikkim’, appreciating both the critique of the green revolution and the economic potential offered by the ‘premium price’ of organic produce, but taking issue with the means the government had employed in pursuing these. Frequently, it would take the form: “Organic is a good idea, but...,” followed by objections to specific measures taken – what Sikkim residents sometimes referred to as “the way the conversion has been implemented.” These objections frequently focused on the compulsory nature of the conversion, and, during the period of my field research, this frequently meant the vegetable ban, with its material impact on households who relied on markets for food. The ‘idea’ of organic was generally associated with the person of the then Chief Minister, who was quite publicly the conversion’s originator and main political sponsor, and, less strongly, with the then ruling Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) party. The ‘implementation’ of the conversion, on the other hand, was primarily the responsibility of the agriculture and horticulture departments. When Sikkim residents criticised the ‘implementation’, and not the ‘idea’ of the conversion, therefore, they avoided direct criticism of the Chief Minister and his party, and directed it instead towards the agriculture and horticulture departments, in a manner that followed rather neatly the distinction between legislature and executive. Sikkim’s population is heavily reliant on the state for resources and employment. A recent, but undated, summary gives a total of over 73,000 for the number of people in state government employment (Government of Sikkim, India n.d.), in a population estimated at around 600,000. This figure includes those with permanent and temporary contracts in the state government; elected officials; and the ‘muster roll’: the list of persons given temporary employment in government schemes. Government schemes also often include significant components distributing material resources, such as, in the agricultural sector, farming equipment and inputs. It was commonly understood that the allocation of these opportunities tended to follow ruling party affiliation. When critics distinguished, therefore, between the legislature’s ‘ideal’ of the conversion and the executive’s ‘implementation’ of it, they avoided targeting a major arbiter of livelihoods in Sikkim.

Criticism of the conversion did not solely originate from outside of government and, in any case, as Sikkim’s budgetary dependence on central government would suggest, it is difficult to clearly separate Sikkim’s population into sections ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ government. Officials within the department with whom I had regular interactions would

often make an observation along the lines of the following: ‘What you see in the publications is one thing; if you go to the field, you will get the real picture.’ This referred to the many very well produced publications and media productions, featuring glossy images of lush fields against the backdrop of the Sikkim Himalaya, that were distributed at the conferences, fairs and workshops held in Sikkim, nationally and abroad. As we will see, the conjuring of the ‘field’ refers to the rural locales where the practical work of the department took place – work that officials saw as ‘real work’, and that stood in opposition to the office, where much of the time of the more senior among them was spent. In both this sense of the term and that of the physical spaces of crop cultivation, the ‘field’ carried the connotation of hard work that stood, I argue, for a more ‘real’ picture of the state of the organic conversion. Often, when officials criticised the work of the department, they would, like the general public, caveat these critiques with the observation that the conversion was a ‘good idea,’ often crediting the Chief Minister, whose idea it was, as a ‘visionary leader.’

Frank criticism from within the department was surprisingly common, but generally only once I was on familiar terms with a particular official. Even then, some, particularly senior, officials were reluctant to discuss problems with the progress of the conversion, or to digress from officially prescribed talking points, as was the case with AK Shreshtha when faced with the market traders’ protest. A few days after the protest, I again met with AK Shreshtha. When I asked about the demonstration, he still appeared unsettled and reluctant to discuss it, merely assuring me that the protests, and the supply shortages that had sparked them, were a “temporary disruption,” and that “things [would] settle down.”

It is important to re-state that I was a foreign researcher with whom AK Shreshtha was not well acquainted. The conversion, of which he was a senior architect, was a high profile project in Sikkim, wider India and even beyond, closely associated with the person of the Chief Minister, who would be contesting state elections in less than a year’s time. Adverse publicity for it would endanger this profile, not to mention affecting AK Shreshtha’s status and prospects within the department. His reluctance to acknowledge opposition to or problems with the conversion is thus very understandable. Nonetheless, he must have been only too aware of this opposition; it would have been impossible for him not to have been, judging by the frequency with which I encountered opinions like those of Pemu Lepcha,

and the coverage of the protests in local newspapers, let alone the protest itself. I argue that this denial of the apparently obvious was a reaction AK Shreshtha shared with many of his colleagues, and stemmed from an only too acute awareness of the prevalence of criticism. It was also accompanied by an evident sense of hurt at this criticism, which I ascribe to a frustration on the part of the officials who displayed conviction for the conversion that this conviction was not shared by many of their co-citizens and some of their own colleagues. I argue that incidences such as these represented a dynamic on the part of officials between moral conviction to the conversion on the one hand and a defensive hyper-awareness of the prominence of criticism and mistrust on the other.

Notwithstanding the reluctance of many in Sikkim to direct criticism of the conversion at the Chief Minister and his party, the ruling Sikkim Democratic Front lost power in statewide elections held in April 2019, after 23 years' uninterrupted rule (the elections fell towards the end of my field research period). The causes of the election loss are beyond the scope of this dissertation, but it does not seem unreasonable to include among them the specific measures taken by the then government in pursuit of the organic conversion. Grand gestures such as the vegetable ban were perceived as of a kind with other measures taken by the government in the months leading up to the election, such as the series of 'employment fairs' (rozgar mela): large rallies which promised a government job to anyone whose family did not already have a member in state employment. The Sikkim Krantikari Morcha, which came to power in the election, continues officially to espouse the merits of an 'organic Sikkim', but campaigned on the basis that organic farming should be promoted on a 'voluntary' basis, and hence one which would substantially undermine a central tenet of the original notion of an 'organic state'. While the current government continues to refer to Sikkim as an 'organic state', its public pronouncements on this status have virtually ceased and the current Chief Minister has been reported as claiming that the conversion existed "largely on paper" (Hindustan Times 2019). Thus, this dissertation focuses on the work of Sikkim's officials at a particular point in time, many of whose features are now altered (hence my adoption of the past tense to discuss the organic conversion). It also studies this work against a backdrop of failure. By this, I do not mean to characterise the organic conversion in any way as an objective failure, but rather to highlight its fraughtness. The dynamic of criticism and apologia, and the polar opposites of 'success' and 'failure', were key structuring principles in the organic conversion, and the latter was an ever-present

possibility. In such a context, it is pertinent to ask how officials reconciled themselves to working in the shadow of the possibility of failure. Why did they value authenticity to such an extent? How did they and others enlist the notion of authenticity in criticising or defending the organic conversion? And how did such defences intersect with the alternate notions of a Sikkim organic by default or by design?

Bureaucracy and life

Criticisms of the department's role in the conversion, such as both those of Pemu Lepcha and those voiced from within the department, as well as the sensitivity of officials like AK Shreshtha, all appear rooted in an acute awareness of what might be termed a popular critique of the state and bureaucracy. Such a critique centres perceptions of inefficiency, dysfunction, corruption and the obstruction of the 'visionary leadership' of politicians. Pemu Lepcha's ascription of 'sham' and AK Shreshtha's reaction to the implied accusation that the organic conversion was not all that the department claimed it to be both centre a notion of falseness or hypocrisy: the possibility of a gap between the department's claims and some notion of 'objective reality'. This is made all the more salient by the emphasis placed on authenticity in organic farming: by, for example, the possibility that crops are not grown according to 'true' organic practice. There is a sense that, among the other accusations levelled at the bureaucracy, that of falseness might be the most serious of all. The position of officials between politicians and the public, and their generally presumed ethic of discretion, mean that their perspectives on these sorts of dilemmas less often see the light of day.

Elements of the popular critique are also reflected in academic discourse, from Weber's acknowledgement of the "evils of bureaucracy", alongside its necessity to capitalist modernity (Weber 1964:337) through to the neoliberal critique of the state and bureaucracy (see, for example Von Mises 1951), which argues that bureaucrats tend to take on the characteristics of an interest group, mitigating towards an ever-expanding role for the state in national life. While adopting an anthropological and postcolonial perspective, Akhil Gupta's (2012) critique of the Indian bureaucracy shares a similar focus on the tendency of public sector organisations towards self-perpetuation over the functions which are the

ostensive reasons for their existence. But Gupta's account focuses on the contrast between the aspirations of a post-independence Indian developmental state to deliver social and economic progress to its people, and the realities of citizens' experiences of their interactions with the state. Gupta (2012) identifies 'structural violence' as a key operating principle of the Indian bureaucracy at the organisational level. This he defines, following Farmer (2003), as a state of affairs in which citizens are unable to achieve their full potential, though Gupta concentrates on instances of preventable premature death. Emphasising the perspective of citizens' experience of the state, Gupta argues that the state is viewed as monolithic, and citizens' views of it are dominated by discourses of corruption (Gupta 1995). Viewed from this perspective, 'corruption' is not limited to the misuse of state resources in technical breach of legal or official institutional norms, but speaks to a less precise but all-encompassing disillusionment with the state's inability to deliver on its post-independence promises, to the point where the state and corruption become almost synonymous. Adopting a similar bottom-up viewpoint, David Graeber (2015) emphasises the opaque logic of the bureaucracy and the 'interpretive labour' it demands from citizens in order for their claims on it to be recognised as legitimate. Gupta (2012), Graeber (2015) and Michael Herzfeld (1992) all in different ways ascribe disillusion with the bureaucracy to the deficit between the utopian ideals the state espouses and the ways in which citizens experience it. Herzfeld (1992) labels this deficit 'secular theodicy', after the theological problem of how God could permit evil. As Gupta (1998) points out, such disillusion is all the greater where the post-independence 'developmental state' espouses the rapid and planned improvement of the lives of its population.

All these accounts privilege, quite legitimately, the point of view of the citizenry. How do bureaucrats themselves experience the state and the institutions in which they work? Nayanika Mathur (2016) writes on the implementation of the Mahatma Ghandi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in Uttarakhand, a scheme which provides paid work to poor families in rural public works projects. She finds that officials identify with a specific notion of government, that of 'sarkar' or 'sarkari culture', from the Hindi term meaning government or state. Mathur defines sarkar as an affect which for officials is embodied not only in the procedures and organisational structures of the state, but in many of the trappings of government office, such as the physical buildings of a district headquarters, or the status of higher-ranking officers. It is this affect of 'sarkar'

which, for Mathur, provides officials with a monolithic, though not easily definable, source of guidance as to the correct way of doing things. For example, it defines what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate topics of discussion in meetings: obstacles to the progress of the scheme raised by mid-ranking staff are dismissed by senior officials as not conforming to the notion of 'sarkar', and labelled as 'political' in nature, meaning they do not class as appropriate subjects for a principled, neutral official. Mathur and Laura Bear (Bear & Mathur 2015) identify the 'public good' as a topic worthy of serious academic consideration in studying the ways in which officials relate to their work. Bear and Mathur argue for viewing bureaucracies as "an expression of a social contract between citizens and officials that aim to generate a utopian order" (Bear & Mathur 2015:18). Bureaucracies can therefore be seen as "a central site for the forging of the personhood, affective life and sometimes the radical potential of contemporary citizens" (2015:19), with the public good, in all its politically contradictory forms, a key structuring principle in these processes. This is not to say that officials always deliver on the promise of the public good, or that their espousal of it is necessarily sincere. Neither does it presuppose any particular political orientation. As Bear and Mathur conceive it, the 'public good' can be embodied equally in the goal of eradicating poverty or of universal employment, as espoused by the MGNREGA scheme, as it can in the aim of increasing the efficiency with which funds are used and fostering individual initiative and entrepreneurship among civil servants. But, they argue, the public good should be taken seriously as an ideal which structures the work of officials, as a source of legitimacy for the institutions for which they work, and as a source of justification for their actions.

The contrast, then, between utopian 'visions' and some 'objective reality' can be seen both as the basis of a critique which parallels the popularly articulated feelings of state injustice and, at the same time, as an analytical device for a deeper understanding of the subjectivities of officials. Veena Das (2018) argues that societies and individuals may make productive use of this contrast, employing utopian visions to cope with "the conditions of injustice, violence, untimely deaths, and other violations inflicted on them" (2018:545). Commenting on Michael Puett's (2014) treatment of ancient Chinese ritual texts, Das picks up Puett's argument that these texts, rather than "enacting a world view through which norms or rules for action might be instilled in the individual," (Das 2018a: 545) actively

acknowledge the gulf between these norms and the everyday experience of practitioners. Thus, for Das, these texts create

a subjunctive space in which, by enacting an “as-if” reality, the individual is educated in self-formation through which he or she can break his or her normal patterns of response to contingencies of life in a world marked by strife among kin, battles over succession, and warfare.

(Das 2018:545)

As will be seen, such “subjunctive” or “as-if” spaces permeate almost every aspect of Sikkim’s organic conversion.

If farming lies at the intersection of nature and human action (Besky & Blanchette 2019), then the bureaucracy of Sikkim’s organic conversion, and the work of its officials, embodies particularly starkly the contrast between a Sikkim organic by default and one organic by design. During the international biodiversity conference which I recount in Chapter One, a short debate arose between a session speaker, André Leu, an Australian organic farmer and official from the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Missions (IFOAM), and Dorjee Wangyal Bhutia, a senior department officer. Dr Leu had argued for the importance of “connections” between crops and other plant and animal life forms that can be fostered in a “bio-diverse agro-ecology”. In particular, he had proposed that allowing weeds to proliferate, as a part of what Dr Leu termed “messy” farming, can increase the “strength” of such connections, thereby promoting “ecological functional intensification.” In a question following the talk, Dorjee Wangyal Bhutia, while broadly enthusiastic about Dr Leu’s ideas, argued that,

The conditions in Australia are very different to the conditions in Sikkim. Here we have a long rainy season. The monsoon is becoming earlier and earlier each year, due to climate change. The monsoon began this year in April. I like the idea of eco-intensification, but I’m not convinced that allowing weeds to grow can work in Sikkim. Biomass development is so intensive in the rainy season that even if you do hand-weeding six times, you cannot prevent the crop from being taken over by weed

*growth. It is hard for me to believe that weeds will not out-compete our crops for nutrient uptake.*⁸

Here, a departmental official invokes a notion of Sikkim as exceptional in its vitality and as a result requiring the ordering action of the farmer to contain its natural tendency to “mess”. I contend that, by implication, he argues for the similarly ordering action of the bureaucrat, moulding a Sikkim ‘organic by default’ into one ‘organic by design’.

Sikkim has historically been defined, geographically and politically, as sitting on the margins of the Indian state (Hazarika 2018). But the organic conversion sits on the margins of the state in another sense. Agriculture and horticulture department officials referred to their organisations as ‘technical departments’. These they defined as ones which provide services directly to the population (as opposed, for example, to the law, finance or planning departments), whose officials are present at lower levels of the territorial administration throughout the state. They are therefore the primary point of contact between the state and its populace. As such, these officials also sit at the state’s ‘margin’ in the conceptual, rather than territorial, sense in which it is employed by Veena Das and Deborah Poole (2004). Defined in this way the state’s margins are, paradoxically, central to its constitution. In the case of the agriculture and horticulture departments, as Dorjee Wangyal’s and Dr Leu’s debate illustrates, the margins are the sites where the compromises between mess and order that characterise farming are defined and imposed; where “nature can be imagined as wild and uncontrolled and where the state is constantly refounding its modes of order and lawmaking” (Das & Poole 2004:8).

If, as in discourses surrounding organic farming, nature is defined as authentic, the tension between bureaucratic or agricultural order and natural mess gives rise to another instance of the rubric of authenticity employed in debate on the organic conversion in Sikkim. The interventions of bureaucrats to secure a Sikkim ‘organic by design’ carry the potential for inauthenticity: for the ‘sham’ of Pemu Lepcha’s charge. However, ‘sham’, ‘falsehood’ or ‘fake’ (Copeman & da Col 2018) are not the only oppositions we can make with the ‘authentic’; ‘artifice’ is an equally viable possibility besides these more pejorative connotations, one which carries the sense of human ingenuity, design, planning and work.

⁸ Conversation in English.

It is for this reason that I centre the ‘work’ of department officials in this dissertation. Artifice is the stuff of technocratic bureaucracy, from the establishment of ‘missions’ to the ‘schemes’ that structure and finance the work of the agriculture and horticulture departments, to the development of new crop cultivars and the task of organic certification.

When Pemu Lepcha observes that “They’ve banned vegetables,” but points to the fact that Siliguri vegetables still arrive in the market, she questions the authenticity of bureaucratic actions. She also, following the widespread use of the indeterminate ‘they’ to indicate government officials, questions the authenticity of bureaucrats themselves. The notion of authenticity is applied differently to persons than it is to organic produce, but it throws up similar tensions between what can be attributed, respectively, to ‘nature’ and to cultivation, or self-conscious human action. Various writers have problematized its application to the person. Richard Handler (1986) sees authenticity primarily as a modern (and presumably Western) notion, co-arising with that of the individual at the end of the medieval era. He contrasts it with the medieval notion of ‘sincerity’, which, Handler argues, denotes an awareness of and adherence to one’s proper place in society and in the world. His distinction, therefore, between sincerity and authenticity might be summarised as that between being ‘true to the natural or moral order’ versus being ‘true to self’. Theodor Adorno (1973) is scathing of this latter notion of authenticity, seeing in it a fetishisation of the self, absent of the self’s relationship to others and the world, leaving it susceptible to the allures of shallow consumer culture and, ultimately, of fascism. Dimitrios Theodossopoulos (2013), while accepting of such critiques and of the constructed nature of authenticity, sees the notion as analytically useful. The question thus becomes how subjects mobilise the notion of authenticity, as in the organic conversion, and what ends this notion serves. Thomas Filitz and Jamie Saris (2013) link the notion of the authenticity of the self with processes of authentication, a connection which would suggest that the authenticity of Sikkim’s bureaucrats could be related to the bureaucratic certification of organic produce.

This parallels academic debates over the nature of the bureaucratic self. Weber’s early treatment of bureaucracy was formulated at a time when the German bureaucracy had reached a size and level of complexity that was relatively new. In the aftermath of the

political crisis brought about by the First World War, some observers debated whether the stability and technocratic efficiency of the bureaucracy might compensate for an absence of political leadership (du Gay 2008). Weber (1964) was clear that, despite its strengths, the bureaucracy's role must be strictly subsumed to that of political leaders. Weber writes that the bureaucrat is to be distinguished from the politician by his "spirit of formalistic impersonality" (1964:330).

To take a stand, to be passionate – ira et stadium – is the politician's element, and above all the element of the political leader. His conduct is subject to quite a different, indeed, exactly the opposite, principle of responsibility from that of the civil servant. The honor of the civil servant is vested in his ability to execute conscientiously the order of the superior authorities, exactly as if the order agreed with his own conviction.

(Weber 1989:10)

According to du Gay's (2000) reading, what Weber identifies constitutes a "bureaucratic morality": the devotion to the impartial fulfilment of the demands of office, to the exclusion of any personal morality or interest. For Weber, bureaucratic, or legal, authority is the principle which compels subordinates to enact the orders of their superiors and which enables both public and corporate bureaucracies to function. It relies on a distinction between the person who occupies a position within an organisation and the position itself, or office, with all its formal responsibilities. A person occupying an office must submit to the demands of that office, as they are prescribed by the office's formal role within the organisation and by the commands of superiors. Du Gay (2008) also argues that Weber's schema implies a particular conceptualisation of the person, one which has the ability to take on separate personae, that conform to different ethical norms according to the context, or life-order – "lebensordnungen", in Weber's terminology. Weber contrasts bureaucratic authority with the much more fluid charismatic form of authority–power voluntarily attributed to leaders such as prophets or shamans by their followers. Charismatic authority is attributed to the characteristics and talents, often visionary or mystical, of the leader, not to the formal mandates of office (Weber 1964). For du Gay (2000), the bureaucrat takes on the persona of her office, abandoning any independent ethical predispositions, to pursue single-mindedly the will of politicians. Such a conception of the dutiful observance of the demands of office tends to be associated with another stereotype of the bureaucracy, that it is characterised by 'routine' (Mathur 2016:xvii). As I

will discuss, this was a characterisation to which my experience of the department did not always conform. While by no means universal, the idea of an ethic of office was often expressed to me by certain senior department officials. When I asked them for their opinions on aspects of the organic conversion, these officials would answer, “we do their bidding,” referring to the politicians. It was not always clear whether this answer indicated a shutting down of a line of questioning that, they perceived, probed too deeply into their personal motives, or whether it was a tacit articulation of disapproval at the measures concerned.

If the above discussion gives the impression that the idea of bureaucratic neutrality carries exclusively Western and modern provenance, this is not necessarily the case. Das (2018b) and Amit Chaudhuri (2021) both cite a famous episode in the Bhagavad Gita as evidence of the centrality of what Chaudhuri terms ‘detachment’ (see also Candea et al. 2015) to Indian philosophy. As Chaudhuri writes,

It's the Gita (circa second to fifth century BCE) that's possibly the earliest text to articulate the notion that an act may be passionate and detached at once; in other words, involve both the expression and the annulment of the self. Krishna, addressing Arjuna, who's despondent on the eve of going to war with his cousins, instructs him in a peculiar definition of action:

Set thy heart upon thy work, but never on its reward. Work not for a reward but never cease to do thy work. Do thy work in the peace of Yoga and, free from selfish desires, be not moved in success or in failure. Yoga is evenness of mind - a peace that is never the same.

(Chaudhuri 2021:239)

While this detachment is not the same thing as the Weberian notion of bureaucratic neutrality, the colonial origins of the Indian civil service would have made the latter even more of a familiar notion to department officials.

By contrast with the neoliberal turn in politics, bureaucratic reforms have promoted a much more active role for the ethical self on the part of bureaucrats. As part of the set of reforms often glossed as the ‘New Public Management’ (Minogue et al. 1998), governments have introduced market mechanisms into public services; contracted functions wherever possible to non-state and for-profit providers; and encouraged rewarding work as a

function of performance. As du Gay (2000) argues, the New Public Management asks of bureaucrats a level of personal commitment and entrepreneurialism that surpasses the impersonal adoption of the will of politicians “as if the order agreed with his own conviction” (Weber 1989:10), rather demanding that it *be* their own conviction (Strathern 2000). Arguably, we see this tendency for the priority given to the ethical self, even in office, in AK Shrestha’s impassioned defence of the organic conversion. We also observe the other aspect of entrepreneurship, that of the promotion of private actors in the delivery of government services for their presumed greater efficiency, in the conversion’s reliance on privately contracted service providers for certification and other services. Du Gay’s critique of the primacy of the ethical self in the New Public Management echoes Adorno’s suspicion of the fetishisation of the self-contained in the notion of authenticity. His advocacy of the principle of respect for office as distinct from self calls to mind Handler’s distinction between the self and the “roles we play” (Handler 1986:3), inviting us to suspect not the roles, but the notion of the self in public life. However, as shown by the indeterminacy of the officials’ answer of “We do their bidding”, the tensions between person and office, like those between a Sikkim by default and one by design, leave considerable room for ambiguity and irony.

Alongside the claim of a Sikkim ‘organic by default’, then, the state, and department officials, were centrally involved in the production of an ‘organic Sikkim’. The work effected by the department in this production was both a consequence of the inherent reliance of organic farming on bureaucratised technologies of authentication, and of the particularly state-centric and compulsory model Sikkim’s government adopted for the conversion. This dissertation takes up Bear’s and Mathur’s (2015) suggestion to interrogate notions of the public good as they are articulated by officials themselves, investigating the conceptions officials elaborated of the principles of the organic conversion and of the public goods they understood it to espouse. In particular, it examines the ways in which they accommodated themselves to the tensions they experienced in the conversion project (and which are inherent in most such projects of social, environmental and moral transformation). What notions of the public good did they see as instrumental in their roles in the production of an ‘organic Sikkim’ through bureaucratic technologies of authentication? How did these notions intersect and conflict? How did critiques, originating from the public and from officials themselves, mobilise notions of authenticity,

person and office? How were questions of the authentication of organic produce and the authenticity of officials themselves as persons related? How did officials conceptualise the tensions between idealised concepts that they encountered in their work and their experience of that work? How did officials conceive the work they did to produce a Sikkim organic by design, and how does it relate to one organic by ‘default’?

Methodology

The bulk of my field research took place over fourteen consecutive months from February 2018. This was preceded by a two-week visit in October 2016, as I was beginning my doctoral studies, in order to make initial contact with departmental officials and assess the feasibility of my proposed project. During the fourteen months of my main field research, I lived in Sikkim’s capital, Gangtok, renting an apartment a twenty-minute walk from the departmental headquarters at the Krishi Bhawan. This building housed both the agriculture and horticulture departments, as well as the livestock department. The agriculture and horticulture departments were particularly closely intertwined. Both were at the time headed by the same Secretary and Minister, and the rooms of most of their respective officials were interspersed throughout the third, fourth and fifth floors, rather than occupying separate zones. My research was primarily with the horticulture department, as this had been the focus of the organic conversion, but also included officials of the agriculture department. The Sikkim organic mission, whose officials were some of those based in headquarters with whom I engaged most frequently, was formally organised under the agriculture department.

Research locations and evolution

My research was multi-sited and did not have a strictly delimited geographical focus. Rather, it evolved in a way which followed the organisational space of the department, chains of contacts made over time, and serendipitous encounters. Department staff are often peripatetic, so my research followed them as they travelled around the state for training, meetings and field visits. Sikkim’s small size means that officials often cover large portions of the state in the course of their work, using a well-developed road network, itself a function of the state’s strategic importance and militarisation. When I was not

accompanying them in official cars, I was able to travel within a day to most parts of the southern half of the state using Sikkim's efficient shared taxi service. Nonetheless, my research came to concentrate on three principle sites: the departmental headquarters itself and two rural areas, which I refer to in this dissertation as 'Tuksum and Pangley. I include here a brief summary of the process of this evolution in order to provide organisational context and to explain the rationale for the structure and siting of my research.

When I initially contacted the department, I was referred to Dorjee Wangyal Bhutia, who became one of my principal points of contact. While it took three visits to find him in, these initial interactions did not fit the stereotype of impenetrable bureaucracy. There were no controls on entry to the public to the Krishi Bhawan (though it was up to visitors to find their own way to the officials they were seeking) and he was perfectly happy to see me without an appointment. He was enthusiastic about the prospect of the research and equally supportive when I later renewed my contact with the department. Speaking in English, he was keen for me to include research in 'the field'. By this he meant the network of offices and officials in the rural areas, outside of Gangtok, usually seen as most directly responsible for the delivery of frontline activities to farmers. This reverence for 'the field' and 'fieldwork' became a frequent refrain in my interactions with department officials, and was familiar to me as an aspiring anthropologist (see Chapter Three).

But he also advised me that in making any such visits to frontline department operations, I should "go with a programme". By this he meant that I should prepare a proposal detailing the objectives and scope of my research and the people within and outside the department I would want to interact with. He referred me to AK Shreshtha, with whom some of my early interactions are described above, and another colleague, to develop this proposal. Once AK Shreshtha was happy with the proposal, it was sent to the Secretary, and then on to the agriculture minister, for approval. After I had met personally with the Secretary and Minister, a formal approval letter was issued permitting me to meet with any staff in the agriculture and horticulture departments for the duration of my research. This process took around six weeks, during which time I was nevertheless able to visit some rural departmental officials. It was AK Shreshtha who suggested focusing on 'Tuksum. Tuksum was a 'gram panchayat unit' (GPU), which is the principle administrative division of India's 'panchayat raj' system of local government, and a longstanding focus of departmental

activities, which were more prominent there than in most other areas of Sikkim. The department supplied a considerable amount of equipment for organic farming, such as irrigation infrastructure and poly-houses, and had established one farm in particular as a 'model farm'. It was also one of only a few sites to which visitors seeking to learn about the organic conversion were often taken on official tours. I decided to follow AK Shreshtha's recommendation in making 'Tuksum a research focus. While I would be in many respects seeing what the department judged the most 'successful' aspects of the organic conversion, this would provide insights into how the department judged this 'success' and what aspects of the department's work officials wanted to portray as exemplary, as well as helping to build trust with departmental officers. Features of the work in 'Tuksum that did not correspond to such ideals would also prove instructive. For a more typical view, I was still free to visit other sites in Sikkim.

Much of the impressive level of departmental activity in 'Tuksum was due to the energies of Bim Bahadur Poudyel, who became a friend, my main contact with the department in the area, and closest of all the departmental contacts I made during my research. Bim Bahadur was a Village level worker, the second lowest grade of technical staff in the official departmental structure, but was well known within the department. He was clearly well regarded by senior officials, including AK Shreshtha, showing that rank was not always the primary determinant of relationships within the department. AK Shreshtha referred me to him not through the organisational hierarchy, but through Prakash Singh Kumar, the 'In-Charge' of one of the private 'service provider' companies that held contracts with the department to support the organic conversion. Bim Bahadur held primary responsibility for the horticulture department for the whole of 'Tuksum GPU. This included the wards⁹ of 'Tuksum, where Bim Bahadur lived and had grown up, Rawney, where the model farm was sited, and three others. However, Bim Bahadur frequently travelled to the subdivisional horticulture department office in the small town of Shermathang, some forty-five minutes away by car. Through accompanying him there, I became familiar with that office and its staff, including the Deputy Director, Dinesh Koirala, who also became a friend. Through relationships with him and other officials based in Shermathang, my research gradually

⁹ A ward is the lowest administrative division of the panchayat raj system, and the level below the gram panchayat unit.

extended to other parts of the subdivision, though Tuksum remained the most prominent focus.

My association with Pangley, on the other hand, came about through a route outside the department. A friend unconnected with the department put me in touch with Sonam Gyatso Bhutia, an officer who had retired several years previously from the agriculture department. Sonam Gyatso lived in Tsongchu, on the outskirts of the town of Pangley, and I began to visit this area regularly, often staying with Sonam Gyatso. I found his perspective as a retired officer invaluable and in many respects contrasting to those of serving officers. Through staying with him, I began to become familiar with the subdivision horticulture office in Pangley and its staff. At one point, Sonam Gyatso offered to take me to his previous work site, under the neighbouring subdivisional office in Kunsing, where I met several serving horticulture department officials. I subsequently returned on two occasions to visit them.

Research focus and activities

My research consisted principally of following the officials with whom I became acquainted in their routine, and not-so-routine, work. These included agriculture and horticulture department officials working at village level, in sub-division and district offices, and in departmental headquarters in Gangtok, and included personnel from most levels of the organisational hierarchy, as well as retired officials. It also included farmers whom I met, in most cases, through officials themselves and who were usually the recipients of department services. Farmers were not, however, the primary focus of the research and I do not claim that those with whom I had contact were representative of any general category of farmers¹⁰ in Sikkim.

Having obtained formal permissions for my research from the Secretary and Minister, and proceeding through chains of such acquaintances, I found that officials were generally open to my accompanying them in this way. In the departmental headquarters, these interactions usually took the form of informal conversations which took place mainly with

¹⁰ In any case, the English term ‘farmers’ was employed by officials in quite specific ways. See Chapter Two for a discussion of this point.

officials with whom I had become more familiar, often over the course of whole mornings or afternoon in their rooms in the Krishi Bhawan. As I mention above, entry to the Krishi Bhawan was unrestricted and ‘dropping in’ on officials in their offices was often welcomed. Where there was no urgent ‘programme’ to prepare for, the pace of work was often relaxed and officials generous with their time. While I did not formally participate in official tasks, I was able occasionally to assist acquaintances in drafting letters in English. I visited the Krishi Bhawan on average two to three times per week when I was in Gangtok. As well as such informal interaction, I was often invited to accompany officials on ‘field visits’ and to other set-piece events, or ‘programmes’, such as public meetings, conferences and organic fairs, and I often witnessed the preparation for the these ‘programmes’. In rural sites, officials would split their time between travelling around their allocated working areas and attending the offices that served as their bases (usually termed ‘subdivision offices’) for meetings and paperwork. I was able to observe more of these types of activities through my acquaintances with more junior staff in rural areas than I was in departmental headquarters.

In addition, I was able to visit officials with whom I was on reasonably close terms in their homes and, at times, stay with them for several days, accompanying them in both their work and personal lives. My research did not to any great extent involve extended periods living with officials, as is common in more place-based ethnography, though I did stay with officials repeatedly and for periods of days at a time. My interactions often took place in the context of set-piece events or ‘programmes’, as officials referred to them: public or community meetings, conferences (particularly related to the national or global organic movements), training events, or visits of senior officials or of guests from outside of the department to departmental activities. I came to realise that, even though they were often planned at short notice, such events, and preparations for them, occupied a significant proportion of officials’ time, and were one of the main structuring principles of their work, in contrast to the perception of routine and repetition that is commonly associated with bureaucratic life. Another common context for my interactions with officials was that of the long car journey, often made in order to reach such events. On such occasions, cars provided a convenient ‘non-place’ (Augé 1995) where officials were, bar a constant stream of official and personal mobile phone calls, less preoccupied with everyday office concerns,

hierarchy and etiquette, and often seemed more ready to talk candidly among themselves and with me.

Observations on the research methods

As my principal interlocutors were state officials, my research could be characterised, following Laura Nader (1974), as ‘studying up’. This term can sometimes be used to imply a reversal of the power dynamic between researcher and ‘researched’, and a contrast with the village-based ethnography which has often historically characterised anthropology, glossed, by contrast, as ‘studying down’. Such distinctions highlight both the importance of studying the people, systems and processes which shape public life, particularly in the context of the modern state, and some of the distortions and absurdities that can be produced when the ‘researched’ are not in a position to challenge the researcher. However, by their binary nature, they can overlook the capacity of ‘traditional’ village subjects to pose such challenges to anthropologists and, conversely, the privileged position anthropologists can retain in the face of seemingly very powerful interlocutors (Keltly 2020). Following Annelise Riles (2004), I take another lesson on the idea of ‘studying up’: that officials such as those of Sikkim’s agriculture and horticulture departments understand their work in terms very comparable to, and historically influenced by, academic, and anthropological, discourse. Many of the officials I followed, as educated public servants, had undergone a technical formation in agriculture at the high point of India’s drive to establish itself as a developmental state and its pursuit of the green revolution. To an extent, they showed an implicit understanding of my research agenda. Many had been trained in rural agricultural colleges, which also featured ‘research stations’ whose remit was to adapt crops and technologies to the needs of the rural farming population. Generally, this training had also featured agricultural extension, the philosophy of which is based on understanding this population. Senior officials had generally spent their early careers in ‘the field’ and, at least rhetorically, placed a high value on the categories of ‘the field’ and ‘farmers’ as the *raison d’être* of their work. This meant that, for example, officials in departmental headquarters were keen to offer me opportunities to accompany them on ‘field visits’, intuiting that such events would be my main interest. They were less understanding, and more guarded, of my interest in the parts of their work that did not normally involve the public, such as internal meetings and documents, and consequently my research is based less around these. Nonetheless, usually through accompanying junior

staff as they were called to attend specific events, I was able to observe some of these activities.

My background as a development professional working in non-governmental organisations, and often alongside public servants in government departments, also made for a certain degree of common ground with officials. This was likely reinforced by the colonial history which the Indian civil service shares with the non-governmental and governmental contexts to which I had been exposed. This shared institutional culture influenced my own perspective on my research in ways that should be made explicit here. I frequently felt a concern, often shared in complicated ways by officials, with notions of ‘success’, ‘failure’ and ‘authenticity’. As I will argue, in many ways, Sikkim’s organic conversion represents an internalisation of neoliberal approaches to governance, featuring a highly projectized space which insists on clear objectives for activities, emphasises operational efficiency (including an extended role for private contractors) and mandates processes of project monitoring and evaluation. Such processes were particularly strongly enforced owing to the organic conversion’s dependence on funding from the federal government and the concomitant obligations to adhere to formal mechanisms of accountability. Coming from the NGO sector, and from evaluative and managerial roles, I was familiar with such processes, sometimes to the point of reflex. At times I found the temptation to judge the activities of the department and its officials, and their correspondence to the ‘authenticity’ of official representations difficult to resist, at the expense of a more inquisitive and less evaluative understanding of the processes which underlay such judgements. In analysing and writing up this research, I have attempted, often with considerable struggle, to resist such temptations.

While state-level government organisations in India are much more accessible to the general public than federal ones, particularly in a state as small as Sikkim, it is undoubtable that my status as a foreign researcher helped me gain access to officials at all levels of the organisation. This is particularly true given the department’s concern with Sikkim’s international profile and its involvement with the global organic movement. It is important to emphasise, however, that the strategic choice to access officials through the departmental hierarchy shaped my experience of the department, and Sikkim’s organic conversion, in several ways. As I have described, it meant that, at least in part, I witnessed

the conversion from a departmental perspective. The conversion itself, and the stakes officials read into its success or failure, therefore occupied a much more prominent position for me than they would have done had I adopted a more site-led approach, focusing on sites more typically representative of Sikkim as a whole. This is particularly so in a context, much lamented by officials, where agriculture occupies a diminishing role in household and state economies. While this route of entry to the conversion in many respects reflects the more partial ‘top-down’ viewpoint of a government official, it also made for a picture of the activities of the conversion, and rural life in Sikkim, that was perhaps even more fragmented than is normal in anthropology. In addition, while I focus in this dissertation on the ‘work’ of officials, I must acknowledge that this entry route often placed me, as far as officials were concerned, firmly in the category of ‘work’ myself. The prominence of special events or ‘programmes’ meant that officials in rural areas were used to visits from ‘higher-ups’ and guests from outside of the department and abroad. Such programmes formed an integral part of their ‘work’. It was a standard element of their preparation to plan the areas to which the guest would be taken and the elements of activities they would be shown. Such managed itineraries were a common feature of my early interactions with officials. By contrast, on visiting given officials for a second or a third time, I was often told something to the effect of, “this is the official position, but the reality is different”. While I would not claim definitive knowledge of these ‘realities’, I was able to explore such contrasts where it was possible to develop relationships with officials over time. A second observer effect derived from the prominence of tourism in Sikkim. The state has become a popular destination for domestic tourism over the past two decades. Besides exporting produce to wider India and beyond, the Government of Sikkim envisaged exploiting the potential synergies between organic farming and tourism, promoting Sikkim’s associations with ‘health’ – in the biological, environmental and spiritual manifestations of the term – to attract visitors. As part of this initiative, Sikkim’s rural residents were encouraged to provide facilities for tourists. The tourism department provided training for villagers to set up ‘homestay’ accommodation to the extent that, along with the agriculture and horticulture departments, the tourism department became one of the most prominently visible arms of government at the local level in rural areas. In visiting rural sites, then, I was generally regarded as a tourist (arguably an accurate casting) and it was assumed I would stay in a homestay. In Tsongchu, near Pangley, which was a town popular with tourists, I stayed in one of two rooms built by Sonam Gyatso Bhutia to serve

this purpose. In Tuksum, I also stayed as a paying guest with a relative of Bim Bahadur. As Tuksum, like many areas of Sikkim, was not on the established tourist route, the homestay was rarely used by any other guests and my staying occasioned some conflict between my host and the proprietors of other nominal homestays nearby. While my relationships with both these hosts became close, it is important to acknowledge their financial element and their distance from the ethnographic ideal of 'staying with' those one is researching. In the case of other short-term stays with department officials, I offered remuneration, as was common practice, but the offer was declined.

As part of my research, I agreed with senior officials that I would produce a report for the department examining the perspectives of farmers on the organic conversion. This, we hoped, would provide a practical focus for my research and enable me to contribute an output of use to the department. To my knowledge, my report was not widely circulated within the department, but I presented it to two senior officials and their the verbal and inline comments were very useful in gaining an official perspective on my research material and in correcting my technical misapprehensions. I have not included the report with this dissertation as I had not agreed with the department that it would be publicly available.

My research was subject to a number of ethical considerations, many of them connected with the politically sensitive nature of the organic conversion and the sometimes confidential nature of information to which I was granted access. My research plan was approved and granted permission by the department and the agriculture minister early in the period of my field research. Nonetheless, it inherently covers sensitive topics, such as where I detail practices and situations that may not have been in accordance with official accounts, policy or regulations at the time. Detailing such topics could place individual officials, farmers, or others at risk of negative repercussions. For these reasons I have adopted a general policy of anonymity for my informants and interlocutors. All names are changed, except where identities are not possible to conceal and their identification would be unlikely to bring significant negative consequences. In this dissertation, I generally use the term 'the department' without specifying the agriculture or horticulture departments. This is in recognition of the intertwined nature of these two departments and to protect the identities of my interlocutors, where more specific indications of their positions in the organisational structure might compromise their anonymity. For similar reasons, where I

refer to senior officials, who were few and thus more easily identifiable, I do not generally provide their designations. I have kept all data from participant observation and interviews securely and have anonymized it when writing up field notes. I clarified these principles to my interlocutors and ensured they were aware that consent to participation in my research was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time, and that they were free to withhold sensitive information. Where I interacted with farmers, activists and members of the public I made clear my association with the department and the Government of Sikkim. Where I needed to reproduce official documents, I obtained permission from the relevant authority. The situation in Sikkim with regard to the organic conversion has changed since my fieldwork, as has the government, making the content of this research less sensitive than when it was conducted. I have therefore declined to request an embargo, prioritising open access to the research. However, where I judge that detailing ethnographic or other information could still impact negatively on individuals, I have omitted that information from my dissertation.

A word is important here on the subject of the closeness of my relations with officials. Friendships, such as that with Bim Bahadur Poudyel, proved illuminating on how officials viewed their work, and the complexities they navigated between official representations of the organic conversion and the everyday situations they encountered. There were other officials, however, such as AK Shreshta, introduced above, with whom my acquaintances never progressed to such levels of intimacy. Such acquaintances were nevertheless very informative, particularly considered in retrospect. They showed, for example, the importance of such official representations, and of a particular understanding of the professional conduct becoming of a public servant.

Chapter summary

Chapter One examines the historical precedent for the outward-facing nature of Sikkim's organic conversion. It also explores what is at stake in Pema Lepcha's ascription of the label 'sham' to the conversion. Surrounded by major powers, the rulers of Sikkim, both as a Kingdom with varying degrees of independence, and as an Indian state, have sought to position the territory as a 'beacon to the world'. They have mobilised both sacred and

secular soteriological qualities to do so, but have also been acutely aware of the questions of authenticity which accompany these qualities. The outward-facing nature of the conversion and the concern with authenticity have echoes in the global organic movement's preoccupations with external markets and with certification.

Chapter Two explores the way notions of work and 'hard work' are mobilised by officials in Sikkim's organic conversion. For department officials, the English term 'farmer' represents an official and bureaucratic category which does not correspond precisely to equivalent Nepali terms. The idealised notion of the farmer is characterised by his capacity for 'hard work'. Officials construct the category of the 'hardworking farmer' as an idealised torchbearer for the organic conversion, defined by his capacity for toil and willingness to adopt the organic farming strategies promoted by the department. As such, the 'hardworking farmer' is both remedy for the decline of farming, through the organic conversion, and as an exemplar of the virtue of hard work to other farmers.

Chapter Three argues that a similar ideal of hard work is applied by officials to themselves and to one another. It is related to 'the field' as a privileged site of hard work for farmers and officials, as opposed to 'the office'. The authenticity associated with hard work also frames the field as more authentic than the office. These oppositions, however, provide ground for a number of ironies centred around the tension between work as a virtue and work as a job, or employment.

Chapter Four focuses on certification as an essential technology of the organic conversion and the organic movement more broadly. It describes the entrepreneurial modality through which certification and other services aiming to encourage farmers to adopt organic techniques were delivered, through the contracting of private companies, termed 'service providers'. Certification operated principally through the medium of land area and relied centrally on the principle of Sikkim as an 'organic state'.

Overall, this dissertation extends the focus of existing literature on the ethical lives of government officials in several directions prompted by the notion of Sikkim's organic conversion as a compulsory, state-wide and state-led project of agricultural, environmental and social redemption. The focus of my research on the broad category of work, and its

more specific valences, allows for an examination of some of the tensions and ironies that officials voiced in their everyday professional lives. The intersection between a bureaucratic organisation and notions of ‘nature’ also raise interesting questions. Where Besky and Blanchette (2019) explore the relationship between the “naturalisation of work” and the “work of nature” (Battistoni 2017) often overlooked in anthropocentric notions of agency, I examine here how officials conceive of the intersection between this ‘work of nature’ and their own work. In particular, I explore the intrinsic reliance of the organic model of the conversion on notions of authentication and authenticity, the latter relying, variously, on ideas of faithfulness both to nature and to place and people. These themes raise questions, which this dissertation explores, of the applicability of the rubric of authenticity to bureaucracies and to the work of officials themselves – questions of the work of authenticity and the authenticity of work.

Chapter 1: Organic Sikkim

This chapter contextualises the organic conversion within Sikkim’s public life and history, arguing that it was characterised by a preoccupation with perceptions beyond Sikkim’s borders, and an outward-facing orientation that it shared both with Sikkim’s history and with the organic movement more broadly. Through an examination of an international conference centring on the notion of Sikkim as an ‘organic state’, I suggest that a central consideration for officials prosecuting the organic conversion was that of its positioning vis à vis wider India and the world. I argue that this preoccupation has precedent in the historical concerns of Sikkim’s leaders with its positioning with respect to the neighbouring geopolitical powers of colonial and postcolonial India, Tibet and China. Present-day conceptions of Sikkim’s history were largely formulated during the colonial era and with acute awareness for these relations. I examine some of the language used by officials and the population of Sikkim to discuss the organic conversion and conclude that it also follows these concerns, betraying an ironic awareness of the outward-facing nature of the conversion. Finally, I place the conversion in the context of the pre- and post-accession history of Sikkim and alternative notions of its statehood, and examine how this context produced the officials charged with prosecuting the organic conversion.

‘A lighthouse to the world’

The quest for higher crop yields through conventional chemical-led agriculture practices is an open violation of the entire purpose of food production. Violence cannot bring about peace, and poison cannot bring about health.

Pawan Kumar Chamling, Chief Minister of Sikkim, address to the “international conference on biodiversity and SDGs,” Gangtok, May 2018.

The auditorium of the Chintan Bhawan¹¹, the main government conference venue in Gangtok, was full to its capacity of 400, the downdraft of its powerful air conditioning chilling the large, windowless, white-walled theatre, even though the day outside was not particularly hot. The walls were decorated with large photos of some of Sikkim's most iconic symbols and tourist attractions: Mounts Khangchendzonga and Siniolchu, a red panda, the northern, mountain village of Lachen under snow, the Kagyu monastery of Rumtek, Changu and Gurudongmar lakes, a cultivated cymbidium orchid. The main guests were seated on a stage thickly decked with orchids and other cut flowers, reference to Sikkim's diversity of native orchids and its government's active efforts to develop commercial floriculture. The front rows in the audience were mainly occupied by officials from the forest department¹², the agriculture and horticulture departments, and representatives of the Indian and global organic movements who had been instrumental in organising the conference. These included the NGO Navdanya¹³, which campaigns for sustainable agriculture, and the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), a Germany-based umbrella NGO. Both had been supporters of Sikkim's organic conversion since its early stages. Navdanya is based in the small, mountainous state of Uttarakhand, in some ways geographically and agronomically comparable to Sikkim. Its founder, Dr Vandana Shiva, an internationally renowned writer and campaigner on environment and sustainable agriculture, was the conference's Chief Guest. Dr Shiva has written extensively on the negative impacts of India's green revolution on human welfare and biodiversity. She argues, amongst other things, against the domination of agriculture by global agro-industrial corporations (Shiva 1989), the spread of GM technologies, and the concomitant monopolisation of seed production (Shiva 1993). Dr Shiva and other senior members of Navdanya and IFOAM had been involved in the organic conversion since the early days of the concerted push to certify Sikkim's land in 2010, advising senior officials in Sikkim, including the Chief Minister. Other speakers included the former Executive Director of neighbouring Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Centre, then serving as an advisor to the Indian government. The back rows were crowded with pupils from two of Gangtok's elite private schools.

¹¹ From (Nep) 'bhawan', 'building', and 'chintan', 'reflection' or 'deliberation'.

¹² Formally, the Forest Environment and Wildlife Management Department.

¹³ The name is derived from the Sanskrit 'nine seeds.' It references nine crops held as essential to (North) Indian agriculture and the economic and symbolic importance of the seed.

As I had visited the agriculture and horticulture departments over the previous few days, I had noticed the atmosphere turn hectic with preparation. It was only around a month since the introduction of the ban on the import into Sikkim of non-organic vegetables, and in previous weeks officials had been busy responding to the public and media focus that had alighted on the department, particularly trying to arrange transport to bring Sikkim-grown produce to Gangtok's markets. But a few days before the conference, activity shifted markedly to preparations for it. Many of the officials I normally called in on were busy writing speeches and working on presentations. Others were occupied preparing and printing departmental publications to be handed out to guests, or with organising logistics. Guests had to be accommodated in Gangtok's Mayfair Spa Resort and Casino; their travel organised; reports, leaflets, flyers and complementary promotional DVDs stocked; lunches and snacks arranged. Most of these preparations occurred in the final days and hours before the conference, much of whose organisational specifics remained provisional until the last minute (on the morning of the conference, the schedule was compressed from two days into one due to the lack of availability of the Chief Minister for commencement and closing speeches).

As its title suggests, the conference's theme focused on the intersection between biodiversity loss in India and the wider world and the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals. These goals, agreed in 2015 under the auspices of the United Nations and with a timeline up to 2030, represented an attempt to integrate concerns of environmental sustainability into the agenda for poverty reduction and broader human flourishing that had characterised much of the global development efforts up to that point, recognising the interrelations between the two. However, the bulk of the conference speeches and presentations focused much more specifically on Sikkim's organic conversion, framing it as the perfect illustration of the conjunction between human development and environmental protection. In her keynote address, Dr Shiva sketched this connection, beginning by painting a picture of desolation in the core Indian states of the green revolution. Soils in Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh were "dead", exhausted and compacted by "chemicals" which did not nurture them, and giving rise to an "epidemic" of farmer suicides, whose instrument, as well as underlying cause, was the 'poisons' sold to them by "multinationals", purportedly to counter pests. By contrast, she congratulated the Chief

Minister and Sikkim for “challenging materialistic science.” In phasing out the use of these “poisons”, Dr Shiva concluded, Sikkim was acting as a “beacon to India and the world.”

The presentations which took up most of the rest of the morning expanded on this account of Sikkim’s position in relation to the green revolution. In their use of language, they reiterated the terms employed by Shiva, emphasising associations between the green revolution and its allied technologies with violence, sickness and death. The extract of the Chief Minister’s address, quoted above, provides a powerful example of this tendency. It emphasises the ‘unnatural’ qualities of the green revolution, as a ‘violation’ of the principle of agriculture as nurturing not just of human bodies but of society and the environment. The terms ‘fertilizer’ and ‘pesticide’ were rarely used. They were replaced with the terms ‘chemical’ and ‘poison’, emphasising, respectively, this non-naturalness and pathogenicity. Speakers employed these terms almost interchangeably to denote both fertilizers and pesticides, thereby conflating inputs which kill intentionally with those intended to promote plant growth, but which, speakers held, have the collateral effect of impoverishing and compacting soils. Dr André Leu, a former President of IFOAM, and an organic fruit grower in Australia, also contrasted the case of Sikkim’s conversion with examples of intensive agriculture. He lamented the failure of India and Australia alone to ban the insecticide Endosulfan, with its well evidenced link to “birth defects,” and cited as archetypes of the green revolution the regions of Punjab and California, where, he said, “the soils are toxic and dead.” Dr Leu argued that organic farming, such as that which Sikkim envisaged, could prove more productive than ‘conventional’ farming, as non-organic farming dependent on artificial inputs is usually termed. In conventional farming, according to Leu, yields declined over time due to soil exhaustion, citing trials in Ethiopia where organic crops outperformed “chemical wheat.” Destroying pests, he argued, is “the opposite of eco-function,” and constitutes “agriculture by death.” Another Navdanya speaker referred to the connection between pesticide use and the epidemic of farmer suicides in Punjab and other green revolution states that garnered much public and media attention in the early 2000s. This tragedy is often attributed to indebtedness, itself caused by the high cost of green revolution inputs, whose expense is often not recouped when crops fail. But the speakers’ reference to farmers’ use of agricultural pesticides as a means of suicide made the argument all the more poignant. Similarly poignant was her reference to the “cancer trains” that ferry patients, whose illnesses are presumed to be linked to

pesticide use, from Punjab to Rajasthan in search of free treatment (See for example Das 2016; Frontline 2004). Dr Leu concluded by echoing Dr Shiva's praise for Sikkim's organic conversion, as a "lighthouse to the world."

In this way, speakers not only portrayed the green revolution in highly affective terms as associated with sickness, death and violence (Shiva 1989), and positioned Sikkim's conversion as its antithesis, but also advanced a broader critique of its underlying philosophy and political economy. This critique positioned, by turns, Sikkim and India as a whole in counterpoint to an agriculture based on "Western materialistic science". Dr Shiva's own conference presentation, later in the morning, in a session entitled "biodiversity and poverty alleviation," had as its theme "Biodiversity-based farming for increasing farmers' incomes." It identified the roots of India's green revolution in the science of the European industrial revolution. Shiva specifically referenced the work of Justus von Liebig, who, with other 19th Century chemists, identified the major elements that determine plant growth and paved the way for the industrial fixation of nitrogen, the principal among these. This invention enabled the mass production and application of the first artificial fertilizers.

By contrast, Shiva explained, while the use of artificial fertilizer was increasing in Europe and North America, an Englishman was posted as a plant pathologist to Indore. Albert Howard, according to Shiva,

came to India to introduce modern farming in 1905. But he found no pests in the fields. Eventually, he was converted to organic. He wrote, "I used the peasants as my professors." And he brought organic farming back to England.

On his return to England, Howard would go on to write *An Agricultural Testament* (Howard 1943), propounding a system of 'bio-dynamic agriculture', based, in part, on his experiences of Indian farming, and would come to be regarded as the 'father of organic farming'.

Another speaker, also from Navdanya, continued this contrasting parallel history of conventional agriculture and the organic movement through the 20th Century: "Fertilizers and pesticides were introduced after World War II, when they were looking for something

else to make money with other than explosives,” she said. She did not specify which group she intended by the pronoun “they,” but, judging from the context and content of other presentations, it would seem she was referring to the chemical industry, the governments of the belligerent powers, or, more likely, a combination of the two, which could loosely be categorised as a Western military-industrial-agricultural complex.

Besides Dr Shiva’s work, there is a significant body of academic literature which supports some version of such a view. Nick Cullather (2013), for example, traces the origins of the green revolution to the US government’s assessment that rapid population increase, in the absence of increased food production, would risk widespread communist revolution. The speakers thus framed the green revolution as a process extraneous to both Sikkim and India, originating in Western capitalism and the industrial revolution, sparked by the Faustian advent of industrial nitrogen fixation, and whose ‘violence’ was foreshadowed by its militaristic links. These are the origins of the “Western materialistic science” to which Shiva referred. Speakers’ invocation of the colonial officer Albert Howard pointed to a purer, autochthonous Indian agriculture which predated European influence. Indeed, it showed the West, contrary to its pretensions to the role of agent of agricultural modernity, learning from India’s prelapsarian example, and put into question assumptions as to the Western provenance of organic agriculture. Effectively, conference speakers inscribed a double boundary around Sikkim: one which separated India from the wider world and had been breached by the colonial encounter; and a second which had remained more or less intact, separating Sikkim from India and the wider world and thus preserving a moral agricultural order. From the point of view of Sikkim and its government, the conference, or ‘programme’, as such high-profile events were referred to in department circles, and the way that it presented Sikkim to its national and international audience, shows an acute outward-facing sensibility on the part of government officials.

Furthermore, conference participants appear to assume that a clear distinction can be drawn between an organic agriculture which preserves such a historical moral order on the one hand, and an intrusive, globalised agricultural system on the other. As I have argued in the introduction, organic farming is less distinguished by the technologies which it espouses (there are various other versions of sustainable agriculture which include these), than by its intrinsic incorporation of certification and allied authenticating technologies.

This complicates a simple distinction between a globalised agricultural system and ‘traditional’ or indigenous farming technologies. The technologies of the organic movement are global in their spread and in their orientation towards bridging the gap between local provenance and national and international markets (see Comaroff & Comaroff 2009). Gupta (1998) argues that farmers’ engagement with the green revolution itself should not be analysed through binary distinctions between “Western” industrialised agricultural systems and “indigenous” practices. Such distinctions, he contends, themselves internalise a hegemonic distinction between the “Western” global and a romanticised, “indigenous” local. Rather, Gupta argues, farmers creatively synthesise the broad range of technologies, concepts and beliefs available to them in their farming practice. Similarly, the organic movement’s espousal of ‘traditional’ methods and globalised technologies and networks points to the likelihood that the organic conversion in Sikkim would play out in a much more complex and hybrid fashion. The remainder of this chapter will first examine the precedents in Sikkim’s history for this sense of Sikkim as apart, and for its assumption of such a redemptive role. It will then examine some aspects of how this role is experienced by officials, farmers and the Sikkim population, through the everyday language used to describe the organic conversion.

‘Valley of grain’

“Khangchendzonga is the ‘peak of the five treasures’. All of these treasures are hidden in Demojong.” Sonam Gyatso Bhutia repeated an interpretation of the name of the world’s third highest mountain, located on Sikkim’s eastern border with Nepal, and associated with Sikkim’s guardian deity, of the same name. Sonam Gyatso had retired from the horticulture department several years previously. We were seated in the crowded prayer room of a small tourist hotel in the town of Sangeyling which belonged to the husband of his niece. The residents of Sonam Gyatso’s village of Tsongchu, three kilometres away, had arranged the village Pang Lhabsol celebrations in the hotel, as, he told me, there was no venue in Tsongchu large enough. Sonam Gyatso’s niece joined us, having been called away from the adjoining dining hall. Her presence was required, as host of the ceremony, to make offerings to accompany the ‘Nesol’ ritual. This, according to Sonam Gyatso, would safeguard the household and ‘protect its wealth’. Lamas from the nearby monastery occupied most of the rest of the seats, and were responsible for the incantation of the

prayer, and for accompanying it with cymbals, drums and horns. On a table across the North side of the room had been arranged an intricate and many-tiered altar, a representation of the geography of the mountains and other sacred sites surrounding Khangchendzonga, each peak moulded in barley flour (Bhu: tsampa), butter and wax.



Figure 6: Nesol altar.

Anna Balikci (2008) translates the term ‘Pang Lhabsol’ as the “offering to the witness god,” and describes it as a “state ritual”, the “national celebration of Khangchendzonga” (2008:24), or a “celebration of Sikkim’s guardian deities” (2008:316). The principle site of its observance under the monarchy was the royal palace at Tsuglakhang, Gangtok, according to the Tibetan calendar, on the 15th day of the 7th lunar month, falling in late-August or early September. Monasteries and individual villages around Sikkim hold

celebrations on different dates around this time. It is commonly understood to have as one of its central purposes the preservation of Sikkim as a polity. The Nesol is a central ritual to Pang Lhabsol (Bhutia 2021), and to other festivals in Sikkim, and is an “offering to powerful sacred places,” (Balicki 2008:382) associated with Khangchendzonga and a number of other deities.

I expected Sonam Gyatso to continue his explanation, expanding on the nature of these treasures and their relationship to Sikkim’s history and sacred geography, an account which is commonly offered in various versions, but with which I was only passingly familiar. He changed tack though, waving his hand dismissively: “Who needs treasures when you have tourists?” He motioned to the street below, where, even in the middle of the off-season of the monsoon, when clouds often obscured the mountains and rain made travel difficult, visitors from other parts of India strolled in groups and taxis plied the main road. As Sonam Gyatso explained, Pang Lhabsol is in fact primarily dedicated to two gods, of which Khangchendzonga is the most prominent, both spiritually and topographically. He pointed to the likenesses of the deities in a large glass case on the wall behind the altar:

“Khangchendzonga is the guardian of the North, and Yabdu guards the South. Every Buddhist household has the guardian gods; one with a red face [Khangchendzonga] and one with a blue face [Yabdu].” He smiled: “Nowadays, we don’t really worry about the East and West. We don’t worry about the South either, nowadays, so Khangchendzonga is more important!” From Sonam Gyatso’s light-hearted demeanour I gathered I should take this explanation humorously. Nonetheless, his account draws upon the common understanding that a major purpose of the Pang Lhabsol festival is the defence of the territorial integrity of Sikkim and the sustenance of its health as a polity. His joke takes this emphasis, rooted in Sikkim’s geopolitical history, and translates it into the contemporary world of competing modern states (both national and sub-national), perhaps injecting something of a modern bureaucrat’s sensibilities for the importance, and fragility, of state legitimacy. Sonam Gyatso’s invocation of the relative importance of the cardinal points in the Pang Lhabsol ritual points to concerns over relations with the rest of India (South) and tensions between India and China (more precisely Tibet, in the North). While Sikkim has historically suffered invasion from both Nepal (West) and Bhutan (East), relations with these nations are now of relatively minor concern by comparison with the two neighbouring superpowers. I argue here that Sikkim’s relations with its powerful neighbours, and the views that its people

adopt of Sikkim's position in the world, prefigure the outward-facing theme I identify above in its organic conversion.



Figure 7: Mt Khangchendzonga from Sange Choeling Monastery, West Sikkim.



Figure 8: representations of the gods Yabdu (L) and Khangchendzonga (R).

Sonam Gyatso's explanation of the Pang Lhabsol festival points to a significant precedent in Sikkim's mythology and historiography for the themes I outline above with respect to the Biodiversity conference: those of Sikkim's role as guardian of a moral order; and the preoccupation of Sikkim's leadership with the polity's relationship to the wider world. The commonly understood narrative of Sikkim's state formation, of which the Pang Lhabsol celebrations recount a part, is ultimately derived from a mix of both mythological and historical sources. According to this narrative, Sikkim's existence as a polity dates to the 17th Century CE when settlers from Tibet founded the monarchy which would endure as an unbroken lineage, the Namgyal dynasty, up to the kingdom's accession to India in 1975. This narrative is also instrumental in the construction of Sikkim's ethno-political makeup. According to the crudest, but nonetheless frequently employed, categorisation of Sikkim's ethnic composition, the state's present-day population can be divided into three groups: 'Bhutia', 'Lepcha' and 'Nepali'. In the state-formation narrative, the Lepcha are allotted the

role of ‘indigenous’ inhabitants of Sikkim. Their presence predates the arrival of settlers from the Tibetan plateau who would found the kingdom, and whose presumed descendants are generally referred to as Bhutia, or Lhopa. ‘Nepalis’¹⁴ are held to have migrated into Sikkim after the age of Tibetan migration from the area to the West of Sikkim which now constitutes Nepal. None of these categories are universally accepted among the present-day groups to which they respectively refer, nor did they exist as such at the time of the events the narrative describes, and finer-grained histories trouble this simplistic chronology. However, this ethnic schema is nonetheless frequently employed in popular, and even official, discourse, and is a commonly assumed feature of Sikkim’s political landscape.

The prevalent state-formation narrative draws on several central elements of Buddhist pure land teachings (Williams 2008). In it, Sikkim is closely associated with the person of Guru Rinpoche, the 9th Century CE sage also known by his Sanskrit name, Padmasambhava, who is credited with the early propagation of Vajrayana Buddhism in Tibet and the Himalayan region, and whose journeys are said to have brought him through Sikkim, where, in the present day, he enjoys the popular status of ‘patron saint’. Guru Rinpoche is attributed a central role in prefiguring the foundation of the future kingdom. The principal written source from which this narrative originates is the “History of Sikkim”, written in the early years of the 20th Century and attributed jointly to the ninth Chogyal, Sir Thutob Namgyal, and Gyälmo (Queen) Yeshe Dolma (Namgyal & Dolma 1908). Mullard (2011) argues that it likely represents in part an attempt to claim historical legitimacy for Sikkim’s monarchy, faced with the humiliations of the territory’s status as a protectorate of British India (See also McKay 2004). The cornerstone of this association with Guru Rinpoche is the conferral on Sikkim of the status of ‘beyul’, or ‘sacred, hidden land’ (Balikci 2008). The Tibetan concept of ‘beyul’ refers to a chain of sacred places, mostly taking the geographical form of valleys scattered along the Himalayan range, and consecrated by Guru Rinpoche. Vajrayana teaching has it that these places offer sanctuary in times of political and spiritual turmoil. A beyul can be visited spiritually through meditation, but can

¹⁴ While all three terms are historically contingent and to some degree problematic, they are also commonly used in the present day to refer to Sikkim’s ethno-political composition. I therefore adopt them in the rest of this dissertation. I retain the term ‘Nepali’ in quotation marks as it subsumes a number of distinct ethnic identities, and to distinguish it from the terms signifying, respectively, people from the present-day nation of Nepal, and the Nepali language.

also offer a very physical space of political refuge to those fleeing persecution, protected by the topographical barriers of mountain ranges and accessed via high passes whose mountain deities permit passage only to select people under certain circumstances” (Mullard 2011:10).

According to the foundation narrative espoused by the royal family and its allies, Sikkim’s status as a beyul was revealed through the discovery of a number of ‘treasures’ or terton, secreted in the landscape by Guru Rinpoche and his contemporaries. Discovered in the years preceding the foundation of the monarchy, these identified Sikkim as ‘Beyul Demojong’, and furnished the kingdom with a historical necessity based in prophecy, and the monarchy with spiritual legitimacy. ‘Demojong’ roughly translates as ‘sacred hidden valley of grain’. The toponym may have been conceived purposefully to encourage migration from Tibet (Balicki 2008:87). However, it is an indication of the symbolic importance of agriculture in Sikkim that this name enfolds both spiritual and material abundance by playing on associations with Guru Rinpoche and with the agricultural productivity of its fertile river valleys. During the early history of Sikkim, this epithet referred specifically to an area around the valley of the Rathong river, near Yuksom, in what is now West Sikkim, directly to the South of Mt Khangchendzonga (see illustration below). This area contains many of Sikkim’s most significant Buddhist religious and historic sites. Since then, the use of the name Demojong has been expanded synecdochically to refer in the Bhutia language to the whole of the present-day territory of Sikkim.



Figure 9: the Rathong river valley. Yuksom, the place of the investiture of the first Chogyal, is on the hill across the valley in the centre. Mt Khangchendzonga is obscured by cloud in the background. The polytunnel in the foreground was supplied to a farmer by the horticulture department.

This foundational narrative has served the monarchy and its allies in different ways at different points in time. Most elements of it occupy and enact a continuum between myth and documented history (a history written by the Namgyal dynasty and the monasteries associated with them, as the first literate class in Sikkim). It portrays Sikkim as supernaturally endowed, both spiritually and materially – Sikkim’s agricultural fecundity as the ‘valley of grain’ being particularly relevant in the case of Sikkim’s organic conversion. To expand on the notion briefly described above, a beyul’s topographic isolation and the selectivity of its guardian deities provide shelter to those fleeing both material peril, such as the dynastic wars on the Tibetan plateau, and worldly spiritual degradation. They also enable the preservation of the truths secreted within a beyul through times of spiritual and material adversity, so that they can re-emerge to the world in more favourable times. Thus, the notion of beyul promises both sanctuary *from* the world and redemption *to* the world in a way that recalls the exceptionalism and outward-facing nature of the organic conversion.

Sikkim and the world

It is unlikely that Sikkim's early history was as untroubled, nor its nascent monarchy's authority as uncontested, as its founding narrative portrays. Throughout its history, Sikkim's leaders have faced both internal and external challenges to their own legitimacy and to that of Sikkim's position as a state. This has been the case as it pertains to both senses of the word 'state', over two separate constitutional eras: that of the formally independent, monarchic kingdom, under varying degrees of domination by powerful neighbours; and of the democratically led, post-1975 period, as a state within the Indian union. Saul Mullard (2011) argues that a close examination of contemporary documents indicates that resistance to the authority of the monarchy was much more widespread than the monarchic narrative allows. This would indicate that much of the official history of Sikkim can be read as an attempt to justify a contentious claim on power, in the face of both local resistance and the intrusions of geopolitical superpowers. The subsequent history of Sikkim is no less turbulent. As rulers of a small kingdom surrounded by powerful geopolitical actors, the monarchy's continued struggle to retain power forced it, by turns, to balance, finesse and submit to the power of its neighbours. Further incursions continued through the 19th Century CE, notably from the expanding Gorkha empire on the present-day territory of Nepal, as well as from Tibet, China, the East India Company, and its successor power, directly ruled British colonial India. During the Anglo-Nepalese war of 1816, The Gorkha invasion of Western Sikkim was only repelled with the aid of the Company, in return for which the latter exacted wide-ranging trading rights within and through Sikkim to Tibet and China. The gradual encroachment of British, and then independent, India on Sikkim's affairs was to continue up to the present day. In 1853 the Company annexed Darjeeling district, in the Himalayan foothills and currently in the present day state of West Bengal, from Sikkim, and in 1890 Sikkim formally became a protectorate of British India (Singh 1988). As Mullard (2011) points out, the History of Sikkim (Namgyal & Dolma 1908) was largely elaborated around the turn of the 20th Century, as the monarchy's authority was being particularly strongly circumscribed by British India and its Political Officer in Gangtok, John-Claude White. As Alex McKay (1997) notes, White was careful to symbolically reinforce the power of his office by ensuring that the British Residency was built at the apex of the ridge around which Gangtok is clustered, above both the palace and, lower still, the Durbar (the Chogyal's

court and advisory council). The concrete road which ran up the ridge linking the three seats of power thus served as a reminder of their hierarchy (Balikci-Denjongpa 2008).

From the early 20th Century, as Sikkim became drawn more and more tightly within the sphere of influence of the British Empire and India, it nonetheless faced increasing pressure from the metropolis to pay its way. This was in spite of its strategic positioning as a nexus of trade and geopolitical rivalry between the great powers in Asia. As Political Officer, White was tasked with developing infrastructure in Sikkim along the lines of the rest of colonial India, in order to secure Britain's claim to a controlling interest in the kingdom. This was to be achieved with minimum fiscal input from the Indian government. White's response, over the objections of the Chogyal, was to fundamentally alter Sikkim's agricultural economy and its ethno-political composition. White encouraged, through grants of land, the migration of farmers from Nepal, with the objective of bringing much of Sikkim's abundant uncultivated land under the plough and thus expanding the tax base. As a result, Sikkim's revenue increased from around £500 in 1891 to £150,000 a decade later, a surplus which was employed, among other areas, to educate the youth of Sikkim in Indian schools and universities, and to introduce Western medical services (McKay 2004:25).

India's independence in 1947 prompted the growth of a movement demanding a similar level of democratic representation in Sikkim, particularly among the 'Nepali' population, by this time a majority. Nonetheless, the Chogyal formally retained overall authority. Seats on the State Council were filled through a mix of direct appointment by him and election. The latter were reserved according to the threefold ethno-political categorisation, between those elected by 'Bhutia-Lepcha' and by 'Nepali' 'communities'. As the 'Nepali' population increased, so did its relative disadvantage in this system of governance, leading to growing demands for 'one man one vote' (Sinha 2008). Many in the democratisation movement saw themselves as more culturally aligned with India than with the monarchy, and favoured accession to the Indian union. Meanwhile, India, under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, favoured greater control over Sikkim, for its strategic and trade value, in the wake of the Chinese invasion of Tibet, the 1962 Sino-Indian war and insurrections elsewhere in nearby states of northeast India (Das 1983). Allegations of vote-rigging in favour of the main Bhutia-Lepcha party in the 1973 elections led to India's intervention and a further round of

elections in 1974, won by the main pro-accession party. The resulting civil unrest, and the resistance of the Chogyal, led, in 1975, to armed intervention by India and the Chogyal's deposition. A swift referendum resulted in the victory of the pro-accession lobby, thus ending Sikkim's existence as a formally independent state.

As an Indian state, Sikkim is accorded 'special category status', which enables it to access increased fiscal transfers from the central budget. Since its accession, it has received immense central government transfers, much of which has funded infrastructure and development projects, including a vast programme of road building. The latter, besides enabling Sikkim's very considerable Indian army and security force presence, has provided a vastly improved transport network for its population. In 2014-15, Sikkim's population, tiny by comparison to India's plainland states, received central transfers of over ₹50,000 (approx. £500 at the time) per capita, the highest even among special category states. The average for all states was a little over ₹5,000 (Rao n.d.). Nonetheless, the state has faced constant pressure to reduce its reliance on central transfers through controlling expenditure and generating its own revenue. Timothy Mitchell (2002) argues that Keynes's study of the Indian economy ushered in a reification of *the* economy as an object of policy that became central to 20th Century notions of governance. Similarly, post-accession Sikkim's 'state economy' is constituted as a self-contained entity, despite the geostrategic reasons for its incorporation into the Indian union. In the context of pressure on central budgets and of fiscal austerity (Bear 2015), associated entities such as the state's budget deficit have come to constitute a primary focus of policy, and national and state fiscal planning documents centre, in strongly normative terms, notions of 'debt burden' and 'fiscal responsibility' (Government of Sikkim 2016).

Efforts to reduce the reliance of Sikkim's post-accession governments on central transfers have been at the heart of their policy agendas, and the rationale for the organic conversion should be seen at least partly in this light. One such initiative was the widespread development of hydro-electric power (or 'hydel', as it is commonly abbreviated) across the state, a policy focus which has considerable parallels with the organic conversion. Through hydel, the Government of Sikkim has sought to capture the economic value represented in the state's natural resources, and to deploy that value in redressing economic deficits. Hydel emerged as a policy priority soon after accession, in the light of the pressing need for

energy to fuel the rapid development of India more broadly; the perceived urgent need for such development in Sikkim; and narratives of 'green growth' (Huber & Joshi 2015:13). Sikkim's plentiful rivers and steep terrain were deemed suitable for a type of technology termed 'run of the river' (RoR) schemes which do not require large dams and are portrayed as minimising environmental disruption (Huber & Joshi 2015). Nonetheless, hydel projects were planned on a scale that would enable the export of power to greater India, thus improving Sikkim's state finances and enabling it to be perceived as a contributor to, rather than merely a recipient of, the national development effort (Arora 2009a). It should be mentioned here that some of the hydel projects that became the most prominent were proposed on the Rathong and Rangit rivers in West Sikkim, the historical territory of the original Demojong and the sacred sites attached to it. The prospect of hydel development desecrating this sacred landscape prompted a significant movement opposing it, supported particularly from within the Bhutia and Lepcha populations (Arora 2009a), against the economic development programme of a ruling party whose support was seen as being drawn primarily from the 'Nepali' population. Thus, the notion of 'green growth' cannot always be assumed to align automatically with the values of all sectors of Sikkim's population.

As Sonam Gyatso observes (see above), a further source of support to this state economy, one that has become prominent since the turn of the millennium, has been the promotion of Sikkim as a tourist destination, mainly to the Indian domestic market. A burgeoning Indian middle class has become increasingly interested in exploring the further reaches of its own country. As with the decorations in the Chintan Bhawan for the biodiversity conference, Sikkim's tourism marketing centres the natural beauty of its mountain scenery, its wildlife, cultural diversity, and its spiritual and religious sites, particularly those associated with Vajrayana Buddhism and Guru Rinpoche (Arora 2009b). Indeed, Sikkim's organic conversion has been conceived as intimately connected with the development of tourism. As AK Shreshtha's presentation of the organic conversion makes clear (see Introduction), tourism is one of the main remedies Sikkim's government envisions to its paucity of employment opportunities and shortage of cultivable land. And the notion of 'eco-tourism' allows visitors to enjoy not only the pristine landscape, but the 'healthy' produce that landscape offers up, as well as the spiritual resources to which that landscape is intimately connected. As such, Sikkim's government could be said to have envisaged,

through its promotion of both tourism and the organic conversion, the consumption by outsiders of qualities associated with its landscape and people. This is a related phenomenon to what Comaroff and Comaroff (2009) refer to as the “commodification of culture”. In the cases of both tourism and farming in Sikkim, the cultural assets being articulated are inextricably linked to geography and landscape.

Since 1979, Sikkim’s governments have been formed by parties which espouse the cause of greater representation for the ‘Nepali’ majority, and whose support has been strongest within these groups. This shift in the ethno-political balance of power has not resulted in a wholesale repudiation of the symbolic lexicon of Sikkim’s spiritual and geo-political distinctness, or of much of Sikkim’s historical narrative, despite their associations with the previous, Bhutia-dominated regime. Thus, much of the outward-facing orientation of Sikkim’s political discourse has been preserved, along with a sense of Sikkim as sanctuary, as saviour to the world and guardian of a moral order. This positioning can be seen in the theme of Sikkim as a ‘lighthouse’ and a ‘beacon’ to the global organic movement and the world.

To trouble Sikkim’s history, as writers such as Mullard (2011) do, is also to trouble commonly held notions of its ethno-political makeup. These centre particularly around the ascription of indigeneity, with Bhutia and Lepcha ethnicities presumed to hold this status, and ‘Nepalis’ denied it. In present-day Sikkim, the term ‘Sikkimese’ is contentious, with many Bhutia or Lepcha arguing it should be reserved for them alone as ‘indigenous people’. Firstly, Mullard’s analysis, in suggesting that the early monarchy did not necessarily enjoy the universal consent of the people it ruled, and problematising the notion of ‘rule by consent’, problematises this joint claim on indigeneity. On the other hand, a historiographical analysis troubles the notion of ‘Nepali’ identity. Residents of present-day Sikkim who claim Limbu identity are commonly subsumed under the ‘Nepali’ ethno-political category. This is because their population is centred on an area which straddles both western Sikkim and Eastern Nepal, and because they are considered to belong to a broader linguistic and cultural grouping referred to as Kirati, along with groups such as Rai and Thangmi (Shneiderman 2015). The latter two groups are considered by many in Sikkim to have arrived more recently, at least since the foundation of the kingdom. The inclusion of the antecedents of Limbu people in the Lho-Mon-Tsong treaty, however, would

support a similar status as ‘original inhabitants’ or ‘indigenous people’ of Sikkim as accorded to Bhutia and Lepcha peoples, a status argued for by many Limbus today (Vandenhelsken 2014). Furthermore, the ambiguous and fluid nature of Sikkim’s boundaries over the course of its history belies attempts at definitive chronologies of the ‘arrival’ of the antecedents of its present day ethnic groups. This is particularly true for the category of ‘Nepali’, a term which elides a number of distinct ethnic identities prevalent in the Northeast of the Indian subcontinent and which, in Sikkim, tends to be defined largely in opposition to those of Bhutia and Lepcha. The category ‘Nepali’ functions both as an effective ethno-political bloc in Sikkim and neighbouring regions, and as a convenient shorthand for ‘immigrant’, risking simplistic association with the modern state of Nepal. Political movements in northeast India have preferred to employ the term ‘Nepamul’ to describe this emerging ethno-political identity (Sinha 2005; Subba et al. 2009)¹⁵, in part to avoid these connotations. In Sikkim, ‘Nepalis’ tend to identify themselves by their specific ethnicity. While migration to Sikkim from neighbouring Nepal and from ‘Nepali’-majority districts of West Bengal has increased post-accession, seasonal and permanent migration had been prevalent long before the reforms of the Political Officer, John-Claude White, and was essential to the agrarian economy as a source of labour.

The categorisation of Sikkim’s population as ‘indigenous’ or ‘non-indigenous’, or the ascription of more or less recent arrival to individuals, families and ethno-political groups, has wider implications than their claim to some abstract ‘Sikkimese’ identity: it has concrete consequences for their relationship with the state and their material entitlements to its resources. In its later years, the monarchy instituted the legal category of ‘Sikkim subject’, a status which entitled its holders to preferential rights including in land ownership, employment and taxation. This status was initially denied to ‘Nepalis’, then extended only to those holding land. Post-accession, the category of Sikkim subject was extended to all residents of Sikkim who had settled before 1975, and is a prerequisite for access, amongst other benefits, to employment with the state government. The status is denied to anyone settling after accession, along with their descendants (Pradhan 2020). Civic rights vis-à-vis the state are further affected by India’s elaborate system of state affirmative action. This allocates special status to specific groups identified as economically disadvantaged or

¹⁵ I have retained the term ‘Nepali’ in keeping with its common use in everyday language and official discourse in Sikkim.

suffering social discrimination and exclusion. A number of categories exist at both national and state level, the principle of which are ‘scheduled castes’, ‘scheduled tribes’ and ‘other backward classes’. The objectification of ethnicity and caste in such stark terms originates in the post-independence desire to redress structural inequalities, but has become a prominent feature of Indian civic and political life. It has led ethnicity and caste to become a central focus of state and, to some extent, national politics. In Sikkim, the majority of ethno-political groups are accorded one of these statuses by the state government. Bhutia and Lepcha peoples were accorded Scheduled Tribe status by the state in 1978, shortly after accession, followed by Limbu and Tamang. Rai, Gurung, Magar, Bhujel, Thangmi and others hold the status of ‘most backward classes’. The Bahun, Chettri and Newar groups are accorded the status of ‘other backward classes’, in spite of the privileged status these caste-related ascriptions would generally be assumed to confer in, for example, Nepal. As Mona Chettri (2015) describes, these categories allow groups to secure governmental recognition as a ‘community’. This is the umbrella term used most often to refer to both ethnic and caste-based groupings both informally and in official governmental documents. It also allows these groups to access state support on a community level and, importantly, permits individuals to access government jobs and higher education on a favourable basis, through a system of ‘reservation’, whereby the state is obliged to allocate a fixed percentage of places to them. The political importance of these benefits is hard to overstate in Sikkim, where the economy is so dependent on governmental resources. A commonly quoted statistic among government officials is that “one in nine” working age persons are in government employment in the state¹⁶.

The predecessors of the agriculture and horticulture department officials, then, were similarly concerned with Sikkim’s relationships with the wider world and its presentation to that world. In Sikkim’s early history, as now, this presentation was key to finessing the competing neighbouring geopolitical powers, and its spiritual significance was a key resource in this endeavour. These relationships have radically affected Sikkim’s destiny as a polity and continue to do so. They have determined both its national alignment, its politics, the ethno-political composition of its populace, and how that composition is officially

¹⁶ Figures for state employment in India are low by the standards of wealthy countries, but not in the context of the overall size of the Indian population. By comparison, in India as a whole, “public administration and defence” accounted for 1.8% of all employment (International Labour Office 2024).

interpreted. Mullard, in another publication, refers to the process of reimagining Sikkim's history as "constructing the mandala" (Mullard 2012: 12), in reference to the graphic prayer device. A mandala is used as a meditation aid to focus the subject's attention on the nature of reality and the universe. It takes the form of a closed geometric design usually featuring concentric boundaries, each with four doors aligned on its geometric axes, and representing creation in microcosm. Sikkim's historical narrative makes use of such motifs in Sikkim's role as refuge and saviour to the world, in its guardian deities allowing the entry of select people across its mountain barriers through passes at its cardinal points. I suggest that many of these motifs have been preserved despite the change from Lhopa monarchy to 'Nepali', mostly Hindu, majority rule within the Indian Union, where Sikkim is still obliged to prove its value and to pay its way. The organic conversion was thus conceived and influenced as part of contemporary attempts to prove this value – to India and to the world, in terms of the secular-soteriological idiom of the purity of organic farming, and in terms of the 'premium price' to which it aspires for its produce.

Talking 'organic'

Bim Bahadur Poudyel, the local Horticulture Inspector, his cousin, Ashish, and Ashish's father, Gyan Bahadur, showed me down the steps of the house Ashish and his family shared, onto a field formed of three broad terraces in a small valley that separated Ashish's and Bim Bahadur's houses. Bim Bahadur invited me to put my questions to his uncle, on the grounds that he had been farming for fifty years, and could tell me something of the way farming had changed in Tuksum, the village in which they lived, and which would become one of the sites on which my research focused most closely. He cautioned me, though, jokingly, that "nowadays he doesn't do anything!" "Seventy years!" Gyan Bahadur scolded, implying he had worked on the land since birth. "I've been farming seventy years, and I'm still farming!" The two younger men rolled their eyes to one another. As we climbed from a somewhat neglected patch of radish [Nep: Mula] into one of maturing cabbages, Gyan Bahadur continued,

These are one hundred per cent organic. We put nothing but manure on them. Before we used to use [artificial] fertilizer, but this wasn't healthy. Now it's organic [Eng]! Now it's healthy, and much more tasty as well! Before we grew only broad-leafed

*mustard, radish, beans, peas and pumpkin, but now we also plant chillies, aubergine, carrot, tomato, flowers and chayote [Nep: iskus]. Government gives us all of these seeds; Government gives us everything!*¹⁷

As I would learn, on the hectare of land below his house, Ashish, like many people in Sikkim, grew vegetables mainly for the family, occasionally selling a small quantity, together with the maize he would grow in the monsoon season. Most of the family income came from government contracts, usually for building, and from a brother who lived in the US. Gyan Bahadur's emphatic praise for the benefits of the organic conversion could well have stemmed in part from my status as a new visitor and outsider associated with the department, and from his relationship with a departmental official. Nonetheless, it illustrates a commonly articulated enthusiasm and positivity for the conversion, which was particularly evident in officials and farmers who enjoyed close relationships with them. It also illustrates several common features of the terms in which farmers, officials and the general public in Sikkim evaluated the conversion, both positively and negatively. Firstly, the English term 'organic' was by far the most predominant term used to describe the conversion itself and the agricultural approaches and technologies it had espoused. Equivalent Nepali or Hindi terms were very seldom employed. Secondly, officials and farmers articulated the benefits of the conversion in terms of health and taste. Thirdly, there was an almost umbilical association between organic farming, government and government support. The phrase "government provides everything" was a frequent claim by government officials themselves. This section examines some aspects of the ways in which language was used by farmers, officials and the general public, in relation to the organic conversion.

Previously an unfamiliar term, the English word 'organic' became ubiquitous in everyday language in Sikkim. This is largely due to the frequency of official pronouncements on the organic conversion, the controversies it occasioned, and the almost universal way in which the bans on the import of artificial inputs and of non-organic produce touched Sikkim's population. The term first became prominent with the start of the phasing-in of the ban on artificial fertilizers and pesticides in 2010, which lent a greater immediacy and

¹⁷ Conversation in Nepali.

prominence to the conversion project. In the period of my research, it was widely used to discuss the conversion and its ramifications. So, for example, the Nepali ‘organic ko laage’ (‘because of organic’) was a phrase often cited as justification for Government action connected with the conversion, such as the building of a ‘Kisan Bazar’ (Farmers’ Market) in Gangtok, or the introduction of checks for non-organic vegetables on goods transport at the main state border crossing at Rangpo. When I accompanied an employee of a service providing agency to complete the twice yearly inspection of farms that forms part of the certification system, she generally introduced us to farmers with whom she wasn’t acquainted by explaining, ‘Haami organic ko laage kaam garchu’ (‘We work for organic’). As such, ‘organic’ is understood as inherently connected with the state government, and often as designating an official, organised body.

As noted above, prior to the organic conversion, department officials generally understood their role as one of bringing Sikkim abreast of green revolution technologies. This orientation had not entirely changed among officials, who, as the conversion proceeded, still regularly referred to agriculture in the state as ‘backward,’ and its farmers’ outlook as ‘primitive’. However, as can be seen from the conference speeches described above, this logic had, at least in government circles, in many respects been turned on its head, the formerly glorious ‘green revolution’ being characterised according to the language of the global organic movement, in terms of ‘chemicals’, ‘poisons’ and ‘death’. As part of this shift, officials invoked Sikkim’s past to naturalise the state’s position as a torch-bearer for organic agriculture. What may have previously been termed ‘backwardness’ was re-purposed for the organic conversion as a virtue. Another term officials commonly used to describe farmers was ‘simple’. The sense was less pejorative than the term ‘backward’, and implied, as well as a certain rustic naivete, a kind of honesty and place-based authenticity which framed Sikkim as a wholesome, healthy land. The Sikkim Organic Mission had produced a steady stream of publications and several short films since the beginning of the transition period in 2015. Written in English, they featured frequent photographs, some composite images, of terraces of green rice crops, or of flowering crops in full bloom – yellow mustard or white buckwheat – against a backdrop of brilliant white mountains, usually in the form of the recognisable profile of Mt Khangchendzonga. In their high quality production, these appeared to be targeted at an audience external to the department, and likely to Sikkim. As part of the preparations for the various ‘programmes’,

or high-profile events, related to the conversion, the department frequently placed banners around Gangtok and sometimes other sites in Sikkim.

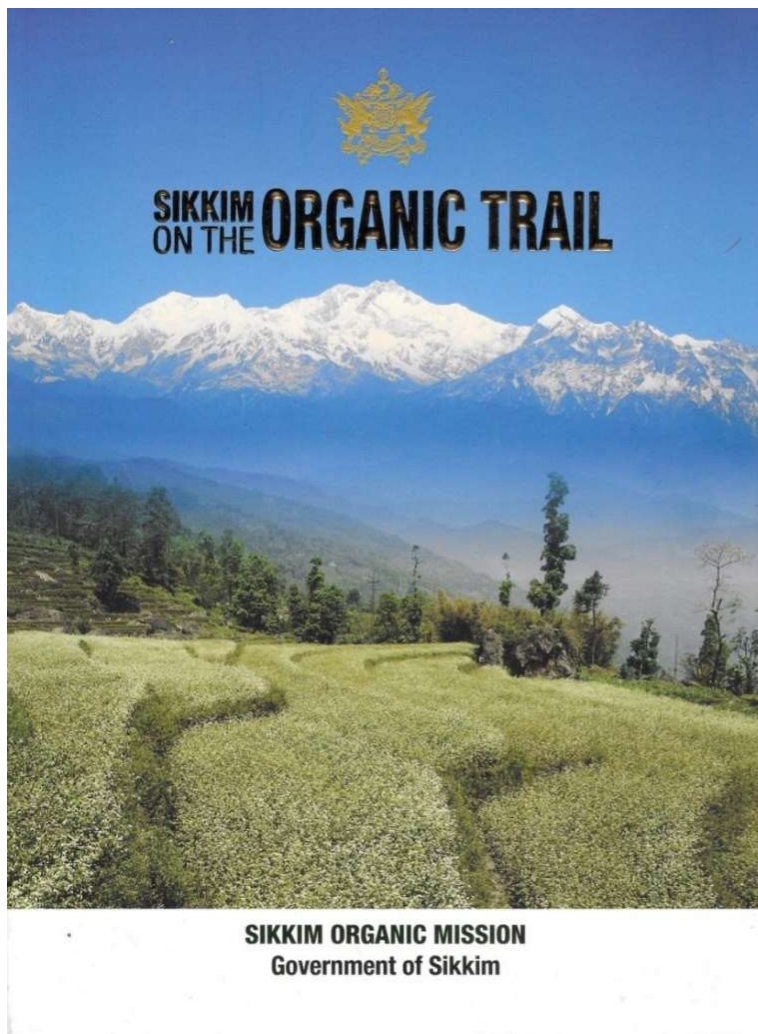


Figure 10: cover of a publication produced by Sikkim Organic Mission (Government of Sikkim 2017).



Figure 11: banner on a pedestrian overpass in Gangtok.



Figure 12: banner placed outside of the Krishi Bhawan, the headquarters of the agriculture and horticulture departments, publicising the 2018 Sikkim Organic Fair (see Chapter Four).

This framing of the simplicity of farming in Sikkim makes extensive use of the territory's past and its uniqueness as a place. Girik Kumar, a mid-ranking officer based in the departmental headquarters, explained to me that, prior to any talk of the organic conversion, Sikkim's own produce was valued above that imported from other areas of India. Historically, this centred on varieties of produce that had been bred within Sikkim or nearby areas. Vegetables were often smaller in size and specific varieties changed from area to area within Sikkim, adapted to growing conditions, with some areas becoming famous for varieties with particularly sought-after qualities. The local provenance of this produce, often associated with people's home villages, was indicated in the widely used term 'basteeko', from the Nepali 'baste', meaning village.

The value of organic is in the mindset of the people. So actually, we have a mindset here, in the state, Sikkimese people, as soon as we go to the hat¹⁸, we look for products which are organic. Even before 2013. And that's natural. We look for basteeko. If you came from the village to your relatives, you would bring basteeko. Basteeko are organically grown, so we go for basteeko things. We know they're from the village and they're more tasty. We hardly go for those goods which come from Siliguri, or which are conventionally grown, which the traders bring, so basically, we recognise this thing. Our basic mindset is organic, even before organic.

'Does that apply to Gangtok as well?'

Gangtok, the whole of Sikkim. Like my mom, when she goes for shopping, she does that. Everyone, even me. When I go for shopping, I look for basteeko, even before this March, before April, when they banned the conventionally grown [produce], so basically our mindset is such that we go for basteeko, organic vegetables.¹⁹

Girik's eliding of the Nepali 'basteeko' and the English 'organic' would indicate that the latter was conceptually predicated, at least in part, on the former, and had in at least some senses superseded it. It would also indicate that the virtue of tastiness he ascribes to 'organic' produce is one it inherits in part from 'basteeko'. There is a sense in which the outward-facing aspect of the Sikkim Organic conversion managed to straddle two possibilities: that of Sikkim as historically pure and 'organic by default,' and of a past tainted by the 'poison' and artifice of the green revolution, now redeemed by the organic

¹⁸A (usually weekly) market in a village or provincial town.

¹⁹ Conversation in English.

ideal, with its qualities of authenticity, healthfulness and taste. Sikkim-grown produce was generally higher in price, owing to the smaller scale of production and the shorter growing seasons and slower growth compared to lowland areas. Sikkim-grown varieties were also usually of smaller size, an attribute often mentioned with that of tastiness. With the at least partial conflation of the terms ‘basteeko’ and ‘organic’, the latter took on many of the associations of the former, of rural, healthy, rustic, simple, perhaps even at times crude, but authentic. It served as a perhaps sentimental link to a village past, and to present, often distant, ancestral homes, at a time when the population of Sikkim was rapidly urbanising, entering formal employment, and increasingly connected to and dependent on ‘mainland’ India.

However, it is on ‘imported’ vegetables and grains that much of Sikkim depends. Urban populations in particular depend disproportionately on ‘Siliguriko’ produce, named after the urban hub of Siliguri in northern West Bengal which serves as a market centre for most of the Northeast. Girik and other, particularly middle-class urban-dwellers, often categorised ‘Siliguriko’ vegetables as larger, less tasty, and, due to the ‘chemicals’ used in their cultivation, less healthy. Despite its less desirable qualities, ‘Siliguriko’ produce is the staple of Sikkim’s now significant urban population, mainly owing to its lower price in comparison to locally grown vegetables. These undesirable qualities were also extended to the traders who operated out of Siliguri, both buying Sikkim-grown produce from markets and bringing wholesale, non-organically-grown produce to Sikkim’s retail markets. In a meeting with the ostensive purpose of ‘sensitising’ villagers to the organic conversion, one mid-ranking, headquarters-based officer from the horticulture department spurred farmers to organise their own means of marketing their produce. ‘Bengali traders are making lacs²⁰ taking these vegetables to Siliguri. Why should the middlemen take all the profit? Why shouldn’t Sikkim people benefit?’ Siliguri is therefore portrayed as exemplifying the evils of both chemical agriculture and the exploitative market in agricultural goods, phenomena which, as Vandana Shiva argued, are portrayed as intimately connected.

Among the crops grown in Sikkim, several appear more frequently in the speeches of Department officers, in my conversations with them, and in speeches and publications

²⁰ One lac is 100,000, in this case, by implication, rupees.

intended for the general public and audiences outside of Sikkim, to the extent that these plants could be considered iconic of the organic conversion. It is interesting to consider the specific characteristics that contribute to this iconic status. Sikkim is historically renowned for the production of spices, in particular, the three closely related crops, all within the family *Zingiberaceae*: large (or black) cardamom, ginger and turmeric. Large cardamom is one of Sikkim's most significant cash crops, sold throughout India and exported particularly to Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Its cultivation was historically associated with the state's Lepcha population (Gorer 1938; Lepcha 2019), who would employ shifting cultivation of partially cleared tracts of forests to grow the shade-loving plant.

“Cardamom is a lazy person's crop,” said Sonam Gyatso Bhutia, as we stood in the field he had begun cultivating since his retirement from the horticulture department, a little over a kilometre away from his house. He had hired two labourers to clear the undergrowth from a field he had planted with cardamom and kiwi vines, and now we joined them in the weeding work as he talked. ‘It is tillage-free cultivation,’ he expanded.

You plant it in the forest, clear a space between the trees and plant the seedlings. Then it grows by itself in the forest, and produces a crop every year. Now, because of disease, it is only for three, four or five years, but previously it produced for eight or nine years before replanting. It is naturally organic. The farmers never used to add artificial fertilizer. All you need to do is clear the undergrowth once a year, and harvest.

The following day we had breakfast on a grassy terrace overlooking Sonam Gyatso's steep garden. It was full of exotic and native trees, planted for fruit and to attract the birds his retirement had permitted him the time to watch and identify, all trailed with a scarcely controlled proliferation of iskus vines (see below). He picked up again on the merits of cardamom. Nowadays, he said,

many farmers have become greedy. They don't plant it in the forest, but more densely in open fields. Without the shade of trees, the leaves get burned and it doesn't produce as well, but because it is such a high value crop, they still get a very good profit, and they don't have to work for it. Nowadays the best way to grow cardamom is to reintroduce the trees, to provide shade and prevent water loss. Cardamom agroforestry

is ideal because cardamom needs young trees. If they're too big they take all the nutrients. So you have to cut them and replace them regularly, so you get money from the timber. The variety grown most in this area is Savney. It is indigenous²¹. It stands up well to disease²².

I understand Sonam Gyatso's description of cardamom as both 'indigenous' and a 'lazy person's crop' as identifying what he sees as a virtue – that of its productiveness, both biologically and economically, which substitutes for the toil of ploughing and weeding, associated with most field cultivation. I would suggest that, for him, this productiveness stems from a vitality deriving from the 'natural state' of the semi-cultivated conditions in which it is traditionally grown, a quality indigenous to Sikkim. His ascription of 'indigeneity' to cardamom is strengthened by its association with indigenous Lepcha people. For Sonam Gyatso, a Bhutia, its status as a 'lazy person's crop' may also play on a stereotype which casts Lepcha people as shifting cultivators, who, by implication do not engage in the hard work of field cultivation, questionable as this stereotype might be²³. It is possible that he appraises this virtue in terms of the valuation of such hard work, and thus implicitly criticises cardamom farmers. But I take the phrase 'lazy person's crop' primarily to indicate a virtue: that the quality of hard work is itself located in the crop, and perhaps also in its indigenous connections to the land, the forest and Sikkim, thus obviating the need for hard work on the part of the farmer.

²¹ Given the extensive history of plant breeding and exchange within the Northeast and with other areas of India, such claims should not be seen as definitive of indigeneity specifically to Sikkim.

²² Conversation in English.

²³ Rice cultivation, which is particularly labour intensive, is widespread in Lepcha majority areas and Lepcha people are popularly strongly associated with it.



Figure 13: a cardamom field, West Sikkim.

One crop cultivated in almost every rural household is iskus (Eng: chayote, *Sechium edule*), a member of the squash family with a vine-like habit. Iskus is native to Latin America but long naturalised in the Himalayan region. Multiple parts of the plant are edible: it is grown for its fruit, used as a vegetable, often as a substitute for potato; for its large edible tubers, which keep well in the ground; and for its shoots which are cooked as a green, leafy vegetable. It is high in Vitamin C and available in summer, when other nutritious vegetables are in comparatively short supply. Iskus is famed for its ease of cultivation and for the prolificness of its growth. Cultivated or naturalised plants are a common sight in rural and urban Sikkim, climbing trees, houses and telephone poles. Many officials I knew talked of it in the same breath as more clearly ‘indigenous’ crops such as cardamom, turmeric and ginger, as well as the gathered forest vegetables I discuss below. As one Horticulture Department officer explained to me, ‘you just take one fruit, place it vertically in the soil, and the plant will grow.’ Iskus featured prominently during my fieldwork in the efforts of the Horticulture Department to present itself within Sikkim and to the wider world. The enthusiasm of one senior officer in particular for iskus, and his habit of ordering his juniors to prepare gift boxes for foreign visitors, was well known and often joked about

among department officials. On one occasion, I arrived at the subdivision horticulture office to find preparations ongoing for Sikkim's participation in another 'international biodiversity conference', this time in Dehra Dun, Uttarakhand. A team of around 30 field and Headquarters staff was busy preparing and packing vegetables for the display. Consignments had been sent from each of the four districts of Sikkim, including various vegetables considered specific to or emblematic of that region. I was quickly put to work with two other members of staff, polishing three large sacks of four varieties of iskus fruits (green, yellow, smooth, spiked), originating from three separate districts, and packing them for despatch by overland lorry. It would appear that Iskus's association with Sikkim, as well as its prolificness, garnered it a status iconic of the organic conversion, alongside more strictly 'indigenous' crops. A few weeks later I met one of the officers who had been present, in her room in Headquarters. She told me that in the end, all other states represented at the trade fair had had relatively modest displays, and that the officer charged with organising Sikkim's display had been "very angry" with his superiors for the amount of trouble and embarrassment caused by Sikkim's showy exhibit. Again, though, Iskus's productive vitality can be seen as a virtue, as embodying the quality of hard work, and thus obviating its need on the part of the farmer. I will return to the virtues or otherwise of hard work in Chapters Two and Three.



Figure 14: a Sikkim Organic stall at the international biodiversity conference, 2018, Uttarakhand.

The association with forests is continued particularly strongly through a number of the vegetables available in Sikkim's markets and homes which are not cultivated at all, but foraged. This category includes several species of edible fern (Nep: ningro), nettle (Nep: sisnu), mushroom (Nep: ceu), and bamboo shoots (Nep: bansko tusa). The lunch at the conference I relate above featured a number of other 'typical' classes of Sikkim produce, all, as Pema Wangdi Bhutia, a senior officer, stressed, 'one hundred per-cent organic' (remember here the expositional focus of this event, and its audience from beyond Sikkim). Pema Wangdi asked in particular how I liked the ningro. He emphasised, with a smile, that such forest delicacies were "one hundred per cent organic." He stressed to me the health-giving properties of fern, and other people have told me of its use as an anti-helminthic. Other friends, both within and outside the department, have made similar associations, sometimes sincerely, sometimes humorously or ironically. The sincere deployment of the term again suggests an alliance between the prolific vitality of Sikkim's forest and wild produce, healthfulness and the notion of 'organic'. It ignores the question of whether something that isn't cultivated can be properly included under the rubric of 'organic', given that the category applies in essence to farmed crops and livestock.

The loanword 'organic' thus had multiple valences when it was used in Nepali dialogue in Sikkim. It carried inflections of naturalness, wildness and the forest, of indigeneity to Sikkim and to India, and of prolificness, tastiness, vitality and healthfulness. Importantly, it also signified an association with government, and could even denote government as an institution, or specific government bodies. If such associations seem contradictory, the organic conversion as a whole carried even more complex connotations. It also invoked, and mobilised, these associations of naturalness, vitality, indigeneity and healthfulness. But, as suggested in the introduction, Sikkim's population, and department officials themselves, invested the conversion with the predispositions, hopes and frustrations they already held towards government. The expectation of resources and/or employment was prominent among these, and the frequently-repeated maxim 'government provides everything' (see above) was testament to the ubiquity of the state in everyday life in Sikkim, even if its realisation may have depended on the quality of the recipient's own contacts with officials. But aspersions of 'sham' and 'fake' speak to the disappointment people felt when they perceived a disparity between government's portrayal of the conversion and the realities they experienced. This complexity in how 'organic' and the conversion were perceived

leaves open an important space for irony. As James Fernandez and Mary Taylor Huber (2001) argue, irony embraces just this type of complexity of meaning: “by projecting an attitude of disbelief along with the “outer” meaning of their words, ironists convey a contrary, ‘inner’ meaning to those who catch the cue.” (2001:1). Integral to this creation of implicit though veiled meaning is the use of “indirection” (2001:87): directing the attention of the audience towards an unspoken focus by ostensibly directing it away from that same focus. Michael Carrithers emphasises irony’s multiplicity of valence even more strongly, drawing on the literary theorist Edmund Burke. For Carrithers (2014), a person voicing an ironic register directs her audience to an interpretation, or in Burke’s terms, a ‘certainty’, which ‘hovers above’ the literal meanings of her statements, or ‘sub-certainties’, when taken individually. Several examples from Sikkim’s organic conversion conform to such a polyphonic notion of irony.

At a kiosk in Gangtok’s organic market, I was assured by the seller, again, with a smile and a knowing glance, of its organic status.

This we call organic honey, from organic bees.²⁴

‘Everything’s organic!’

*Yes, I’m organic, she’s organic [pointing to his wife, who tends the stall with him],
you’re more organic than us, because you’re so healthy!²⁵*

(He squares his shoulders, partially squats, and clenches his fists in front of his chest in the manner of a wrestler.)

The words and the gestures of the market seller, when taken together, have the effect of creating an association between his product and qualities of strength and healthfulness, summed up in the ‘organic’ label. Furthermore, the ascription of this label to the honey, the bees and all persons present, can be read as commentary on the ubiquity of the term, and as a hint that this ubiquity might devalue it. The use of the term to describe bees can be read as playing on Sikkim’s status as ‘organic by default’, that anything can be described as organic by dint of its finding itself situated within the geographic boundaries of Sikkim,

²⁴ To my knowledge, no honey produced in Sikkim is officially certified as organic.

²⁵ Conversation in Nepali.

in the same way that all cultivated land in Sikkim has been, through a sometimes cursory process, certified as organic, by virtue, as it sometimes seems, purely of its jurisdictional location. Bees, of course, in a further ironic twist, are free-flying, opportunistic gatherers, not farmers circumscribed by the boundaries of their family fields or home state, and are thus of doubtful amenability to certification. The questionable nature of the association between my own height and health provides another layer of ironic sub-certainty. If I am risking here an over interpretation of such simple exchanges to suit my own knowledge, experience and favoured readings, I am still not exhausting the possible inflections the majority of citizens of Sikkim could draw from them. For Sikkim citizens, the majority of these possibilities, and more which will have escaped my necessarily limited knowledge, would be familiar, whether they agreed with them or not. It is this awareness of the possibilities of meaning that enable the building of a nexus of more-or-less shared understanding of the 'certainty' being cued.

On another occasion, I was invited, with a wink, at 6 am, for a glass of 'organic' at the house of a Sherpa family famed for the spirits (raksi) and beer (jhar) it produced. Here, 'organic' was used to signify a rustic, home-produced quality, and to distinguish the liquor from commercially produced alcoholic drinks. Sikkim Nationalised Transport buses that ply the routes between Sikkim's villages and towns, and to Siliguri, were widely referred to as 'organic' on account of their green livery. The term may also have related to their rural routes, which featured many stops and longer journey times than the alternatives of private shared jeeps and express busses. The term 'organic' was also used, again, usually in a humorous manner, to describe many locally made articles, particularly roughly hewn ones, such as cane stools or bamboo carrying baskets (dokhu).

A friend who oversaw a family food kiosk (Hin/Nep: dokan) in Gangtok, sent me a WhatsApp meme entitled 'Organic Babu'. It is a crude photoshop of a typical sabziwala (Eng: vegetable seller), whose face has been replaced by that of Pawan Kumar Chamling, the Chief Minister, who is widely acknowledged as the initiator and chief architect of the organic conversion. The scene is a typical Indian vegetable market: the Chief Minister-cum-sabziwala sits surrounded by piles of fresh looking produce and wields a set of weighing scales. Originating in the Mughal period, the term 'babu' was originally employed as a title of respect towards zamindars (large landlords), and subsequently towards high

ranking Hindus and those employed in the British Indian colonial service. In the latter sense, as the Oxford English Dictionary notes, it could have the depreciative connotation of a person “who has had a (superficial) English education and is somewhat anglicized; an Indian clerk or minor official who is able to write English; (in later use more generally) an Indian office worker or bureaucrat.” In the present-day use of the term, this depreciative sense is still more common. It often denotes a provincial petty clerk or self-appointed fixer, whose power and competence may need to be deferred to, but might not match his (in this sense, it is invariably used to describe males) own self-estimation. The meme thus plays on the ‘crude’ associations of the organic conversion with vitality and ‘basteeko’ produce. At the same time, it insinuates that the conversion project itself is perhaps not all that it is presented as being.



Figure 15: The Chief Minister as Organic Babu (meme).

Such uses of the term ‘organic’ suggest the conversion gave rise to a new idiom of ironic humour. The suddenness of its onset, and the ubiquitous form which it took in daily newspaper articles updating the public on speeches, trainings and awareness raisings, would have made it ripe as a medium for the kind of playful humour shown here. Its contextless appearance as an English term, unfamiliar to most, would have rendered it an empty

signifier. I would not want to overstate the significance of this idiom for political life in Sikkim: people use whatever tools they find at hand to make light of their circumstances. Nonetheless, many of these examples suggest a nuanced and at times subversive appreciation of the paradox of the state's, and specifically the state government's, positioning in the organic conversion. The government's promise of economic and food autarky through an abundance of Sikkim produce carrying qualities inherent to the state (and, to an extent, to India) conflicted with Sikkim's intractable dependence on 'unhealthy', 'less tasty' and 'chemical' Siliguriko produce, and with the unpopular and ultimately ineffectual ban on the import of the latter.

The meme of the Chief-Minister-cum-sabziwala plays on these agricultural populist associations in an ambiguous way, styling the leader as a salt-of-the-earth market trader of healthy produce. But at the same time, the crudeness of the market trader could throw these credentials into question. How healthy is his produce really? And how faithful are his scales? The epithet 'Babu' places the high aspirations for an internationally recognised initiative of the organic conversion into question. It perhaps calls to mind the crudeness of a policy whose most visible manifestations have been acts of interdiction: the bans and their contradictory, chaotic implementation. My placing here of the positive connotations of these ironic representations sequentially prior to the negative ones does not imply that I see the latter as in any way more definitive. My point is that the use of irony allows such interpretations to coexist in a nexus of related, nuanced and sometimes contradictory meanings which adhere together without the need for formal logical reconciliation. This ambiguity has several effects. As Fernandez and Huber (2001) point out, irony can clearly serve as a tool of veiled critique, without the need to take an explicit position, in an environment where such a position risks harming one's interests. Such deniability would clearly be useful in the circulation of a meme directly referencing the Chief Minister. But an ironic register has a much broader utility than merely that to the subversive who wants to cover his tracks. More generally, it serves to de-centre certainties constructed, to express scepticism over the existence of 'heroes, heroism and heroic conceptualisations' (2001:10), such as those proffered in state narratives of the organic conversion, of 'visionary leaders' and 'hard-working, progressive farmers', or over 'categories of differentiation', such as those which separate 'the commendable from the corrupt' (Fernandez & Huber 2001:10), or, indeed, organic from 'chemical' farming. It does not only operate from 'outside' to

‘inside’, but can be mobilised in what Fernandez and Huber term a ‘politics of complicity’ (Fernandez & Huber 2001:6). As Huber (2001) observes in the same volume, the paradoxes inherent in irony may be grounds for critique or ridicule, but, in a context of strong faith, they may also hint at ‘deeper truths’ beyond the reach of everyday understanding, and so reinforce that faith. It also allows the speaker to be both sincere and insincere at the same time: to take seriously the claims of organic while hinting that he might not take some of the more hyperbolic (Carrithers 2012) claims of the conversion entirely at face value. On the surface of it, it is not in the market seller’s interest to call into question the ‘organic’ status of his produce, much less the value of the ‘organic’ label itself. And Pema Wangdi’s smile hints that his insistence on the “one hundred per cent organic” nature of the ningro (fern) might be coloured with a self-aware, but deniable, scepticism. These ironies echo, and call attention to, the broader ironies of an organic Sikkim’s equivocal positioning with relation to the organic movement and also to the Indian state.

Officials and the state

The agriculture and horticulture departments occupy a prominent position within the state government of Sikkim. In the 2018-19 state budget, the agriculture heading (which includes agriculture, horticulture and livestock department activities) accounted for over seven per cent of overall combined revenue and capital expenditure²⁶, compared to fifteen per cent for education, four per cent for health and three per cent for energy²⁷ (Government of Sikkim 2019). This prominence could be argued to be fitting for a largely rural state, and for a ‘technical department’ which provides services at local level throughout the state, but it is also the product of the significant role of the state in Sikkim’s agriculture over its monarchic, colonial and postcolonial history. Agriculture was central to a notion of Sikkim’s statehood, as refracted through its dependence on colonial and post-independence India. As I relate above, in spite of Sikkim’s strategic position, British India placed a priority on developing the kingdom’s ability to generate revenue and

²⁶ Revenue expenditure is that which covers the recurrent costs of government activities such as salaries and day-to-day running of a department. It is mostly funded from state revenues. Capital expenditure (also often referred to colloquially by officials as the ‘development budget’) covers major investments, for example in infrastructure, and, in Sikkim’s case at least, is often funded by grants from central government.

²⁷ The latter three are given as comparable significant examples of state government expenditure categories.

contribute to the cost of its arms-length governance. Under the monarchy, in a system which has been dubbed 'feudal' (Sinha 2008), all land in Sikkim was held by the Chogyal and divided into estates, the majority of which were administered by landlords termed Kazis in Bhutia and Lepcha majority areas and Thikadars (usually of Newari origin) in 'Nepali' majority areas. The colonial Political Officer John-Claude White was instrumental in formalising this system in the early 20th Century, with a view to maximising revenue collection. Under it, Kazis and Thikadars leased land to cultivators on various rental and sharecropping terms and paid a fixed rent to the Chogyal (Chakrabarti 2010, 2012).

After Indian independence, Sikkim, still itself nominally self-governing, was nonetheless drawn into India's project of national development, and in particular to its green revolution. From 1954, a series of long-term plans for agriculture were formulated with the assistance of India's planning commission, the first of which included the establishment of a state agriculture directorate, the predecessor of the later agriculture, horticulture and livestock departments (Dhungel 2021). As Gupta (Gupta 1998) argues, the idea of the developmental state as an instrument for advancing a national economy and improving the lives of the population was essential to notions of postcolonial legitimacy in India and other new nations, and India's green revolution was one of the central pillars of the developmental state. Agriculture in pre- and post-accession Sikkim was progressively drawn into the technocratic apparatus of the Indian developmental state. Land reforms in the postcolonial era distributed ownership to those who occupied and worked the land, while many of the estates directly held by the Chogyal became 'government farms', a central element of the nascent agriculture department. As research stations and demonstration farms, these formed the basis of the 'agricultural extension' model that characterised the state's efforts to further the green revolution. As well as the adoption of five year planning (Cullather 2013) and the priorities of the green revolution, the metrics of land under cultivation, tonnage of production, yield, and per hectare fertilizer application became central to departmental discourse. Hansen and Steppatut (2001) argue that such "languages of stateness" work to reinforce, in powerful and often mystifying ways, the taken-for-grantedness of the modern state as a form. The officials with whom I had contact were formed in this Indian language of 'stateness'. In order to staff its nascent agriculture effort, and in the absence of higher education institutions in Sikkim, the Sikkim government sponsored school leavers to study in Indian agricultural universities and research stations.

They learned the principles of ‘fieldwork’ and agricultural extension. The centrality of the Indian agricultural centres of the green revolution continued after Sikkim’s accession to India in 1974, and, at the time of my field research, most senior officials had been educated in Indian agricultural universities.

Officials’ embrace of the organic conversion and their disparagement of the aims of the green revolution could indicate their assertion of a specific Sikkim notion of the state, vis á vis the monolithic Indian one played out the green revolution. This notion, as AK Shreshtha contends, foregrounded the harm done to Sikkim’s natural, and by extension spiritual, landscape by the green revolution and sought to define itself against it. The notion of a Sikkim ‘organic by default’, moreover, implicitly questions the existence of any remaining role for the state. Where the central state had, from colonial times, cast Sikkim as ‘backward’, in the same manner that Pandian (2009) describes for the Piramalai Kallars, the conversion converts this backwardness into a virtue. Indeed, it defined Sikkim against the Indian state. The conversion was defined by a Sikkim exceptionalism that sought to counter the threat posed by non-organic food and agricultural inputs of Indian origin, reinscribing the territorial boundary of Sikkim through the interdiction and policing of the cross-border passage of these materials. For officials, formed in the context of the grand statist project of the green revolution, I suggest that the organic conversion in some respects represented an alternative notion of the state, defined against the grand statist project of the green revolution and the monolithic Indian developmental state.

But any such notion of a Sikkim state articulated by officials was an ambiguous one. It was inflected by Sikkim’s historically outward-facing character and its continued dependence on India, economically, politically and for the recognition of that very stateness. As a state project, the organic conversion did not envisage pure self-sufficiency for Sikkim. Rather, it aspired to selling Sikkim produce on external markets, principally wider India, and to attracting tourists, again, principally from India, with its associations of health and spirituality. Both the marketing of Sikkim Organic produce and its synergy with the development of tourism also turned on the notion of authenticating, for an outside audience, the genuineness of the association between Sikkim’s produce and its land and spiritual landscapes. Frequently, Sikkim exceptionalism gave way to a broader Indian version, as with the assertion in the biodiversity conference of the Indian origins of

organic farming. The conversion also promoted 'Indian' technologies as inherent to Sikkim's iteration of organic farming, as with the vedic-inspired 'panchgavya' (literally, 'five substances derived from the cow,' including cow urine, dung, milk, curd and ghee), promoted as a combined fertilizer and pest-control treatment. And the outward-facing character of the organic conversion is very apparent in the importance given to its recognition by the Indian Prime Minister and his government, itself centrally invested in a nation-defining project centred on Hindu nationalism.

The technocratic elements that characterised the green revolution clearly, and unsurprisingly, persisted in the tasks with which officials were charged in the organic conversion. Planning remained central to department activities, as did metrics of area and production of crops. These plans gave prominence to the supply by the state of organic inputs, albeit that the conversion envisaged at least some of these inputs would be produced in Sikkim, or even on farms themselves, with equipment supplied by the state. And Dorjee Wangyal's reservations over the notion of 'mess' in organic farming speak to a prioritisation of agricultural order very much in keeping with the green revolution. Any notion of a Sikkim 'organic by default', then, must be countered with the de facto role of the state in effecting the conversion and constructing Sikkim as an 'organic state'.

The forms taken by the work of the organic conversion followed neither the template of the statist green revolution, nor an absence of a role for the state which might be suggested by the notion of a Sikkim 'organic by default'. Notably, the conversion introduced forms of governmentality that were novel (to Sikkim, at least) and much more in keeping with the New Public Management (see Introduction) and audit culture (Strathern 2000). Such forms included the projectized nature of much of the work of the conversion. Much of the work of the conversion took the form of discrete projects, or 'schemes', funded by, and elaborated in conjunction with, the Ministry of Agriculture of the central government. Paradoxically, then, the Indian state retained as much control over the construction of Sikkim as an 'organic state' as it had over efforts to prosecute the green revolution. The contracting of much of this work, and particularly of the certification of land and produce, to private entities and non-governmental organisations represented a significant, though indirect, expansion of the reach of the state in terms of its (indirectly contracted and non-permanent) payroll.

The state has historically played a central role in the construction of ethnicity in Sikkim, in ways that have structured the department and the conversion. This includes in particular the constitution of Bhutia and Lepcha ethnicities as ‘indigenous’ and the ascription, particularly, to the latter, of the role of ‘forest cultivators’. The colonial era move to increase revenues by encouraging the settlement of ‘Nepali’ farmers led to the agglomeration of a number of distinct caste-and ethnicity- based groups into one category, largely defined residually vis à vis those of Bhutia and Lepcha. Here, Gupta’s (1998) warning of the dangers of attempting to isolate an ‘indigenous’ technology applies also to the indigeneity of peoples. State-drawn distinctions between categories of persons by caste, ethnicity and indigeneity, in both colonial and post-independence eras, have tended to result in the reification of these categories. Perhaps most notably, the centrality of the notion of affirmative action to the constitutional basis of independent India, in an effort to include historically disadvantaged groups in the state’s developmentalist agenda, has tended to follow and reinforce such categories. As Chettri (2015) and others (Shneiderman 2015; Vandenhelsken 2014) have argued, the definition at state (ie Sikkim) level of ‘scheduled castes’, ‘scheduled tribes’ and ‘other backward classes’, and the incorporation of most previously recognised groups into this framework has encouraged mobilisation on the basis of these groups in an effort to access state resources, reserved employment and political representation.

Department activities also often appeared to be conceived with inherent though implicit assumptions over which groups would be involved with them. One official shared with me his own theory concerning what he referred to as ‘land-race’, which proposed that different ethnic groups were suited to the cultivation of particular crops in particular agro-ecological zones. Another, on a visit to a Lepcha community association which jointly rented a one hectare plot of land for the cultivation of vegetables, introduced the group as a ‘primitive’ people. In general, a marked majority of farmers with whom I met when visiting department activities belonged to ‘Nepali’ groups. Notwithstanding these examples, officials rarely explicitly referred to caste and ethnic difference, particularly in the formal settings of their workplaces. Here, I believe, they articulated an emphatic espousal of the founding constitutional principles of the Indian state, with its emphasis on secularism and anticomunalism. Even oblique questions related to the possibility that some participants

in department activities might show relative disadvantage compared to others usually elicited a response of “There are no tribes here; we are all one.” This response, as they made clear, was equally valid for the treatment of officials themselves within the department as it was for that of the farmers their work served. In Sikkim in general, the politically fraught question of migration into Sikkim from Nepal and other Indian states tended to be couched in the similarly neutral terms of the state-defined legal category of the ‘Sikkim subject’. Citizens possessing this status, due to their families having settled in Sikkim prior to accession, enjoyed preferential civic rights²⁸, including that to buy property and an exemption from income tax. The most senior positions in the departmental hierarchy were disproportionately occupied by Bhutia officers, but this was most likely a function of the regular progression of cohorts of officials up the ranks. In the years before and immediately following accession, recruitment to junior posts, and opportunities for state-sponsored higher study were disproportionately offered to candidates of Bhutia and, to a lesser extent, Lepcha origin. These were the officials who were reaching retirement age during my field research, and so were the most senior. The majority of posts at the level of Deputy Director and below were held by officials of ‘Nepali’ origin.

Below is a summary description of the backgrounds of the principal department officials who feature most prominently in the ethnographic examples in this dissertation.

Bim Bahadur Poudyel was a Village Level Worker, the second lowest grade of technical staff in the departmental structure. He had grown up in the village of Tuksum and was responsible for overseeing the department’s activities in the gram panchayat unit of which that village formed one of three wards. The majority of Tuksum’s inhabitants were of Bahun-Chettri origin²⁹. As he recounted his childhood, his family was poor and he had been forced to drop out of secondary school to support his family after his father had died, but had attained a junior job with the department through a relationship with a local politician. He lacked the university education that would have been necessary to apply for statewide-recruited ‘gazetted’ officer posts. During the time that I knew Bim Bahadur, his regular work for the department was increasingly supplemented, and interspersed, with

²⁸ Though in practice, as Mélanie Vandenhelsken (Vandenhelsken 2021) observes, proof of settled status at accession relied on a longer period of permanence in Sikkim prior to accession.

²⁹ One of the principle caste-based groups generally held to make up the category of ‘Nepali’.

private contracts for a company contracted to the department for the construction of polytunnels. This took place in another district from that in which he worked.

AK Shreshtha was a senior officer often given responsibility for representing the department in national and international fora and for the visits of guests from outside the state wanting to observe the conversion, of which he was a strong advocate. He had studied in an Indian agricultural university. Of Newar³⁰ heritage, his home was near the small town of Pollotar, about an hour's drive from Gangtok, from where he commuted daily.

Dorjee Wangyal Bhutia was a senior officer who had grown up in a village distant from Gangtok, where his father had been a teacher and small landowner. He had been educated in an Indian agricultural university. While of Bhutia heritage, he voiced a strong dislike for ethnicity- or caste-based politics and enjoyed close relations with several ruling party politicians.

Sonam Gyatso Bhutia was an ex-officer who had retired from a position as Joint Director several years earlier. He had been educated in an Indian agricultural university outside of Sikkim. Over the course of his career, had had had responsibility for a government farm and for a subdivision (the principal unit into which the state was divided for the purpose of department activities). He was descended from a Bhutia landowning family, some of whose land the family had donated to the state shortly after accession, for the establishment of a government farm. He had retired to his home village of Tsongchu, where he ran the family farm and a homestay.

Pema Wangchuk Bhutia was a senior officer who retired during the period of my field research. He retired to the family farm at Tarigang, where he ran a homestay and employed several workers to cultivate the ten hectare farm. While he was working, he had stayed in a flat which his family owned during the week and spent his weekends in Tarigang.

³⁰ The other major caste-based group included in the category of 'Nepali'.

Pratap Pokhrel was a Field Officer in a service provider company whose main responsibility was for the regular certification of farmers' land. Of Bahun-Chettri heritage, he had been a teacher prior to being recruited by the service provider.

Chandra Lal Khadka was a Village Level Worker, the second-lowest level of technical staff in the department. He was responsible for overseeing department activities in three populous wards around the town of Phamley. Of Bahun-Chettri ethnicity, Chandra Lal also lived in his working area of Phamley and had studied agriculture at a private college in Sikkim.

Dinesh Koirala was the Deputy Director at Shermathang. As such, he was responsible for supervising department activities in the subdivision in which Bim Bahadur Poudyel worked and was Bim Bahadur's direct superior. He was of Bahun-Chettri origin and lived in a village around twenty minutes' drive from the sub-divisional office in Shermathang town, where his family also owned a small farm.

Organic Sikkim: in search of a place in the world

The biodiversity conference, with its substantial involvement of leaders from the Indian and global organic movements and its emphasis on positioning Sikkim as a “beacon to the world,” was not an isolated episode in the day-to-day work of the department. A number of such internationally-focused ‘programmes’ were arranged during my time with the department. These included the International Biodiversity conference in Dehradun, Uttarakhand, in October 2018 (referred to above), and the Biofach Organic Fair in Delhi, under the auspices of IFOAM, later the same month. Both required substantial logistical operations to gather and transport fresh Sikkim produce across several states for exhibit, as well as the setting-up of stalls and the production of literature and publications for distribution. Even internal department ‘programmes’, such as staff training events and community meetings, would often be accompanied by a photographer, either hired by the department or from a local newspaper, and would be covered in the Sikkim media the following day. The organisation of these ‘programmes’ consumed a sizeable proportion of officials' time and effort. I argue in Chapter Three that these set-piece events did not

constitute aberrations from a mundane bureaucratic ‘routine’ of standardised processes, meetings, and the preparation and circulation of documents. Rather, they represented a significant facet of the bureaucratic everyday in the department. I wish to argue here that these ‘programmes’ were part of a marked outward-facing quality which pervaded the organic conversion. This outward-facing quality was to some extent a result of factors inherent in the model of the global organic movement. The emphasis on marketing illustrates the centrality within this model of convincing consumers, at a physical remove from producers, of the merits of the produce (Guthman 2004). That on certification demonstrates the work required from producers and third party authorities to engender this trust (Seshia Galvin 2021). And the global organic movement, being headquartered primarily in Europe and North America, and, to a lesser extent, in metropolitan India, necessitated officials’ engagement with and orientation towards these milieus. But this begs a question as to why Sikkim’s leaders chose to pursue the organic model in the first place. It could be that they saw it as the most practical way of combining their goals of environmental preservation and economic advancement. But I argue that this outward-facing quality has clear historical parallels in the preoccupation of Sikkim’s leaders, across its different constitutional eras, with the polity’s positioning vis-à-vis regional and global powers. Sikkim’s historic soteriological promise, of sanctuary from the world and redemption to it, was a key guarantor of this positioning, and of the legitimacy of its leaders. Post-accession, as Sonam Gyatso wryly observed, the focus of this positioning has swung firmly to the South, to wider India, but it has been no less of an imperative for Sikkim’s leaders. The need to show a fiscal contribution to the union, in return for the expense its maintenance incurs (though the latter is largely a function of India’s geostrategic concerns) had led to the impetus for hydel development. But the organic conversion and the linked priority of (eco-)tourist development can be seen as a present-day embodiment of Sikkim’s positioning as guardian of a moral order. In this reading, Sikkim preserves ‘traditional’ produce and agricultural techniques and offers them back to India and the world in the form of ‘healthy’ or ‘tasty’ food and a paragon of the protection of the environment, in a time of environmental crisis.

As with Sikkim’s past positioning as beyul, which centred the legitimacy of prophecies and the interpretation of terma (Mullard 2011), the present-day organic soteriology relies on the rubric of authenticity. The presentation of the organic conversion emphasises

faithfulness to ‘tradition’ and to notions of the indigenous, in the form of native and naturalised crop varieties, ‘basteeko’ produce, and to associations between these and ‘indigenous’ peoples (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009). Both claims of authenticity for Sikkim’s history, and those made for Organic Sikkim, though, invite critique in comparable terms, through the rubric of authenticity. Hence, Mullard critiques the monarchy’s narrative of Sikkim’s history through more ‘authentic’ contemporary sources that highlight contingency, conflict and contested versions of ethnicity and state legitimacy in the establishment of the monarchy. Similarly, those sceptical of the organic conversion, both within and outside the department, used terms such as ‘sham’ and ‘fake’. Where the department and state government claimed Sikkim to be “one hundred per-cent organic,” the conversion’s critics asserted that artificial inputs crossed the border in spite of the official ban on them, and pointed to instances of land being certified organic without inspection visits (see Chapter Four). Even those seemingly benefitting from the infrastructure and language of the organic conversion, such as the honey vendor, were not beyond the playful ironising of them.

The organic conversion can be seen in part as an effort to locate Sikkim’s place as a present-day state within the Indian union. As such, officials reflect uneasy notions of statehood with a rejection of the green revolution, couched as it was in monolithic notions of the Indian developmental state. But at the same time, they aspire to demonstrate the value of an ‘organic Sikkim’ within that union, as a refuge from the world and as a sanctuary to it, as well as as an economic contributor to the union. Meanwhile, they strive to achieve this role for Sikkim through the bureaucratic technologies familiar to them from their formation in the green revolution. In the following chapters, I will examine more closely the ways in which such ironies play out in the ‘work’, often conceptualised, either in deed or in the breach, as ‘hard work’, of the farmers and officials with whom hopes for and organic Sikkim were invested.

Chapter 2: cultivating the farmer

I appeal to all my hardworking farmers, educated and uneducated youths with full enthusiasm, dedicated officials and my colleagues in the legislature and cabinet serving the people of Sikkim to accept this challenge for our long term benefit and make Sikkim a leader in the area of organic farming and a source of inspiration not only for our country but for the entire world.

Pawan Kumar Chamling (Government of Sikkim n.d.a:8).

The above excerpt again highlights the aspiration that politicians and officials harboured for Sikkim's organic conversion to position the state as a 'beacon', or as a "source of inspiration not only for our country but for the entire world." The excerpt is taken from an "appeal" (Government of Sikkim n.d.a) made in a speech by the Chief Minister to the state legislative assembly in 2010 while launching the Sikkim Organic Mission. The categories of person to which the Chief Minister addresses his appeal here were also prominent in officials' conceptions of the organic conversion, in particular, 'hardworking farmers', 'educated and uneducated youths', and 'dedicated officials' themselves. The adjectives used by the Chief Minister to qualify these categories are also indicative of the ways in which officials conceptualised the conversion. In this chapter, I will explore the first of these categories. I argue that officials invested much of their aspirations for the organic conversion in the person of the farmer in two distinct ways. Firstly, officials positioned the idealised person of the farmer, and particularly of the bureaucratic category of the 'progressive farmer', as an exemplar and personification of the conversion. Central to this personification was the quality of 'hard work'. Secondly, the more generalised category of the farmer was the object of bureaucratic process which officials instrumentalised in attempts to demonstrate the success of the conversion within the context of the criticism levelled at it.

The hardworking farmer

“As we say, there are four things required for farming: hal, bal, mal and jhal.” Angden Bhutia’s speech rose to a rhetorical crescendo as he addressed the gathering of around fifty farmers and a number of horticulture department officials. The meeting was an “awareness programme on organic farming,” a title inscribed on a large white banner behind the speaker, and had been arranged in Rungkup ward, Lungtok gram panchayat unit³¹. “Hal” referred to traction for ploughing, usually provided by draft animals³²; “mal” to animal manure, an input which had become precious (and scarce) in Sikkim in the absence of artificial fertilizers; “jhal” referred to water, another often critically scarce input. ‘Bal’ is a colloquial term used to indicate the strength, effort or hard work of the farmer in the field. It was on this last element that Angden Bhutia brought his speech to focus. “We can provide irrigation; we can provide transport, but to produce enough vegetables for the cities, you will have to supply the hard work [bal].” This section examines how the officials responsible for the conversion constructed a quite specific notion of the farmer, and how this notion was inherently associated with that of hard work.

Ram Kumar and Suriya Dhakal were busy weeding around a large bed of coriander seedlings when we came upon them at around 8am. Bim Bahadur Poudyel, the Village Level Worker, had offered to take me on a tour of Tuksum, introducing me to some of the farmers that lived there. I had originally arrived at 6:30am at the house of Bim Bahadur’s cousin Ashish, who had planned to harvest his crop of potatoes. A heavy rain had fallen since around midnight and thick cloud obscured the high, forested crest of the hill behind this side of Tuksum, and the broad, hilly landscape to the South that could usually be seen from here. The only view was of the small valley bottom, formed of several gently terraced fields, the houses built facing one another on the surrounding slope, and the edge of the woods behind them, stretching up the hill into the mist. I had to leave the path at several points to avoid large puddles, but nevertheless became bogged down in the sodden field, and arrived on the terrace below Ashish’s house with my feet soaked and muddy. Finding no-one up at Ashish’s house, I crossed the valley to Bim Bahadur’s house. Bim Bahadur,

³¹ A ward is the lowest level of territorial administration in India. A gram panchayat unit (GPU) is the second lowest.

³² The word ‘hal’ also refers to a unit of area equivalent to that which a bullock can plough in one day.

who would normally have long-since departed for the forest to cut grass for his brother's cattle, was also still in his bedroom, but came out when he heard me. "He will still be sleeping," Bim Bahadur said of his cousin. "They won't dig the potatoes today; it's too hard with the rain." Instead, Bim Bahadur prepared tea and suji (semolina) porridge for us both. "When it's cold and rainy, you need suji! You can't get up early when it rains." After a leisurely breakfast we walked down the valley, crossed the road, and continued on a path descending the valley towards Ram Kumar's house, stopping for more tea at the house of Ram Kumar's brother on the way.

Ram Kumar and Suriya, by contrast, had been working since 6am, according to Bim Bahadur. Suriya wore a clear plastic sack over her clothes against the rain, one side cut open and a corner peaked over her head. Ram Kumar, her husband, was sweating in a T-shirt, shorts and gumboots. They had started that morning from Nesam, an hour away via a steep footpath. The land consisted of about five hectares, around an acre of which was dedicated to intensive vegetable cultivation. The rest was lightly forested hillside which provided fodder for Ram Kumar and Suriya's two cows. It had belonged to Ram Kumar's father and had been the family home until, during Ram Kumar's childhood, his father had bought a further three hectares of land and built a house in Nesam. At the time the road ended at Nesam, and the family had moved in order to be able to sell their produce more easily, and for the children to be near to the school there. In around 2000, the road was extended through Tuksum, and Ram Kumar had taken over the cultivation of the land here, while a younger brother and sister-in-law were responsible for most of the work in Nesam. Next to the vegetable plots was a cowshed, which housed two cows and a calf, a polytunnel, and a house under construction, with the ground floor bare brick and concrete and an upper level underway. They walked up from Nesam every day to tend the field and the cows while the house was under construction. Once the house was complete, they planned to move to Tuksum, to save this walk. Aside from the plot of coriander (Nep: dhania) they were weeding, the vegetable garden included patches of radish (Nep: mula), broad-leaved mustard (Nep: rai), cauliflower (Nep: phulkobi) and cabbage (Nep: bandakobi). It was late April and these crops were between two weeks and a month from harvest. "Ram Kumar Bhai is one of our hardest working farmers," Bim Bahadur told me. "He is the first this year to produce a cauliflower crop, and he made plenty of money. Many people in Tuksum don't want to go for farming these days." He pointed his chin up

the hill towards the house of Ram Kumar's brother, who, Bim Bahadur said, was too busy driving the only taxi in the village to cultivate his land, and to the still quiet house of his cousin, Ashish. "Nowadays, people want a government job, or they go for factory duty."

Judging by their early rising habits, the distance they travelled to work their field, and their persistence in doing so through adverse weather, Bim Bahadur's characterisation of Ram Kumar and Suriya as "hardworking" would appear to have been merited. In subsequent visits, I could almost always count on finding one or both of them working when I visited during the day. This was in contrast, as Bim Bahadur observes, to other Tuksum residents, who would as often as not be away on other business. The person of the "hardworking farmer" invoked by the Chief Minister was also one commonly used by officials. I will return to the ways in which officials employed the notion of hard work, but the other half of this phrase also carried a very specific significance for officials. Nepali terms for categories of person related to farming include 'kisan', a word usually translated as 'farmer', and which often carries the implication of a person cultivating land which she herself owns. A less formal term is 'khetipati', which could be translated both as 'farmer' and 'field hand', the latter sense implying a labourer working on land belonging to others. However, Bim Bahadur and his colleagues rarely used these Nepali terms when speaking of the people. Instead, they almost exclusively used the English word 'farmer', even when speaking in Nepali (though the conversation above was in English).

The speech by Angden Bhutia, which I recount briefly above, took place around two weeks before the ban on import of non-organically grown vegetables to the state was due to take effect. It was as part of a 'field visit' by a number of headquarters-based officials to two villages. In attendance were members of two local community associations that supported farming activities, the gram panchayat³³ and a contingent of around ten local and state horticulture and agriculture department officials. The latter included Angden Bhutia, a Joint Director, and Pema Wangdi (PW) Bhutia, a senior department officer, both based in the departmental headquarters in Gangtok. Angden Bhutia's speech, in Nepali, with the mixture of English and occasional Hindi phrases that were characteristic of department officials, opened the meeting, by way of introduction. He placed the meeting firmly in the

³³ A gram panchayat is the elected administrative council of a GPU.

context of the impending vegetable ban. “When the ban begins, our farmers will need to increase production, in order to satisfy the market,” he began, using the English words “farmers” and “market”. “But you will also receive higher prices for your produce.” Angden Bhutia thus positioned the farmer as key to the success of the government-conceived vegetable ban and its plans for the organic conversion more broadly.

The promise, and the problem, of the farmer

Timothy Mitchell (2002), argues that, under the colonial and Nasserist regimes in Egypt between the 1930s and the 1950s, the category of the fellah, or peasant, was both problematised and instrumentalised in the service of economic development. Governmental and international experts in economic development came to reify *the* national economy as an object of their expertise (following JM Keynes’s highly influential study of *the* Indian economy), and to espouse the development of agricultural exports as one of the priority strategies for its growth. From this perspective, the fellah’s traditional patterns of land use and tenure, and his propensity to contract malaria, came to be identified as the key to economic development. I suggest that the use of the English term “farmer” in Angden Bhutia’s speech, otherwise mostly in Nepali, represents a comparable reification and instrumentalisation. I would not over-emphasise its exoticism: such speeches made frequent use of English terms, many of which were widely understood even by non-English speakers. Nonetheless, such shifts occurred frequently in similar speeches and in departmental literature, and when they did, the word in question almost always had a specific professional significance for officials. As Angden Bhutia and his colleagues use it, I understand the term ‘farmer’ to go beyond designating an occupation or a social group to indicating a professional relationship between farmers and the department: ‘the farmer’ is employed as a bureaucratic category and as a means to fulfil government policy objectives. Furthermore, the use of the phrase “our farmers” (Nep: hamro farmers hara), while it also had the effect of emphasising fellowship and diminishing social distinctions between farmers and officials, hints at a proprietorial sense in which officials saw farmers principally as instruments in the project of the organic conversion. Furthermore, the category of the farmer was not unique to the organic conversion, but, officials told me, was already present

in the pre-conversion era, where it was deployed in schemes consistent with the aims of the green revolution.

The farmer's status as bureaucratic category is more clearly apparent still in the official documentation of the conversion and the 'schemes' which structured and resourced it. The Mission Organic Value Chain Development North Eastern Region (MOVCD-NER) was a prominent scheme, financed by the central agriculture ministry, which aimed to develop marketing and agricultural processing infrastructure for organic produce in Sikkim and seven other northeastern states. An "impact study" produced for it gave the following assessment of the context of farming in the Northeast:

Despite of these distinct advantages, [the northeastern region] is constrained by low productivity, high cost of cultivation and increasing proportion of small and marginal farmers trapped in the traditional low output agriculture practices which lead to economically unviable production systems.

(Reddy 2017:9)

Here, in a close recapitulation of the logic critiqued by Mitchell (2002), we see the farmer as a key element in a problematic defined by productivity and the (agricultural) economy. A white paper produced by the horticulture department (Government of Sikkim 2018) provides an overview of horticulture in Sikkim and the department's official assessment of the progress of the organic conversion at that time. A section of this paper, entitled "Special initiatives for vegetable development programmes" describes a strategy of organising farmers into multiply tiered groups under a scheme financed by the central agriculture ministry with the Hindi title Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojna (National Agriculture Development Scheme). The grouping of farmers had the ostensive purpose of meeting "the demand for vegetables in the rapidly increasing populations of urban areas of Gangtok and Namchi³⁴"), through the establishment of "clusters" of farmers specialising in specific, high-demand crops. According to the paper, this enabled the department to deliver training to farmers in the production of specific vegetables and the development of "collection centres/marketing aggregators": physical market and transport facilities provided by the department which would enable farmers to sell their combined produce more easily in the towns. The groups included "farmers' interest groups" at a local level,

³⁴ The principal town of the district of South Sikkim.

which were federated into “farmers’ producer organisations” (FPOs). The white paper details that “through this programme, 43 villages have been included with 1069 farmers under one Farmers Producer Organisation (FPO) and 92 Farmers Interest Groups (FIG) in and around Gangtok under East District,” while “around Namchi, 20 villages have been included with 807 farmers under one FPO and 67 Farmers Interest Groups” (Government of Sikkim 2018:38-39).

‘Farmers’, then, were a well-established bureaucratic category, one might even say a currency, in the framework of central government-funded schemes on which the department depended to resource the conversion. But, as shown by the Chief Minister’s, Bim Bahadur’s and his colleagues’ use variants of the adjective ‘hardworking’, the category very often embodied very specific, morally-charged qualities. Firstly, as we have seen, the farmer was ‘hardworking’. Secondly, he was male. As with Bim Bahadur’s praise for Ram Kumar, whose wife Surya generally worked their land alongside him, it was the male household head in a family who generally received official recognition as the ‘farmer’. Female-headed households were included in the circle that officials routinely referred to as ‘farmers’, and with whom they had most contact, and where, as was often the case, the male head of a household was mainly occupied with formal or other employment, and a woman undertook the bulk of farming work, her name would often be officially listed as the ‘farmer’. However, such households were usually in the minority. In a visit to Ram Kumar and Surya’s land a few months after the one I describe above, the first floor of the new house had been completed, and the couple had occupied the house with their eldest son. Bim Bahadur informed me that Ram Kumar had been awarded the “Chief Minister’s farming award” and had travelled to Gangtok to receive it, while Surya was busy preparing a plot for planting cabbages. The archetype of the ‘hardworking farmer’ then, was generally understood to be male. Thirdly, as with Ram Kumar, the farmer usually owned his land, which was worked by himself and his family. For official purposes, such as the records of crops grown, their area and quantity, and when lists were prepared for the provision of agricultural inputs, one ‘farmer’ was generally registered per household or landholding, and this was most often the person recognised as the male head of the household.

As in Angden Bhutia’s speech, officials deployed the figure of the hardworking farmer in an instructive capacity, in what seemed an attempt to encourage other farmers towards

hard work. This exemplary quality of hardworking farmers was epitomised in the designation of the ‘progressive farmer’. Officials described progressive farmers as in the vanguard of the organic conversion, selected on the basis of farming expertise, a willingness to adopt the organic techniques prescribed by the department, and a commitment to farming. In return, officials said, progressive farmers were prioritised for the receipt of departmental services, including the provision of inputs, and training and marketing support. Like the notion of the ‘farmer’ as designated by the English term, the category of the ‘progressive farmer’ also predated the organic conversion, constituting one of the central strategies adopted by the Indian government (and others) for the adoption of new technology and the rationalisation of production (Blair 1980; Leaf 1980). Richa Kumar (2016) argues that an equivalent designation adopted by agriculture officials in Madhya Pradesh was used by upper caste farmers to justify their claims to higher productivity. The designation of progressive farmers would thus have been a strategy with which Sikkim’s agriculture and horticulture department officers would have been familiar. Departmental literature cites progressive farmers involved in the adoption of organic technologies and new crops, such as “establishing [...] model kiwi fruit orchards” (Government of Sikkim 2018: 36). Officials also very often singled out their commitment and capacity for ‘hard work’. People designated progressive farmers almost always enjoyed a particularly close relationship with departmental officials. While officials talked of progressive farmers as a category apart from farmers more broadly, distinguished by their heightened commitment, adeptness and amenability to new farming technologies, in practice, there was a less clear distinction. On some occasions and for some purposes, officials would refer to all farmers in a meeting as ‘progressive farmers’.

The “awareness programme on organic farming” in Lungtok, which I recount above, was preceded by a visit to the house and fields of a farmer and community association member named Prem Pradhan. Prem Bhai³⁵, as he was referred to by the officials and his neighbours, was around 30 years old and was introduced by officials present as a “progressive farmer”. PW Bhutia, the most senior officer present, also emphasised that Prem Bhai was “one hundred per cent dependent on farming”. He and Angden Bhutia, the

³⁵ ‘Bhai’ (Nep) is a respectful term of address usually used to refer to people younger than oneself.

Joint Director, led the group of about twenty people, including all the headquarters-based and local officials, and several members of the local community associations, down a steep path from the road to Prem Bhai's roughly two hectares of land. A cameraman, brought along from Gangtok, documented the tour for the Department, taking photos and video of the officials touring the fields. Angden Bhutia was clearly familiar with Prem Bhai's fields and PW Bhutia, the most senior officer present, was also acquainted with Prem Bhai from previous meetings. Prem Bhai farmed three gently sloping fields, totalling roughly two hectares of land, on a shallow terrace which broke the otherwise steep valley side. Prem Bhai was around 30 and, according to PW Bhutia, was "one of our hardest working farmers. He farms the whole area alone, with his wife." The largest field, of about one hectare in area, was devoted to cherry pepper (Nep: dalle khursani), in neat rows with black polythene mulching sheets running the width of the field along each row, intercropped with young mandarin orange trees (Nep: suntala) and maturing radishes (Nep: mula). Three rows of sprinkler heads stretched along the field, connected by black irrigation hose, equipment which PW Bhutia informed me had been supplied by the department. In the two smaller fields grew cabbages, radishes and broad-leafed mustard, intended for both market and for Prem Bhai's household consumption. In response to a question from PW Bhutia, Prem Bhai informed us that the recent harvest of cherry pepper had been two tonnes, but that it had been reduced by crop damage due to hail and a lack of water for the irrigation system. Later, in the community meeting, after his enjoinder to hard work as one of the four elements of farming, Angden Bhutia's speech continued. As they would know, he reminded the gathering, the ban on 'inorganic' vegetables ('inorganic saag sabzi') would begin on the 31st March. Once this happened, farmers would need to increase their production, but they will also receive better prices for their produce. "From this subdivision, we will have to collect 400 metric tonnes of vegetables! How is this possible?" he asked, rhetorically. "It will only be possible through your efforts [bal], the efforts of people like Prem Bhai. On one hectare, Prem Bhai is able to produce two tonnes of cherry pepper. If all farmers can do this, we can supply Gangtok; supply India." The speech concluded: "We will keep track of which GPUs, which wards, bring how much produce."



Figure 16: Well-tended fields of the type Angden Bbutia praised.

Despite the fact that he was married and had a young daughter, Prem Bhai's age put him in the category of 'youth', one at which the organic conversion was explicitly targeted. As shown in the Chief Minister's speech, the architects of Sikkim's organic conversion saw it as a response to two linked problems: the decline of farming and the potential, and moral hazard, posed by young men. For them, a highly educated but underemployed youth was increasingly deserting a farming sector characterised by low productivity in search of higher income earning opportunities in the expanding private sector or in 'government jobs'. Craig Jeffrey (2007) explores the phenomenon of 'timepass' in the lives of young Indian men (as with farmers, 'youths' are often, though not exclusively, assumed in social and political discourse to be male). The term describes lives characterised by waiting and of idle conversation, often in public spaces, which characterises much of the lives of young Indian men, against a background of high unemployment. As such, in Indian social and political discourse, 'youth' is a category that has been singled out as both a problematic (idleness, unemployment) and a promise of untapped potential.

In this respect it bears comparison with that of farmers in Sikkim and with the Egyptian fellah (Mitchell 2002). Against such a background, Sikkim's organic conversion promised to reverse the decline in farming. Officials enjoined farmers, and particularly educated youth, to take an innovative, entrepreneurial approach to the occupation and so realise the income gains that could be accessed through the 'premium price' of organic produce sold

in wider India and internationally. Thus, the conversion can be seen as a moral campaign simultaneously to reverse the decline of farming, restoring its dignity and its profit, and to address, through the means of hard work, the hazard posed by idle youth.

In these respects, Angden Bhutia's enjoinder to farmers and youth to 'hard work' resembles aspects of Anand Pandian's (2009) study of the way in which colonial and post-colonial authorities have promoted the virtue of 'toil' to Piramalai Kallars in Tamil Nadu.

According to Pandian (2009), the notion of toil was first mobilised as a virtue for didactic purposes by the colonial authorities in their attempts to curb what they perceived as the 'savage' tendencies of the resettled 'robber caste' of the Kallars. It is not only in Sikkim that the personification of the farmer takes on a moral tone in this way. Julie Guthman (2004) argues that the archetype proffered by the Californian organic movement in its early days was that of the 'Yeoman farmer', who was also defined by the virtuous confluence of private land ownership and the hard-working of that land, a figure heavily influenced by the philosophy of John Locke. The figure of the strong, independent and virtuous yeoman farmer, according to Guthman, figured prominently in the marketing of the Californian organic movement, despite the preponderance in that industry of large, mechanised farms, agricultural finance and migrant labour.

If officials allocated an exemplary role to farmers, farmers themselves did not accept this role in as passive and unchallenging a manner as the Soviet portrayal of Stakhanov would suggest (Siegelbaum 1988). Shortly after Ram Kumar received his farming award from the Chief Minister, I again visited him. He spoke proudly of the award and the ceremony in which it was bestowed. His pea crop was nearing harvest, and he said it would be good. But, without Bim Bahadur, the Village Level Worker, present, he was scathing of the support he received from the department. "I have two varieties of peas. Government brings these seeds from outside Sikkim. They don't do well here. They're too sweet and people don't like them in the market. This one is local, from Sikkim. I bought them from the market. They're ready a little later but they have a longer season and they're less sweet." He explained that the pods of the local variety were more tightly packed with peas, meaning that a sack of peas in the pod contained four times the weight of peas, and so were more attractive to wholesalers. As he talked, his expression became increasingly disdainful.

Government gives very bad seed. These are the ones from outside Sikkim [commercially produced], so the quality is OK, but government seed from Sikkim is very bad quality. It comes late, so it's useless. Government people always lecture us, plant this, do that, but they don't know anything about farming [Nep: krishi].

Ram Kumar's opinion reflected that of many farmers, including 'progressive farmers' and others who had close relations with the department. Their attitude to the department's support was frequently to accept, but not to count on, it, making their own arrangements for the supply of inputs, and usually buying seed from the market. They often complained about the quality of government inputs and the timing of their supply.

Farming futures?

Even when they played the role of seemingly willing exemplars, farmers' relationship to farming could trouble the departmental narratives of a revival of the nobility and profit of farming. Chandra Lal Khadka's working area comprised of three wards around the town of Phamley, arranged up a steep, South-facing valley side: Middle Phamley, where his family home was located; Phamley Municipality; and Upper Phamley. We had started from his home in a shared taxi and started walking down the hill from Upper Phamley, stopping at the houses of the farmers with whom he worked most closely. Chandra Lal was a Village Level Worker, the second grade of technical officials in the agriculture department. We took a zigzag path down the valley side planning to arrive back at his house for a late lunch. Most of the farmers we visited he classed as 'progressive farmers'. It is instructive that over the course of the morning, we only stopped at the homes of six farmers. Most other households were known to Chandra Lal, but he said he didn't have too many interactions with them. Many people collected seed when the department was distributing, but "Mostly they have other work and haven't farmed seriously [Nep: Testo seriously farming gareko thienna]." When we reached Chandra Lal's house on the main road, we continued down the street a couple hundred metres, to that of his cousin, Pushpa Lal. The house was empty and shuttered, but we could hear chopping coming from the lower side of Pushpa Lal's land, which consisted of around two hectares stretching down the valley side. We found him building bamboo frames for a large plot of bitter gourd (Nep: karela) vines. Chandra Lal introduced his cousin as a progressive farmer. "He goes to the field at 5 am and returns

at sunset, every day,” he said. He was in his late 30s or early 40s, short but extremely muscular, and walked with a stoop, which became more evident as he carried a 50Kg sack of newly harvested potatoes up the hill to the house. As we sat in the courtyard drinking the tea he had made us, Pushpa Lal’s two sons arrived home from school. This was the first time, Pushpa Lal told us, he had tried growing karela in the off-season, taking advantage of Sikkim’s altitude to produce hot season vegetables late, when the price was high in plainland areas. It was late October and the price of karela was R40/Kg, but could be up to R120/Kg by the time they were ready. He farmed with his brother, who had gone to Phamley market to sell produce. They had inherited the land from their father, who had split it between them and two other brothers, but Pushpa Lal and his younger brother pooled their seven hal (0.7 Ha) of land so as to be able to grow more crops, and rented a further 6 hal (0.6 Ha).

Previously, we grew rice and maize but it didn’t provide a good income and I couldn’t feed my family; now we work more on the higher land, growing vegetables, and I can send the children to school, or to hospital, when they need to go. But it’s hard work. I don’t want my children to farm. It’s bad for your health. They’re doing well at school. This one wants to be a lawyer, and this one a teacher. I hope they’ll have a better life than I’ve had.

Pushpa Lal appeared proud of his achievements and his capacity for work, and clearly fit the criteria for a progressive farmer: ‘off-season’ production was one of the main strategies promoted by the horticulture department for realising the ‘premium price’ for Sikkim organic produce. But his wishes for his children’s futures, paralleled by their own hopes, indicate that the valuing of the principle of hard work comes up against the practical limits of the need for a livelihood and of the body’s capacity, particularly when set against the less demanding and more lucrative alternatives of state and private sector formal employment. Chandra Lal, while he lauds his cousin’s ability to work, and himself engages in farming, is recognised in the family as wealthier and more secure, thanks to his ‘government job’.

Consequently, and in keeping with the widespread diagnosis within the department of a ‘decline of farming’, the farmer, as a hardworking cultivator “one hundred per cent dependent on farming”, and enjoying the official support of the department, was the

exception rather than the rule. As I have discussed in the introduction and in Chapter One, farmers in Sikkim do not produce sufficient food to feed the state's population. The corollary is that fewer and fewer of the state's population are dependent on farming, in comparison to the pre-accession era, when the majority of households grew most of their own food. As Bim Bahadur observes, an increasing proportion of the state's workforce was employed outside of agriculture, by the state or in factories, many in the pharmaceutical sector, which the state government had offered a generous tax regime in an effort to increase employment. While almost all rural households still grew some crops, this was increasingly a supplementary activity, and a subsidiary one to the main (usually male) earner's formal sector employment. It was increasingly limited to a small kitchen garden (Nep: bari), situated next to the house, whereas the cultivation of the fields (Nep: khet) was either left to other household members, to tenant farmers, or not undertaken at all, with fields being left fallow.

In the eyes of officials in the examples above, the farmer, and particularly the progressive farmer, played the role of exemplar for the organic conversion. For officials, this role went beyond the demonstration and dissemination of novel technologies and extended to the qualities that officials deemed fundamental to the conversion. In its didactic nature and its official espousal of a moral archetype, this kind of exemplarity recalls Pandian's (2009) account of the relationship between the Piramalai Kallars and the virtue of the quality Pandian terms 'toil'. Originally, according to Pandian, the notion of agricultural toil was prescribed by colonial authorities as a remedy for what they viewed as the lawless tendencies of members of a 'robber caste', who were to be encouraged to take up settled agriculture. In Sikkim's organic conversion, the exemplar of the progressive farmer encouraged qualities of both hard work and the entrepreneurial seeking of 'premium price', primarily through the technologies and mechanisms prescribed by the department itself. It also valorised a pure and absolutist relationship to farming, lauding 'one hundred per-cent dependence' on farming as a marker of moral commitment and a rejection of the tainted, though higher income, alternatives of a 'government job' or private sector employment, as well as of a proprietorial and obedient relationship to the department itself. At its most reductive, the enjoinder of Angden Bhutia to farmers calls to mind the Stakhanovite movement of the 1930s Soviet Union, where hard work and superhuman feats of productivity, notably of the movement's namesake, the miner Alexei Stakhanov,

were positioned by officials as exemplary (Siegelbaum 1988). Beyond this didactic role though, I suggest the exemplar of the progressive farmer was also of essential symbolic value to officials in their attempts to show success for the organic conversion, to their superiors and to the public, in a climate where the department bore the brunt of critique of the conversion. As such, the farmer served as the personification of the values of the conversion, not only in order to influence other farmers and prospective farmers, but to represent the conversion to the world.

The bureaucracy of farming

By contrast to the specific positioning of progressive farmers as a focus for aspirations of state food self-sufficiency and exports, the broader and impersonal category of ‘farmers’ as a whole was charged with the hopes of officials in other ways. One morning, I accompanied Bim Bahadur on one of his regular visits to the subdivisional office in Shermathang in the car he used to travel around his working area, and owned himself. As we descend the steep road from his home in Tuksum, he informed me that we would attend a meeting on the topic of ‘area and production’, a phrase which at the time was obscure to me. When we had arrived at the office and sat drinking tea, Bim Bahadur’s Deputy Director, Dinesh Koirala, explained that the process of estimating ‘area and production’ was an annual exercise to produce projections for the entire subdivision of the area cultivated under the main crops over the coming year, and the tonnage of those crops expected to be harvested. These estimates were fed into district and national level projections, and so provided senior officials and politicians with an overall picture of Sikkim’s progress towards the aims the department had been set. The exercise also, more immediately, was intended to provide an estimate for the requirements for the government supply of agricultural inputs, particularly seed and ‘planting material’³⁶. All ‘fieldworkers’ (staff based outside of headquarters or subdivisional offices) in the subdivision had been called in to the office for the meeting.

³⁶ The umbrella term for seed and other means of propagation, such as seedlings grown from cuttings of existing plants.

There was no standard format for the area and production exercise distributed by the Department, so Dinesh had worked up a blank table himself and printed it out. For each GPU, this would detail the area under each of nine principle vegetable crops and the production of each of these crops (see figure 17) for each month of the Gregorian calendar, beginning in July, according to the government fiscal year. A separate table was to be prepared for each crop and for both rabi³⁷ and kharif seasons. However, Bim Bahadur objected to the format. He explained that senior officers had recently promoted the adoption of a ‘cluster approach’ for crop growing, whereby farmers in a given area would be encouraged to specialise in a particular crop, according to such factors as altitude, climate, soil type, water availability and slope aspect. This approach, it was held, would enable farmers to produce larger volumes of the crops in which they specialised, and enable department personnel to more effectively support them with technical advice, the provision of inputs and marketing infrastructure. Bim Bahadur suggested that, instead of the format being broken down by GPUs and wards, as has been done in the past, it should be structured by clusters. Dinesh agreed to adopt a cluster approach for the exercise, but some discussion ensued on which clusters to adopt, as this was the first time they had had to operationalise the cluster model on paper. Each fieldworker proposed clusters for their area. After around twenty minutes, a list of clusters was finalised, but it followed almost exactly the original list of GPUs and wards, with the exception that two wards were left out on the grounds that they did not constitute viable clusters of any one prioritised crop.

³⁷*Rabi* is the winter season, marked by cool, dry weather, lasting from November to February. Crops traditionally grown in this season include brassicas, carrots and peas. Kharif is the summer monsoon season, suited to crops requiring high rainfall, such as rice and gourd family vegetables. Off-season cultivation is the practice of growing during the summer season, at high altitudes (and consequently cool temperatures), vegetables normally grown at low altitudes in the winter season. It is undertaken as a strategy to increase farmer incomes by producing crops when prices are at their highest.

Figure 17: reproduction of a sample blank table used for one crop for one of either rabi or kharif season

TENTATIVE MONTHLY VEGETABLE AREA AND PRODUCTION

Crop:

Season: (Kharif/Rabi)

Sl No	GPU	Cluster	July		August		September		October		November		December		January		February		March		April		May		June	
			A*	P	A	P	A	P	A	P	A	P	A	P	A	P	A	P	A	P	A	P	A	P	A	P
	A**	1***																								
		2																								
		3																								
		4																								
		5																								
	B	1																								
		2																								
		3																								
		4																								
	C	1																								
		2																								

*A: Area; P: Production

** GPUs were listed by name

*** Clusters were listed according to the names of the wards, to which they corresponded exactly.

The group of fieldworkers moved to the meeting room, where they rearranged the chairs in a circle and began to discuss the area and production for each crop in turn. Bim Bahadur, at the centre, filled in a blank table for each crop with other fieldworkers feeding him the estimated figures for their area. This they did with varying degrees of authority. Some had their area estimates, in hectares, handwritten in their notebooks or on scraps of paper. Some claimed that they had arrived at these figures through discussion with farmers, others that they had based them on their knowledge of their working area. Others still seemed less prepared and appeared to base their figures on guesses. Bim Bahadur frequently challenged the estimates of other colleagues, either revising them upwards or downwards, according to his claimed familiarity with the areas, which was often based on acquaintance with individual farmers and their land. In all cases, Bim Bahadur and other fieldworkers proceeded by first agreeing the total area which would be devoted to a given crop, then dividing this figure equally across the months in which they expected it to be harvested. The monthly and total area figures were then converted into production figures using a multiplier of tonnage of production per hectare, itself derived from a similar table for the previous year. The less prepared fieldworkers, however, frequently worked backwards, discussing what would be a reasonable level of production and calculating the area from that. These discussions gave the impression that fieldworkers did not have a clear idea of how much area, or which fields in which farms, would be planted under which crops. A 'reasonable' level (my term) usually appeared to represent one that would be acceptable to Headquarters officers for a typical ward, rather than for the specific conditions in the ward (or, more correctly, cluster, though, as discussed above, the two were more or less synonymous) under discussion. The group began with kharif crops, which were then in the fields, and proceeded to rabi crops. As each crop table was completed in handwritten form, it was sent to Dinesh's room, where one of the fieldworkers, who possessed a degree in computer science, sat entering the figures into a Microsoft Word document, working out the totals on a calculator.

The exercise continued in this manner for most of the rest of the working day, but, as it proceeded, the atmosphere became less serious and less industrious as the task became repetitive. Generally, only one or two fieldworkers were engaged at a time, and the others

drifted in and out, buying snacks or going outside to smoke a cigarette. “There’s not much aubergine; just put 0.5 Ha, that will do;” “0.25 Ha? That’s a godown³⁸. Put 0.5 Ha.” At one point, the worker entering the data into the computer came back into the meeting room with a message from Dinesh: “why aren’t they listing figures for January and February?” Bim Bahadur told him that as all the areas were high altitude and there was no water in the winter season, almost no crops would be harvested. Most backed up this point of view, but another fieldworker pointed out that off-season chayote (Nep: iskus) coped well with water scarcity, and fruited in that season. The group agreed to include some production of chayote in the winter months.

As the others worked, Dinesh, in his room, explained to me how the figures were used by the department. He was adamant that he didn’t want to inflate the figures, despite pressure from senior officers to do so, and had told his colleagues to: “Just put in what they will realistically grow. Write what you produce, not according to targets.” He complained that “anyway, the centre³⁹ haven’t given enough seeds so this will limit production.” He said that he wanted the production estimates to take this into account, in other words, for “the centre” to be forced to acknowledge the effects of its shortcomings on the regions’ ability to fulfil its demands for increased production: “senior people want to increase the total for money-making,” he said, implying that seed procurement from commercial suppliers affords an opportunity to take cuts on contracts; the larger the order, the larger the cut.

On the drive back to Bim Bahadur’s house, I asked him why he took such a lead role in the area and production process, despite other, sometimes higher ranking, colleagues being involved.

I know all the areas. I previously worked in Timling and I also worked in Kolatar for three months on deputation. I know the farmers, I know the farms [my colleagues] are talking about, so I know what is possible. I covered every one. They don’t know the farmers, some of them rarely make field visits.⁴⁰

³⁸A storage shed or warehouse, the implication being that such a small area is not worth counting.

³⁹ Department headquarters.

⁴⁰ Conversation in Nepali.

Bim Bahadur's intimate knowledge of farms and farmers positioned him here as a central source of authority within his subdivision team, despite his formal rank being among the most junior present. His privileging of 'field' knowledge was supported by his supervising officer, and Deputy Director, Dinesh, who, at least initially, took the principled stance that estimates should adhere to this knowledge, though Dinesh appeared to anticipate pressure to increase the estimates in line with the ambitious goals of the organic conversion.

The following week, all 'fieldworkers' in the district were called to a meeting in Gangtok which, after checking with his superiors, Dinesh allowed me to attend. About 100 field officers and staff were present in the large conference room of the district administrative centre, seated at rows of desks, with several senior district-level and Headquarters officers on a raised dais facing them. On the wall behind them was a banner, reading, "Orientation Programme with Official and Field Functionaries Regarding Round the Year Vegetable Production." One journalist had been invited and sat near the front. The Joint Director opened the meeting by introducing the main theme: "planned production," or "year-round production" of vegetables. He began with some context:

We will discuss how to exploit the potential of agriculture, especially in this district. At the moment, consumers are facing problems; there is not enough produce reaching them. Consumers are asking why there aren't enough vegetables in the markets. We need to increase the amount of produce that reaches the markets.⁴¹

He embarked on a comparison of the district with others, listing the ways in which vegetable production was progressing more positively in neighbouring ones: one sold most of its produce to Gangtok; another to West Bengal; one had a well-developed capacity for off-season production and established clusters of producers in specific crops. The implication was that the district was underperforming when compared to others, but that, if actions were taken to fulfil its "potential," could conceivably equal or outperform them. "The question is, how can we develop the district?" His answer was to focus on increasing production in both main growing seasons. In summer, the department could increase production through providing more seed for summer vegetables, and through encouraging farmers to plant off-season vegetables. In winter, it could increase water infrastructure in

⁴¹ Address in Nepali.

higher areas which experienced drought, thereby allowing easier production of cold season vegetables. “We can provide water tanks; we have budget for this.” Next, RK Limbu, an Additional Director, outlined the types of measures fieldworkers should take in order to pursue this agenda. He began by asking, “what is in shortage, and what is in surplus,” and explained that crops could be produced outside of their normal growing season by making adjustments to the altitude at which they are grown, or by growing them in polytunnels. RK Limbu enjoined fieldworkers to experiment with such approaches: “try different crops at different altitudes; try crops in greenhouses;” and to experiment with “altitude-wise planting around the year.” For example, aubergines could be grown as a rabi crop in the “lower belt;” cucumber could be grown in nurseries in the pre-rabi season in low altitude areas, then grown on in the rabi season in a polytunnel. He posed the rhetorical question: “how will we manage this?” and answered, citing two main technologies: polytunnels to extend the growing season, and nurseries to ensure seedlings were available to enable planting at unconventional times. His argument was that these technologies, combined with adjustments to the relationship between altitude and crop seasonality, would enable year-round production.

The remainder of the meeting continued to emphasise these themes, with senior officers enjoining fieldworkers more generally to increase their ambitions for production, and not to be constrained by previous ways of doing things. There was a strong theme of comparison, even competition, between districts, with a sense that senior officers in Headquarters judged the efforts of the districts to increase production. There was also a strong sense that the ultimate concern of Headquarters officers was with the inability of the Department to fulfil the “demand” of “consumers” and “citizens” (Nep: *nagarik*). This was likely due to political pressure felt by the Chief Minister and ruling party as a result of the price increases and supply problems which followed the vegetable ban. Officers frequently invoked the Lal Bazar, the main vegetable market in Gangtok⁴², which mainly sold cheaper imported vegetables from Siliguri, as the embodiment of ‘the market’: “The CM and Secretary are asking why there are no vegetables in the market;” “We have to get vegetables into the market.”

⁴²*Nagarik*, like its English equivalent, ‘citizen,’ carries connotations of the urban, and can also mean ‘town-dweller.’

Lil Bahadur Thapa wrapped up the meeting with an instruction that subdivision-level officers and staff should return to their posts, begin revising the area and production figures from the following day, taking account of the increased capacity the strategies and technologies discussed in the meeting should permit, and submit revised figures by the end of the week. I visited Dinesh again two weeks after the meeting, and asked him how the revision of the figures went. “Yes, it was fine, we have increased the figures somewhat,” he replied. I asked him whether he thought the figures would be realistic, reminding him playfully of his commitment not to overstate them, and he smiled. “What can you do? If the higher ups demand, we have to obey.”

Similarly to Angden Bhutia in the “awareness programme”, then, headquarters officers in the ‘programme’ dedicated to “year-round production” articulated the need to increase estimated area and production in the context of the imperative to feed Sikkim’s population. At least in this instance, the goal of the organic conversion to generate revenue and access markets outside Sikkim took a secondary position to this priority. Though I did not hear from senior officials of the rationale or process for organising this meeting, it would appear that its impetus was threefold: acute political pressure to show that the department was acting to maintain food availability and control prices in the markets; the department’s related, and perhaps already planned, efforts to introduce the new technological paradigm of ‘year-round production’, as evidenced by the meeting’s title; and the failure of the initial area and production exercise to provide estimates commensurate with the increases required. As opposed to Dinesh’s and Bim Bahadur’s espousal of a process of estimation of these quantities based on their knowledge of farms and farmers, senior officers presented the imperative of increasing production. Dinesh and Bim Bahadur were not convinced of the likelihood that the technological paradigm of ‘year-round production’ would enable this increase, particularly not within the year-long temporal horizon of the area and production estimates. In particular, they voiced scepticism that the department would arrange the supply of adequate seed to permit this increase.

But the area and production exercise does not just demonstrate the primacy of the notional imperative to increase production over a realistic assessment based on fieldworkers’ knowledge of farmers and their farms. While Bim Bahadur claimed the estimation process which subdivision-level staff undertook was based in this knowledge, it nonetheless obeyed

to a great extent its own, internal logic and aesthetic. Estimates were based on the previous year's figures, which were themselves estimates, and which as such bore an at least questionable relationship to the quantities grown by farmers. It was important to the fieldworkers that the figures in the table remained internally consistent, even if that meant calculating monthly figures from a 'reasonable' overall annual total. And such figures were estimated with one eye to what fieldworkers judged would have been acceptable to senior officers. The table which Dinesh prepared was based on a year from July to June, in line with the departmental fiscal year, whereas, when discussing farming activity, farmers in Sikkim usually speak in terms of the months of the Bikrami calendar⁴³, which conform more closely to cropping cycles. The figures prepared would ultimately be fed into departmental planning processes which operated on the basis of the government fiscal year, and would determine budgetary allocations for seeds, planting materials and other inputs. The Kharif season harvest begins in June, so that production figures for many crops pertained to parts of two separate growing seasons. Thus, the exercise demonstrates the disjunct between bureaucratic and agricultural temporalities. In this context, the fieldworkers intermediate between farmers and the state (Bear 2014), not so much to enable the former to access services, but more to enable the latter to incorporate the farmer symbolically into its presentation of the conversion. Dinesh's insistence that the figures should nonetheless reflect "what they will realistically grow" nonetheless showed a desire to resist the imposition of unrealistic targets which might assuage the political pressure to be seen to increase production. Rather, Dinesh and Bim Bahadur were keen to reflect the blame for the department's inability to increase production back onto the incompetence or corrupt practices of senior officials.

The category of the farmer was clearly central to Sikkim's organic conversion, but in two quite distinct ways. On the one hand, the conversion relied strongly on its symbolic invocation of the personified farmer, particularly in the form of the progressive farmer as an exemplar of the qualities of hard work and as an emblem of the organic conversion. In many ways, a small number of progressive farmers were charged with the work of fulfilling officials' and politicians' aspirations of food self-sufficiency for Sikkim; of access to external markets, and presenting the conversion to the wider world. Officials invested this

⁴³ A solar calendar consisting of twelve-months, with the year beginning and ending around the middle of April in the Gregorian year, is particularly referred to for agricultural purposes.

figure of the farmer with the 'natural' associations of the conversion, free from the artifices of the green revolution; but also with the quality of 'hard work' in the field, a quality which officials hoped would play an exemplary role, encouraging others to take up or expand farming production. By contrast, officials also relied inherently on the more impersonal category of 'farmers' in order to claim progress towards the aims of the organic conversion. Here, farmers were invoked as the objects of bureaucratic process, such as in the estimation of area and production. While field-based staff and officers set considerable store in their knowledge of individual farmers and farms as a concrete basis for such processes, these processes generally required no necessary relationship with specific farmers, and imposed minimal direct burden on them. In the first of these guises, that of the 'hard-working farmer', I argue that officials did not confine their instrumentalisation of the value of hard work to farmers, but extended it to themselves and their own work, a shift which I will explore in the following chapter.

Chapter 3: The work of officials

In this chapter, I will explore the third category to which the Chief Minister addresses his appeal (see Chapter Two), that of “dedicated officials”. As a government-mediated project ostensibly focusing on the transformation of agriculture, the organic conversion naturally centred both farmers and officials. As I will show, the “hardworking” quality of farmers, and the “dedication” of officials were closely connected. Officials often invoked the notion of work (Nep: Kaam) and related terms, and I explore the varied ways in which they did so. I argue that, for officials, the term ‘kaam’ often carried an ethical sense, of responsibility towards other for a specific task, but that this was not restricted to the formal institutional space of their employment. Other terms captured work in the sense of employment, as a public good that it was often understood as the responsibility of government to supply. In the ethical sense, I argue, officials valued the quality of ‘hard work’, for themselves as for farmers. This valorisation was expressed in similar terms to the ‘hard work’ of farmers. Officials often invoked the exemplar of the ‘hardworking farmer, whom it was officials’ duty to serve, and couched notions of ‘hard work’ in their own personal histories of hard, rural, farming childhoods and early careers. Their plans for retirement also centrally featured a return to farming work, though in practice often in a less ‘hard’ form. The irony here is that a ‘government job’ in the sense of employment and a career, represented, for many officials, a means of escape from the ‘hard work’ of poor rural childhoods.

“What is my work?”

On one occasion in the early months of my field research in Sikkim I was sitting across the desk from Dorjee Wangyal Bhutia, a senior departmental officer, in his room on the third floor of the Krishi Bhawan. Dorjee Sir, as he was known in the department, was a strong advocate of the organic conversion with a gruff manner that didn’t invite discussion. Other officials also informed me that he enjoyed the trust of the Chief Minister. I was nearing the end of a process of finalising a research plan which would be agreed by the agriculture minister. I was eager to visit department activities in the rural areas, or ‘the

field’, as officials referred to them. Dorjee Wangyal agreed that this was crucial. “But you must go with a plan,” he told me. I understood that he was reluctant to sanction my visiting department activities first hand without formal approval, and this was against departmental protocol without written approval from the Minister. At this point, he shifted the conversation slightly:

You should avoid negative people. You will get a wrong impression from negative people. They are not supportive of our farmers, our organic farming. Our organic conversion is a vision, and our Chief Minister is a visionary leader, but most officers are not contributing to this vision; they are merely drawing a salary⁴⁴.

I understood this warning as showing his concern for the risk, as I contacted various officials in headquarters and ‘the field’, that I would come across some whose support for the conversion was more equivocal than his. I had recently met several times with a senior officer, based in the Krishi Bhawan headquarters in Gangtok, who was nearing retirement. This officer had also encouraged me to visit rural areas. “In headquarters you will see many beautiful reports, even wonderful films,” he told me, “but if you want to know the real situation, you have to go to the field.” Other officials had given me similar advice, and my research plan centred around spending significant time with front-line department staff in rural areas. Other officials had also made comments over a perceived gap between the department’s presentation of the conversion and the ‘reality’ in the field. But this official’s scepticism appeared to have a personal dimension. Senior officers often receive a promotion shortly before retirement, and occasionally an extension of their contract for one year beyond the official retirement age of 60. This official had received neither, and appeared to harbour some resentment towards senior officials. He had also offered to arrange accommodation for me in specific ‘homestays’ when I did travel to the field, and I suspected he might have an interest in these businesses. I understood his resentment to come perhaps from a mixture of his scepticism over the conversion and what he saw as his unjust treatment. Similarly, I understood Dorjee Wangyal’s term “negative people” to refer specifically to this official, but also, more broadly, to elide improper professional ethics with commitment to the aims of the organic conversion and ways in which the department pursued them.

⁴⁴ Conversation in English.

A few weeks later I shared Dorjee Wangyal's car as he made the three hour journey to a village meeting (Hin: gram sabha) in South Sikkim where he had been requested by a senior MLA⁴⁵ to make a speech on the organic conversion. We were travelling a few days before the vegetable ban was due to take effect, and our conversation was fragmented by the constant phone calls he made and received, as officials attempted to finalise the legislative arrangements for the ban. Officials back in headquarters were busy drafting the wording for the 'notification' that formed the ban's legal basis⁴⁶, negotiating its provisions with the law department, and then securing the signatures of the law minister and Chief Minister. It was 8pm and we were still an hour from Gangtok and, as we wound down a steep river valley along a section of road under construction, Dorjee Wangyal praised the two officials who were working late in the office or from their homes to complete the legislation.

All of the work that is accomplished in the Department is done by a few positive people. The rest are just passing time, but we cannot get rid of them. This is the way government works. It is the duty of government servants to do their best for the people. They receive a salary, and in return they should work hard for the people. I believe in discipline; discipline and punctuality! For example, this morning I arranged to meet you at 7:30, but you arrived at 7:33. In my department, there are maybe only twenty people that are effective. The rest are just passing their time⁴⁷.

Dorjee ended his complaint in a resigned tone. I interpret his explanation as a continuation of our conversation of a few weeks previously, contrasting these few 'positive' officials to the 'negative' majority, as exemplified by the retiring officer. His invocation of the notion of "duty" to indicate an obligation to work in the interests of "the people", and his reference to the more routine qualities of office, such as "discipline" and "punctuality" would indicate a valuing of bureaucratic routine. He does not mention the notion of his subordination to the will of politicians but one could argue that his invocation of the Chief Minister, the conversion's main architect, indicates a commitment to this principle. But Dorjee Wangyal's characterisation of the conversion as a "vision", and of the Chief Minister as "visionary" hints at a more personal conviction. I argue that the notion of 'positivity' that Dorjee Wangyal espouses, to adapt his adjective into a noun, is more than

⁴⁵ Member of the Legislative Assembly, or state parliament.

⁴⁶ As was common for many similar measures, the ban was not presented to the Sikkim Legislative Assembly, but took the form of this 'notification', to be published in the Sikkim Government Gazette.

⁴⁷ Conversation in English.

merely procedural, but includes a strong personal commitment to the values of the organic conversion. It is a commitment that is also reflected, for example, in AK Shreshtha's sense of seemingly genuine hurt at the market traders' protest (see Introduction). But it was not only senior officers who expressed criticism of their colleagues' commitment.

'You want to do this interview now?' Bim Bahadur asked me, as he came out of the newly built bathroom, towelling his head, across the little courtyard from the old house his parents had left him and his brother. He went into the kitchen and came out with cups of tea for both of us and for his cousin Ashish, who joined us on the bench on the veranda. We had agreed to meet in the early morning, but it was now past noon. Bim Bahadur informed me that he had had several pieces of "work" (Nep: kaam) to do. When I had arrived at 6:30am, he had already left for the forest to cut fodder for his brother's cows. He had then been called away for a discussion about a relative's efforts to have his daughter admitted into a particular school; and had had to visit the site of a community centre that his cousin Ashish had secured the contract to build. Ashish wasn't experienced in construction or in 'government contracts', and was getting into difficulty with structural faults and the cost overruns that would be necessary to correct them. It was towards the end of a long and wide-ranging conversation that we drifted onto the subject of the responsibilities of government servants such as himself and his colleagues in the horticulture and other departments.

Our younger generations are doing work in the government sector. It's easy. You think!... what type of work is the government sector doing in your country? But in Sikkim... The day before yesterday you talked to me about office time also; some people go at 10am, and so on, some people 10:30, some 11, you will see. They don't know, "What is my duty? What work do we do?" Those who are doing work in an office, I told you, they are the servants of our villagers, Sikkimese⁴⁸ people. But they don't think that, they think "I am an officer! I am an officer; government gives me a vehicle." "The people of our Sikkim are low caste; they are from poor, backward families." They think that. I think that that type of thing is in that person's, that

⁴⁸ As discussed in my introductory chapter, the term 'Sikkimese' is contested, with many Bhutia and Lepcha people arguing it should be reserved for them as an ethno-political bloc, as 'indigenous people of Sikkim', and as distinct from Nepali and other such blocs. As Bim Bahadur would refer to himself as Bahun-Chettri (often elided as 'Nepali'), I take his use of the term to indicate all people of Sikkim, or those officially termed 'Sikkim subjects'.

*officer's, mind. They do not work regularly; they are not timely; they do not maintain time. They do not know, "What is my duty? What is my work?"*⁴⁹

Here, Bim Bahadur, speaking in English, makes clear that the notion of work is applicable to officials as well as farmers, and that it carries a particular moral freight. I would argue that this notion is a fair synopsis of the ideal voiced by the Chief Minister of the “dedicated official”, and that Bim Bahadur sees its transgression in terms familiar from the popular critique of bureaucracy. Specifically, he identifies the qualities of timeliness and regularity as key measures of the proper conduct of a government officer. More broadly, he charges his colleagues with a failure to honour the deeper purpose of their work. This, for Bim Bahadur, as for Dorjee Wangyal, is connected to serving the people, in this case, farmers. Bim Bahadur specifies the importance of respecting them rather than discounting them as “poor”, “low-caste” and “backward”. Importantly, he implies, his criticism applies differentially across one of the most fundamental distinctions in the organisational hierarchy of the state government: that between “officers” and “staff”. His allegations of laxity and arrogance appear to apply disproportionately to officers, in whose ranks he would likely never attain a position. As a Village Level Worker, Bim Bahadur belonged to the category of staff. As with other staff-level positions, he had been recruited locally, at sub-division level. Vacancies among the ranks of officers, on the other hand, were filled centrally through state government gazette notification (an alternate term was ‘gazetted officer’), and almost always required a university degree, which Bim Bahadur did not possess. Higher ranks of officers had access to a vehicle for work purposes, and some, such as Dorjee Wangyal, used them to commute at the beginning and end of the working day. As a member of ‘staff’, Bim Bahadur did not have such access, in spite of his work necessitating considerable travelling. In fact, he had used a loan, for which he was eligible as a government employee, to purchase a pickup truck, which he used for official duties as well as the private contracting work he increasingly engaged in. As a member of staff, Bim Bahadur defined ‘work’ and ‘duty’ negatively, by using the counter-example of the officer abusing his privilege and displaying a lack of respect for those whom it is his job to serve. His rhetorical questions, “What is my duty?”; and “What is my work?”, while they do not afford simple answers, provide an entry into officials’ views on the professional conduct they expect of themselves and their colleagues. One quite specific, if perhaps only partial,

⁴⁹ Conversation in English.

answer he provides to these questions, relates to the obligation to keep time: to be present during officially designated office hours. And yet, in seeming contradiction of this principle, Bim Bahadur undertook seemingly personal, family-related tasks during these hours. It is possible that he saw this obligation as more pertinent to officers, who were generally based in an office. Bim Bahadur's professional time was less structured. His working area was that in which he lived and had grown up and he did not have a dedicated office in which to base himself. His hours varied widely, and he would often need to leave the house at 5am in order to travel outside of his working area on professional business, or arrive back at 9pm when the rest of the household was already asleep. Conversely, he would undertake personal tasks during the day. Indeed there was not always a clear boundary between the two. Many of the households in the village were related to him and, as a locally respected person with a government job and knowledge of the workings of government, while travelling around his working area he would often mix advice on technical aspects of farming or on ways of accessing department support with the discussion of family business.

Bim Bahadur used the term 'kaam', which is usually translated as 'work', to refer to the household and family-related tasks which had occupied him that morning. The word carries broadly the same valences as the English notion of 'work', diverse and elastic as these might be in both languages. As can be seen from the tasks which kept Bim Bahadur from our interview, the notion of 'kaam' can include both productive agricultural labour and the type of social obligations to which he, as a respected member of the community in Tuksum, would frequently be called upon to mediate. It is also used in the context of employment, including formally contracted employment of the type that defined Bim Bahadur's relationship with the department. However, the term 'kaam' was rarely, if ever, used to indicate the formal or institutional space of employment, in the way that the English phrase "I'm going to work" is used. Rather, it denoted specific tasks related to work. If, at the beginning of the working day, Bim Bahadur told me, "Aaju hamile kaam cha" ("today we have work to do"), he was usually referring to a specific task related to his job, such as distributing seedlings or submitting an expense claim. For the institution of work or employment, people in Sikkim generally used more specific terms. When specifically referring to a government job, the English-derived term 'service' was often used, along with its Nepali equivalent 'naukari'. 'Naukari' means 'service' in the sense of

actions undertaken for the benefit of others, and 'naukar' means 'servant', here in the sense of 'government servant', a phrase officials often used to refer to themselves. However, when used to indicate a 'government job' both terms could often appear devoid of this ethical connotation, and would take on the sense of work as institutional space, as well as that of a position capable of providing a livelihood, and thus one to be desired. In the same way, the English phrase 'public service' might be understood as an (often privileged) institutional space without immediately calling to mind its constitutional position subservient to a public. Thus, in response to the question "Taapai ke garnuhuncha?" ("What do you do?"), Bim Bahadur would reply "Ma service garchu." A broader term for formal or contracted employment was another English-derived term: 'duty'. Asking after an acquaintance at his home, I was told by his daughter, who was busy minding his roadside stall for him, "Wahaa road ma duty ma gaako" ("He's gone to work [duty] on the road"), indicating he had paid employment for one of the many contractors which undertook government-funded road building and maintenance work, or as part of a government scheme⁵⁰. Again, while the ethical sense of the word 'duty' might be invoked, as Bim Bahadur uses it in the example above, 'duty' often meant contracted employment. Thus, while Bim Bahadur's use of the word 'duty' probably had something of the sense of the moral obligation of the official, it likely also indicated that that obligation came with the privilege of a well-paid government job.

The political priority of such jobs could scarcely be understated. Employment was one of the most pressing topics in debate surrounding the upcoming election, and it was seen as a central responsibility of the state government to provide it, a responsibility which it often attempted to fulfil through directly employing the population in 'government jobs'. The Nepali equivalent for 'employment' in its sense as an aggregate or population-level economic quantity is 'rozgar'. The Government of Sikkim's hope that the organic conversion would reverse the perceived decline of farming and provide employment opportunities suitable for "educated youth" gives an idea of the political import it attached to employment in the organic conversion. These hopes took various forms in the policy framework of the conversion. They included the aspirations that the 'premium price'

⁵⁰ These were often as part of state or central government employment guarantee schemes, intended to provide a basic level of income for poorer households, such as the central government Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005.

attached to organic produce would enable agriculture to provide high-skilled and high-income opportunities for educated farmers; that other employment would be created in agricultural processing; as well as the direct employment opportunities created by the contracting of services such as certification through private ‘service provider’ companies. These were often elided in government claims for increased employment opportunities through the conversion. In an illustration of the political centrality of employment in general in the state, in the run-up to the March 2019 state elections, the ruling party organised a series of ‘rozgar mela’ or ‘employment fairs’, presided over by the Chief Minister, at which it was claimed that attendees from households without a member in state employment would be offered a job. These fairs entailed job offers on behalf of the agriculture and horticulture departments, developments which temporarily created a greatly increased workload for department officials processing the applications, as well as consternation as to how the departments would employ those who had been given offers.

In contrast to the formal, institutionalised notions of work implied by ‘duty’, ‘service’, ‘naukari’ and ‘rozgar’, Bim Bahadur’s use of the word ‘kaam’ denoted something more fluid: work which might occur either in the context of formal employment or social relationships. In either case, though, the notion of ‘kaam’ carried a clear sense of a social obligation that needed to be fulfilled but that did not depend on formal, institutionalised professional relationships – on ‘office’, in the Weberian sense of the term. An exploration of the notion of work, as well as the connections and distinctions between the differing work of the “hardworking farmer” and the “dedicated official”, will help to illuminate these questions. The following does not represent an attempt at a taxonomy of work, but rather a brief exploration of the various facets work is accorded in popular and academic discourse, and which surface in discussion of Sikkim’s organic conversion.

Facets of work

Marshall Sahlins writes that “the appropriation of nature we call ‘production’ is a sequitur to its symbolic appropriation” (Sahlins 1977:19). In the case of Sikkim organic, this symbolic appropriation includes, for officials, the valorisation of this work of production itself, as well as the differential value of its produce, owing to its organic provenance. In its

efforts to restore the nobility of farming work and reverse the decline of farming, the organic conversion represented an attempt to place the work of farming in a central role within Sikkim society. As discussed above, the government of Sikkim's portrayal of the organic conversion celebrates the work of the farmer as rooted in nature, but also exercises, through that work, the mastery over nature which, according to this portrayal, forms the fundamental basis of a broader human economy. This is broadly in keeping with the centrality that Locke accords to farming labour and which inspires the depiction, embraced by the global organic movement, of the 'yeoman farmer', labouring on his private land (Guthman 2004).

Work as production

Notions of work, and allied concepts such as labour and toil, are perhaps so fluid because, rather than in spite, of their centrality to understandings of politics, economy and society. Western academic discourse has tended to address them through subjecting them to various taxonomic distinctions in an effort to further this wider social and political understanding. For Marxian scholars, the distinction between the use and exchange values of labour is that between work which is accorded its true social value to the worker and to society, and the alienated value that can be extracted from its product. The worker's dispossession from the work's true social value reduces the work to the status of drudgery and underpins class exploitation. Marxian-influenced analyses of work tend to feature a second, and related, distinction: that between work performed in a formal institutional setting and the messier "heterogeneously structured forms of securing a livelihood" (Butt et al. 2020:71). The former is more directly amenable to the appropriation of value into the capitalist economy. The latter includes reproductive labour, largely confined to the domestic sphere, and often goes unrecognised and unrewarded by that same economy, but its value in producing social relationships, and indeed persons, is more implicitly recognised in the form of societal 'values' (Butt et al. 2020; Graeber 2001). This latter category can also be taken to include, at least in part, the work referred to by economists as 'informal labour', a category which featured prominently in analyses of Indian economy and society, given the prominence of the informal sector (Holmström 1984; Parry 2020). A well-established line in anthropology has sought to complicate these distinctions, through exploring the intrusion of the traditional and domestic into the modern and capitalist sphere and vice versa (Bear et al. 2015).

Work as virtue

As already suggested by Bim Bahadur's views on the subject, however, and by officials' representations of the hardworking farmer, there are many more facets to the social perception of work than that which purely concerns production. His questions "What is my work?"; and "What is my duty?", and the critique that they imply of his colleagues, frame the correct fulfilment of an official's 'work' and 'duty' is a virtue (in one of the two senses I argue he invokes the latter term). Pandian's (2009) study shows the way in which toil can be perceived as a virtue. In Pandian's analysis, Piramalai Kallars espouse toil as embodying the religious-philosophical principle of karma: the earthly reward accruing to virtuous action, in the Kallars' present-day understanding of the notion. The notion of toil was first mobilised as a virtue for didactic purposes by the colonial authorities in their attempts to curb what they perceived as the 'savage' tendencies of the resettled 'robber caste' of the Kallars. That the Kallars' conception of toil is compatible with the colonial authorities' protestant view of the earthly rewards of work serves as a temporal bridge between the colonial and contemporary eras and shows that the notion of toil as a virtue is unique to neither.

Work as drudgery

Work, or toil, on the other hand, can also be seen as penury or drudgery. This is indicated by Pushpa Lal's and his children's hint that farming would be an unsuitable aspiration for the latter's futures. It is also evidenced by the secular trend in Sikkim towards the desertion of farming that the organic conversion was in part intended to remedy. Maurice Godelier (1980) reminds us that the English term 'labour', the French 'travailler', and cognate terms in related languages, include notions of 'suffering' and 'torture'. The notion of work as physical penury and drudgery is the obverse of that of work as virtue, but, arguably, the requirement for an 'earthly reward' contained in the notion of karma which Pandian (2009) elucidates, itself implies an acknowledgement of earthly suffering.

Work as the authentic

Conversely, the notion of the 'Yeoman farmer' (Guthman 2004), as well as founded on that of private property, draws on a romantic categorisation of work that imbues agricultural

labour in particular with a fundamental authenticity and nobility. Thoreau's claim that many types of work which characterise the modern economy, such as office work, produce lives of "quiet desperation" (Thoreau 2021:13), positions agricultural work as uniquely authentic, owing to his claim of its intimate connection to nature. This romantic taxonomy of work reverses the ascription of drudgery to farming labour, shifting it to these supposedly less authentic forms of work. I would contend that, as Comaroff and Comaroff (2009) argue for the marketing of ethnicity in South Africa, the authenticity of Sikkim's organically certified produce relies to a degree on the authentically 'hard work' engendered in its producers and the production techniques they employ.

Work as a 'job' or as employment

As I argue above, Bim Bahadur's invocation of the notions of 'duty' and 'service', in the other sense these terms take on in Sikkim, imply a recognition of work as a formal institutional arrangement, to be desired for the livelihood and long-term security it provides. Marxian political economy has also influenced the popular notion of work in this sense as a 'right'. As I suggest above, the political centrality of employment in Sikkim and to the aims of organic conversion, made both the notion of a job (service, duty in the everyday senses these terms were used in Nepali conversation, or the Nepali 'naukari') and the aggregate measure of employment (Nep: rozgar) particularly freighted for officials. These concerns stem both from political pressure to frame work as a right guaranteed by government, and from the acknowledgement that some forms of work come with different attendant rights and privileges. The latter is particularly true of a 'government job', or 'service'. Elsewhere in India, the terminology used for work and employment differs somewhat. Jonathan Parry (2013), in his study of industrial relations in a Chhattisgarh steelworks, reports that workers use the Hindi term 'naukri' (service) for regular employment and 'kam' for casual daily labour⁵¹, and argues that workers perceive clear class distinctions between these two categories. But in either case, certain types of work are valued both as a right and as affording rights. Bear and Mathur (2015) make a similar distinction with regard to Mathur's account of two types of public employees on the

⁵¹ Parry's transliterations of the Hindi equivalents of the Nepali terms I render as 'naukari' and 'kaam', respectively.

MGNREGA scheme in Uttarakhand, with ‘naukar’, or permanent government employees, contrasting with ‘young professionals’ hired on temporary contracts.

Work as social action

Hannah Arendt (1998) distinguishes between labour, characterised by the figure of “animal laborans”, which provides for the brute and recurrent needs of human life, and work, as characterised by “homo faber” the process of *making* the durable objects which characterise human culture and productive systems. She further distinguishes “action” as the production and transformation of human relationships in the social and political spheres. Whichever terminology is employed, a distinction can be perceived between work purely viewed as material production and the work of social action: that which both produces and is located in social relationships. These should not be viewed as totally separate and mutually exclusive forms of work, but rather highlight the importance, as David Graeber (2001) argues, of viewing the creation of value as embedded in these social relationships. As I argue above, Bim Bahadur refers to his domestic, family and social responsibilities as ‘kaam’, and his use of this term in the context of his formal professional responsibilities is limited to describing specific tasks, rather than to the more general institutional phenomenon of his job. The former were usually pre-agreed with other officials. In this case, I argue, we can take ‘kaam’, as the term is used in Sikkim at least, as representing obligations performed in the context of existing social relationships, as opposed to terms such as ‘service’, ‘duty’ and ‘naukari’, which indicate relationships to the notion of office more characteristic of Weberian bureaucratic neutrality (du Gay 2000).

This discussion suggests that Bim Bahadur might count his family and community responsibilities as ‘work’ (Nep: kaam). If so, the contradiction between his critique of his colleagues’ laxity and his engaging in these seemingly personal tasks during official office hours is perhaps not as clear as one might expect if one were to follow a strictly Weberian separation between ‘person’ and ‘office’. The answer, then, to Bim Bahadur’s question, “What is my work?” is perhaps not as straightforward as its apparent simplicity might suggest. While he seems to have intended this question in a rhetorical sense, I maintain that it is also useful to take it at face value, as an interrogation of the way officials view the nature of their professional work. The following section attempts to explore this question,

examining some of the forms this work took through a key structuring principle that became apparent during the time I spent with officials.

Field and office

It would be hard to point to a regular routine in Bim Bahadur's working life. Alongside that of 'staff', he belonged to a category that was commonly referred to within the department as 'fieldworkers'. The two corresponded more-or-less, with some small differences.

'Fieldworker' was not an official category, like staff, but designated officials who were based in 'the field' – the rural areas outside of headquarters and the district and subdivisional offices that managed department activities around the state. The category of the 'fieldworker' also implied an official who had direct, day-to-day contact with farmers and the public. Some lower level staff, such as administrative workers and peons (staff who carried documents and ran errands for higher-ranking officials) were based in offices, and so were not strictly categorised as fieldworkers.

The field and fieldwork

Bim Bahadur's official working area was Tuksum-Rawney gram panchayat unit (GPU), and he was responsible for all five of the wards within the GPU. He had grown up in Tuksum, one of these five wards, and his official working base was his home, which he shared with his older brother and sister-in-law, Bimal and Amrita, and their two school-aged children. Bim Bahadur was married but had been separated from his wife for several years. He was the only person in the household with a salaried position, a resource which had enabled the family to put his younger sister through college in Gangtok, and which would enable her to go on to university. Bimal and Amrita were, as Bim Bahadur related it, "full-time farmers", working the two hectares of land the family had inherited from Bim Bahadur's father and tending the two or three cows they kept most years. Much of his day-to-day tasks were dictated by demands originating from his subdivisional office at Shermathang, or from headquarters in Gangtok (the former were most often in turn dictated by the latter). Many of these tasks were in the form of 'programmes' – pre-panned set-piece events which Bim Bahadur was required to organise in response to requests from his superiors. These might take the form of community meetings promoting organic farming, or the training of

farmers in organic farming methods espoused by the department. The latter were usually delivered by the privately contracted 'service providers', but as the official representative of the department, Bim Bahadur's attendance was required, sometimes along with his expertise. They usually involved the attendance of superiors, in which case it was particularly important for Bim Bahadur to ensure that logistical arrangements were well prepared and ran smoothly. As a junior, though well-respected staff member in the department, Bim Bahadur was frequently asked to attend programmes outside of his working area, in the subdivision offices or in other GPUs within the subdivision. While such programmes were usually planned some days or weeks in advance, other work would be much less predictable, with requests often originating at short notice from Bim Bahadur's subdivisional office or from headquarters. He was often required to attend the subdivision office at Shermathang for meetings or for 'paperwork', such as the reconciliation of his expenses, or for writing his monthly reports (he did not have access to a computer in Tuksum). Dinesh Koirala, his Deputy Director, based at Shermathang, would often call him early in the morning and ask him to attend that day, something Bim Bahadur generally took in his stride and rarely objected to. At other times, Bim Bahadur might have tasks to complete around Tuksum-Rawney. He would frequently be asked to provide information on the status of farming in Tuksum-Rawney, in response to requests the subdivisional office had received from headquarters, for example, the area of land planted under specific crops and the anticipated production of those crops. This he would usually be able to do from his home, writing the figures on paper and taking them to the subdivisional office. On the rare days when there were no particularly urgent tasks, Bim Bahadur would busy himself helping his brother and sister-in-law with farm work. The following is a brief account of one day I spend accompanying Bim Bahadur in his duties as a Village Level Worker.

Bim Bahadur picked me up from my homestay at 6am in order to collect cardamom seedlings, which he was due to distribute to farmers around Tuksum-Rawney. We drove to the government farm at Shermathang, stopping for a few personal errands, and to buy rice for Bim Bahadur's family on the way. We arrived at around 7:30am and Bim Bahadur telephoned Sita Pandey, the supervisor of the farm, who arrived about 20 minutes later. With the help of a chowkidar (guard), we loaded 500 cardamom seedlings from the farm store. Bim Bahadur then drove to the nearby subdivision office to sign for the seedlings

and to reconcile a cash float he had taken out the previous week. He spent an hour with the Deputy Director and the three other staff in the office, drinking tea and discussing plans to fulfil a recently received headquarters demand for the annual projections of 'area and production' statistics for crops across in the subdivision. On the way back to Tuksum, Bim Bahadur stopped to pick up a relative from Rinchu, the nearest major town, and to buy a sack of cattle feed. We had lunch at Bim Bahadur's house when we arrived back in Tuksum, then set off in the car to distribute the seedlings around the village. Bim Bahadur was unhappy with the quality of the seedlings. "They leave them sitting in Shermathang for too long, and they're a little dry, so some might die," he said. "They're also too late for the farmers. Most have already planted seedlings, either by dividing their existing plants or by buying them." I asked him how the households that would receive the seedlings were selected. "They have to be farmers," he answered,

and I have checked their fields to see that they have enough land and the land is ready. But if I don't provide for them, they cause problems for me, so I have to give seedlings to almost everyone. Some will plant them in the field and some in the forest areas. Some won't use them well.

We stopped for tea at the houses of two of the seedling recipients, a friend and a distant cousin of Bim Bahadur's, and gave advice on care of the seedlings after planting to another two households, but most recipients already had cardamom in their fields and didn't ask for advice. There was no-one home at a further two households and here Bim Bahadur left the seedlings in the shade by the road. We returned to Bim Bahadur's house at 3pm having delivered twenty seedlings each to fifteen households out of around 40 in the village. He left the remaining 200 seedlings in the back of his truck, saying he would distribute them the following day. We drank tea, after which Bim Bahadur told me he had to leave for the forest to cut grass for the cattle, as he had been unable to that morning.

The scarcity of routine in Bim Bahadur's working life mitigates against any claim that the above account could pass as representative of a 'typical' working day. However, I select it as illustrative because it does represent what might be termed an idealised day for a fieldworker, in that it involves direct contact with farmers and with the stuff of farming (in the form of cardamom seedlings). On the other hand, it also demonstrates the centrality of the office in the working life of a fieldworker, as a site of 'paperwork', and of connection

with colleagues and with the wider bureaucratic architecture of the department. I will argue that ‘field’ and ‘office’ represent two opposed but mutually constitutive loci in an opposition in which officials invest highly differentiated judgements of value. Nayanika Mathur (2016), in her ethnography of government servants in the mountainous state of Uttarakhand, observes a certain unease among the officials with whom she works concerning the authenticity, and the true location, of that work. As she seeks a location in which to base herself, and the permissions necessary for her research, she is frequently told she will ‘find nothing [of interest] here.’ At each level of the hierarchy of the state administration, officials tell her that their work is purely ‘paper work’ (Hin: kaghazi kaam), and that the ‘real work’ (asli kaam) will be found elsewhere, usually at the next level down. They, and their counterparts in Sikkim, were clearly very familiar with popular critiques of bureaucracy as only concerned with paper, and with esoteric and self-fulfilling process. Officials in Sikkim did not so explicitly present the same opposition between real work and paperwork, though they did employ the English and Nepali equivalents of both these terms. Within the department, rather, a similar oppositional function was fulfilled by the more spatially-rooted loci of ‘field’ and ‘office’.

The office and office work

The time I spent in the departmental headquarters in the Krishi Bhawan in Gangtok was usually, if anything, less structured than that with fieldworkers such as Bim Bahadur. It generally relied on serendipitous encounters with officials that happened to be in their rooms. On occasion, the officials I came to know well would either be away from their rooms or busy with urgent work and unable to spare time. On these days I would often return to my flat within an hour or so. On other days, one serendipitous encounter would lead to another and I would spend the whole day in the Krishi Bhawan. On one such day, I reached the office at 10:45 am and bumped into Girik Kumar, who was also arriving, in the corridor outside his room. Girik had recently been promoted to the position of Joint Director. Within the context of headquarters, this was seen as a moderately senior post, but outside the circle of the most influential officers at the rank of Additional Director and Director. He invited me into the office he shared with Doma Limbu, another Joint Director. Girik had recently been transferred to headquarters from a district office and no room had been found for him to sit. Doma, who had a friendly and maternal manner, and whose office was seen as something of a social hub, had invited him to share her room.

Doma occupied the main desk in the centre of the room and Girik worked on the small computer desk to the side. Girik asked me if I'd like tea, picked up his mobile, called one of the women who worked in the canteen, and asked for cups for all three of us. After tea, Girik started up the computer and began editing a report on seed nursery development, which would be included as part of a larger progress report to the central Ministry of Agriculture, and which he needed to send to his superior by the end of the week. Another officer, Sunil Acharya opened the door, walking fast, and went to the almari⁵² in the corner. "Busy busy?" Doma asked. "Very busy today. Secretary Sir is in the office, and is telling me I have to accompany him to the Indian Organic Fair tomorrow, and I have to collect publicity materials – how many copies do you have of the Sikkim Organic CD ROM?" Sunil's room was on the fourth floor, the next level above Doma and Girik, but he shared a filing cabinet and a computer with Doma, so was continually coming and going. Sunil had also been assigned another task, a somewhat delicate issue on which he asked for Girik's advice. The previous month, an official party from overseas had come on a fact-finding mission organised by Sikkim Organic Mission, in order to learn from Sikkim's practical experience of the organic conversion. According to Sunil, they had been taken to the state agricultural research centre, where they had asked some "awkward questions," but had left with these questions "unanswered." According to Sunil, the Director of the research centre had apparently not been welcoming towards the guests and had complained afterwards that he hadn't been informed of their visit. "Actually, the Director is very hard line," said Girik, conspiratorially, "His staff are all afraid of him." Sunil had been asked to draft a letter, to be sent from a department Executive Director to the central Ministry of Agriculture, copied to the Director of the agricultural research centre, requesting that local institutions be informed in advance of future visits from foreign delegations. As Sunil explained, the Executive Director's intention was to phrase the letter in a pointed manner so as to indirectly send the research centre Director a message on the inappropriateness of his reaction. For a while, Sunil and Girik discussed how to approach the letter. Girik had a reputation for good written English, but, as I was present, asked me for advice on wording. He eventually asked me to sit at the computer and type the wording as we agreed on it. Once both were happy with the draft, we printed it. Doma, who had been working her way through a pile of expense claims, suggested we have lunch. Girik called to the canteen

⁵² Wardrobe or large cupboard.

again for food and tea, which we shared, joined by a colleague from a neighbouring room. After lunch, Girik, Sunil and I again revisited the letter, as Sunil felt the criticism of the research centre should be more explicit. After about an hour, all were satisfied. The letter was printed off and placed in the file the department kept for matters concerning the research centre, and a peon called to deliver it to the Executive Director. It was now 3pm and the office was winding down. Doma worked through another file from the pile on her desk, which contained more expense claims, and Girik returned to his report, occasionally asking my advice on English phrasing. “I still haven’t finished this work,” he told me as he shut down the computer. “You see what it’s like here. There’s always too much adda,” he said, using the term for idle conversation.



Figure 18: Rear view of the Krisbi Bhavan, Gangtok.



Figure 19: West Sikkim Divisional headquarters in Geyzing, which house offices of most technical departments, including the agriculture and horticulture departments.

The above contrasts markedly with my account of Bim Bahadur's idealised working day, though it is equally unrepresentative of any 'typical' routine. It is not intended to give the impression that such mid-ranking headquarters officers spent the majority of their time in 'adda', snacking, or 'paperwork', or that the latter was not 'real' work. On other days the atmosphere in the building would be frenetic as officials rushed between rooms trying to fulfil the short notice requests of senior officers. This was particularly so in the runup to large 'programmes', such as the biodiversity conference described in Chapter One. But Girik's reference to "adda" points to an awareness, and a degree of anxiety, over the type of critique levelled by Bim Bahadur against officers, particularly in headquarters, itself related to the popular critique of bureaucracy. I contend, though, that, while the routine work of administrative procedure was a constant feature in both headquarters and the field, much of what officials considered 'work' was, in contrast, quite contingent and unpredictable. In large part, it came in the form of 'programmes': the large, set piece events which the middle and lower ranks of the department had little forewarning of, and were thus compelled to prepare for in the final days, or even hours, preceding an event. This unpredictability arose to a considerable extent because of the outward-facing nature of Sikkim's organic conversion, in the form of demands for reports, documentation and proposals from central government, visitors from abroad and national-level events such as conferences or organic fairs. While many of these 'programmes' were necessarily convened in advance, it was usual for middle-ranking officials not to be aware of their impending arrival until they were ordered by senior officials to prepare.

These two examples describe some of the forms work took in the context of the field and the office. To further understand the relationship between the two, though, it is necessary to examine in more detail the points at which the two intersect. Bim Bahadur's implication in the work of the subdivision office provides some insight into the interdependence between field and office, but this interdependence is demonstrated even more clearly in the relationships that 'office' workers and officers maintain with 'the field'.

A field visit

As well as major national and international events, 'programmes' also took a much more local form. I have already described above an example of these, the "awareness programme on organic farming" in Lungtok. While I recount it above from the perspective of

fieldworkers and farmers, my participation in this event began early the same morning outside the Krishi Bhawan where I waited for PW Bhutia, the senior officer, Angden Bhutia, the Joint Director, and another of their colleagues. From our perspective, the day took the form of a ‘field visit’, on which PW Bhutia had invited me to accompany them the day before. When they arrived, separately in two office Tata jeeps, their demeanour immediately seemed different from the ways in which I had previously encountered them in their rooms in the Krishi Bhawan. All three were dressed casually in jeans, sneakers and polo shirts, in contrast to the suits or blazers they would normally wear to the office. They seemed distinctly more relaxed than I had seen them up to that point, and to relish the prospect of the trip. On the two hour journey, PW Bhutia and the other officer, with whom I shared PW Bhutia’s car, chatted excitedly among themselves and with the driver, with little of the formality that would characterise the office, though the junior officials and staff still addressed PW Bhutia as ‘Sir’. As well as the awareness raising programme and the visit to Prem Bhai’s fields, the group visited a plot of land rented by a community association for joint cultivation, after which the community association provided the officers with lunch. This was served in a separate room from the main hall, where the local staff and community members ate, and included locally caught river fish, a particular delicacy of the area, and tungbas – bamboo vessels of millet beer⁵³. The following day I met with PW Bhutia in his room on the fourth floor of the Krishi Bhawan. He was again dressed in his usual suit, but it seemed to me that something of the casual intimacy of the field visit persisted in his manner. He was eager to explain to me the importance for officials such as himself of maintaining a connection to the field, and a note of nostalgia crept into his voice as he began to reminisce on his earlier career, before the responsibilities of high office took over.

Actually, what I enjoyed most about working was the fieldwork, but I didn’t get time for that. When I would go on a field trip I would have huge work waiting for me [at the office, on his return], and I didn’t like that people would want to meet me and not find me there. Still farmers from areas where I used to work are friendly towards me,

⁵³ I understand the separation of the senior officers’ lunch to be in part a result of their rank and also due to their being served special items in addition to those provided in the main gathering. This included alcohol, which, as all three senior officers were Bhutia, they were accustomed to drinking. Hindu participants would have been much more reticent to be seen drinking in public.

*they come to the office – also staff – for personal work, to discuss field problems. I always welcome them, never misguide them. I still like spending time with farmers best. This is different work. It's exciting, motivating.*⁵⁴

'The field' then, a word that was almost always employed in English, and to my knowledge had no direct equivalent in any other language, was a place of special importance for Sikkim horticulture department officials. 'The field' as a site of special significance is also a familiar notion in anthropology. The modern ethnographic method is distinguished by its reliance on 'fieldwork', such as that on which my research is predicated, as a uniquely reliable account of the lives of its subjects (Stocking 1992). The parallel notion of fieldwork in the natural sciences (Kuklick & Kohler 1996) would indicate that the disciplines of agriculture, the natural sciences and anthropology share a common colonial historical basis, as suggested by the equally field-based person of the colonial officer (Gupta & Ferguson 1998). In agriculture, of course, the metaphor of the field is that much more immediate, and officials clearly drew on the image of the physical fields in which farmers laboured and where the good government servant provided them with crucial advice. For department officials in Sikkim, 'the field' was a place defined in opposition to 'the office', as the place where 'fieldwork' happened: the 'real' kind of work. As with Mathur's 'real work' and 'paperwork', the opposition between 'office' and 'field' were present not just across the institutional hierarchy of the department, but at each level within it. At whichever level one would look, office contained field and vice versa. As a field worker, the subdivisional office was a necessary base for Bim Bahadur to complete essential office work and an essential part of his everyday routine. Conversely, the field and the field visit occupied a central position in the imaginaries of senior officers.

Fields past and future

As we drove back to Gangtok from our field visit, our conversation turned to Pema Wangdi's retirement, which was six months away. "I am ready to relax. Working for the Department, there's no time to spend with family, the work is so onerous. It's too much hassle. Tonight I will arrive home at 8pm." He was adamant that he would leave on his retirement date and scoffed when I suggested he could extend, as some others had done. "I

⁵⁴ Conversation in English.

will spend my time with family, and in cultivation. I have my own farm at Tarigang, and I cultivate myself, with no hired labour, no servant; just myself and my wife.”

Tarigang was Pema Wangdi’s family home. During the week he stayed in a flat in Gangtok to commute to work, but he usually returned to Tarigang on weekends. When I visited him there a month after his retirement, we sat on a broad lawn with his wife as a domestic worker brought out a plate of mandarin oranges from their own trees. He was the most relaxed I had seen him. He returned, this time with some relief, to the subject of the demands his work had exacted from him prior to retirement. “This last year was too stressful,” he told me. Speaking of his immediate superior, Dorjee Wangyal, he said, “I had to work even on Sundays. You know Dorjee. He was very good with extension; he is very talented – a very good motivator. But he is very hard work-oriented. He would sometimes say to me, ‘Don’t go to Tarigang on the weekend; I need you to be here.’” “He returned sometimes at 9pm,” his wife interjected. He was voluble in his praise for the expertise of his superior in practical work in the field, a person who he had otherwise characterised as his chief tormentor, making excessive demands on his free time, but with whom he rose through the ranks and enjoyed a close, but perhaps strained, relationship.

Tarigang clearly provided a respite from the strains of officialdom, but Pema Wangdi informed me with some pride that, in the past, it had not been an easy life. He remembered the journey to his secondary school in Gangtok as a 36 Km round trip on foot. “Life was hard then, and my family was not wealthy. He pointed to a hill behind the house and told me he used to climb it to look after the family’s yaks.

Our parents were farmers; they were uneducated, but they valued education very highly. Our father told us to study hard and he would enslave himself for our education. Secondary school was not cheap then. Primary school was also not free, but not too expensive. He would sell cocks and chickens to afford our education.

Pema Wangdi clearly retained fond memories of a rural childhood, hard though it may have been. His conversation moved smoothly from childhood memories to those of his early days as a government official. He expressed a kind of wistful yearning for a place and a type of work which had been mostly absent from his everyday working life as a senior officer.

The main idea was to show demonstration in government farms and to produce seed for farmers' needs, and so that they could take up new crops. We used to produce large amounts of seed, say 35-40 quintals of maize, 6-10 quintals millet, 90 Kg cauliflower, brinjal 40-50 Kg. We produced chilli seed by hand; we had to cover our faces because of the fumes. The responsibility of managing a government farm was very difficult. We had no facility for transportation. On government farms you had to show performance. This was very difficult with no facilities available. We had to carry seeds on our own back. I still remember those days; they were very interesting! The Farm was very well run. The District Collector used to come every year with his family just for a picnic. In my time I never left the station. It was a day's journey to Gangtok and I had too many responsibilities. Now only field men [caretakers and manual farm workers] are left on the farms; there are no officers living on them. They prefer to spend their time in town for the schools and the hospitals. These days the farms are not so impressive.

Pema Wangdi's clear recall of facts and figures also belies a routine familiarity with them, and indicates the importance of a grasp of the practical aspects of farming in the life of an official. His celebration of the practical, hands-on aspects of his work, and in particular the hardships it entailed, contrasted with the modern-day dependence of senior officers, himself included, on junior officers and staff.

Officers often conveyed this absence alongside a nostalgia for a past much more connected to 'the field', both in early career and in childhood. The horticulture department was what was generally referred to as a 'technical department', where the majority of officials were occupied in providing frontline services to the population. During their childhood Sikkim was overwhelmingly a rural state, and so the majority of current officers had grown up during the period of the monarchy in villages often quite remote from the capital, let alone from the urban centres of then-neighbouring India. Most had received a technical formation in agricultural universities, generally in rural areas of India outside of Sikkim (at this period there were none in the state), which featured a practical curriculum centred on the literal fields of demonstration plots and research stations. Their early careers were generally as fieldworkers in remote rural areas, before they progressed up the ranks. Pema Wangdi had worked on a government-run demonstration farm in early post-merger Sikkim, when agricultural extension was more central to the department's work. The notion of

‘extension’, central to the green revolution, implies the spatial penetration of department institutions into the rural areas and into direct contact with farmers. Like the term ‘fieldwork’, it implied that staff would live in these areas, deliver advice and training to farmers, and demonstrate, either on their own land or on government farms, the technologies they expected farmers to adopt. But their continued attachment to farming, at least in an ideal form, can be perceived in their aspirations for a simpler retirement, with, at least notionally, a closer and more self-reliant relationship to the land.

Pema Wangdi’s aspirations for a bucolic retirement were quite common among officials at all levels of the department. These plans usually involved a comfortable home in a rural area (for senior headquarters this often took the form of leaving Gangtok for a renovated and redeveloped family home) with agricultural land that they could work in a leisured way, without the pressures of office. Contrary to Pema Wangdi’s perhaps idealised vision, much of the hard work would usually be done by labourers. And officials’ visions of retirement rarely rested purely on ‘one hundred per-cent dependence’ on farming. Rather, officials could count on their retirement packages, which were linked to their final salary and thus more generous for more senior officials, particularly when augmented by a pre-retirement promotion. Also, as in Pema Wangdi’s case, and in keeping with the prominence of tourism in Sikkim’s economic ambitions, officials’ financial security was often underpinned with plans for a homestay. I argue that Pema Wangdi’s aspirations for retirement are rooted in his recollections of fields past. These recollections also moved fluidly between the hard but honest work of childhood and the hard but honest work of the fieldworker on a government farm, with its connection to farmers – both recalled equally nostalgically.

Escape from the field

The ways in which officials recounted their life histories, and the futures they imagined for themselves and their families, often betrayed a more personal and complex relationship between field and office. Most currently serving department officials grew up towards the end of the monarchy and during the early years of Sikkim’s absorption as a state into the Indian Union. Bim Bahadur was one such official: a Village Level Worker (the second lowest grade of fieldworker), he had worked in the horticulture department for fourteen

years, responsible for 'Tuksum-Rawney GPU. Bim Bahadur's grandfather was originally from nearby Nesam, and, according to Bim Bahadur, had grown up in poverty, unable to secure enough land to support his family. He had left Sikkim in search of land to farm, but this move had not brought success, and he had returned to Nesam only a few years later. The perceived failure had brought ridicule on the family down to Bim Bahadur's generation, and Bim Bahadur recounted being teased at school, nicknamed after the village in which his father had tried to procure land. Still unable to secure enough land for himself and his three sons, and smarting from the perceived humiliation, Bim Bahadur's grandfather had purchased five acres in 'Tuksum. At the time, the land was not particularly desirable. It was two hours' uphill walk from Nesam, also the nearest roadhead, had no permanent source of water, and was sparsely settled. Shortly afterwards, Bim Bahadur's grandfather had contracted tuberculosis. His father and two uncles had married and divided the land between them, and his grandfather had died when Bim Bahadur was two or three years old. His mother had later developed asthma, a condition which severely incapacitated her for the rest of her life, and which Bim Bahadur attributed to 'Tuksum's altitude and its consequent cold, damp climate.

The family struggled to buy food, clothes and school uniforms, and Bim Bahadur would carry the milk from the family's cows down to Nesam to sell in order to buy these essentials. His uncle established and ran a government primary school but once he was of secondary school age, he had to move back to Nesam, where his father struggled to pay for lodging and tuition. After a year, Bim Bahadur's host offered to provide free lodging in return for Bim Bahadur himself giving tuition to his two children. By class twelve (the final year of secondary school) he was tutoring around 25 students and was earning around R 3,000 per month. This income enabled him to complete class twelve, while his three elder siblings had had to drop out of school, a brother to earn money through casual agricultural labour, and two sisters to marry. The income also enabled Bim Bahadur to support family expenses in 'Tuksum, including his mother's frequent hospital stays. However, he was not able to find financial support to continue on to university. After some time continuing to provide tuition, a well-known ruling party member, whom Bim Bahadur had known for some time, was selected as a candidate for Nesam's MLA seat, and requested Bim Bahadur to assist with his election campaign, which was ultimately successful. He provided Bim Bahadur with a recommendation letter, as a result of which Bim Bahadur secured a

position as a peon in the Horticulture Department headquarters in Gangtok, which, Bim Bahadur told me, provided a salary of R 2,500 per month; R 3,500 once allowances were included. After three years in this job, he was promoted to Field Assistant, the lowest rank of technical staff, but shortly afterwards his mother had died. He requested a transfer to the department's subdivisional office an hour's drive from Tuksum, and moved back to live with his family. The following year, his father collapsed with a stroke while working in the fields, and remained severely disabled until his death seven years later. Bim Bahadur was his father's main carer during this time, but the medical costs consumed his salary and any savings he had accumulated.

Bim Bahadur now shared the property left by his father with his elder brother Bimal and sister-in-law Amrita, who contributed most of the agricultural labour, and their children. As a department official, he was able to ensure that Tuksum received government support, including planting material (seeds and seedlings) and larger infrastructure such as polytunnels. Despite his official position in the department, he deferred to Bimal on the running of the farm. "He is the expert in farming; he knows much better than me," he once told me. Bim Bahadur's role was as the earner of a salary, without which farming could not have sustained the family. Even then, he was exploring other ways to expand the family's income. A large company, headquartered in Delhi, had been contracted as a service provider with the department to construct polytunnels, and Bim Bahadur became friendly with the company's representative in Sikkim. He and a friend began subcontracting for the company to build polytunnels in a part of Sikkim some distance away from Tuksum. He began using his pickup truck to travel for these contracts, and to transport materials, and would stay away from Tuksum-Rawney for several days at a time.

Bim Bahadur's relationship with farm work, then, is a complex one. On the one hand, his practical knowledge of farming is a source of pride. He also contrasts his hard upbringing and work ethic with the 'lazy' nature of many 'government servants'. And yet, perversely, given the career he ended up in, it would appear that this personal and family experience of poverty has left Bim Bahadur with a determination not to rely for his livelihood on land and farming. It is his organising talents and political acumen that have ultimately enabled him to secure a 'government job', albeit one whose prospects are limited by his lack of further education. I argue that the ideal of the 'hardworking farmer' serves officials as a

model for the hard work expected of them, and serves not just as an exemplar for other farmers, but for officials themselves. It is present in Dorjee Wangyal's invocation of 'positive' and 'negative' people, in Bim Bahadur's pride in his knowledge of farming and deference to his brother Bimal's still superior practical knowledge. In their roles, officials strive to achieve qualities of 'hard work' and 'positivity' comparable to those they valorise in, and demand of, farmers. In claiming these qualities for themselves, and evaluating their colleagues according to them, they also seek the legitimacy, ultimately based in the fields and the soil, that the organic conversion constructs. But the tension inherent between the department's diagnosis of a 'decline of farming' and its 'positive' prescriptions for an organic revival also play out in officials' careers. On the one hand, a senior officer like Pema Wangdi bemoans the drudgery and stresses imposed by office work and imagines a return to the field, but one stripped of the hard work of his youth and early career. At the other end of the organisational hierarchy, meanwhile, Bim Bahadur parlays his hard work in the field, through the strategically shrewd negotiation of organisational politics, into a more secure future.

Chapter 4: authenticating Organic Sikkim

This chapter examines the central authenticating technology of the organic conversion. I argue that the declaration by its government of Sikkim as a ‘total organic state’ was fundamentally predicated on the certification of land. This certification was the central underpinning technology of the conversion, by which officials hoped they could secure in the eyes of distant markets the association between Sikkim Organic produce and the special qualities with which they invested Sikkim as a state. As such, the certification technologies which they elaborated were based on the capacity to trace the provenance of produce to the farm, farmer, and field on which it was grown. However, at least in some respects, Sikkim’s status as a ‘total organic state’ rendered such specific authentication somewhat tautological. Through the experiences of ‘service providers’ who occupied a significant role in the certification process, and the process of ‘internal inspection’ for which they were responsible, I trace some of the contradictions that this process threw up.

Land as the currency of the organic conversion

Land was both the measure and the means of Sikkim’s organic conversion and arguably the central work in the production of a Sikkim organic by design. As with all organic regimes, Sikkim’s was fundamentally structured around the concept of certification. As with most of them, this certification was fundamentally founded on the principle that, for produce to be labelled ‘organic’, it must be grown on a specifically delimited area of land, on which all of the cultivatory operations performed are similarly approved by a competent authority, usually one operating at national level and on a statutory basis. In spite of its government-mediated and ‘total’ nature, though, the conversion relied principally on a variety of privately contracted entities to carry out this certification role. One of the main categories of these entities was termed ‘service providers’. These were private sector for-profit companies and non-governmental organisations, based both within Sikkim and in wider India. The staff of service providers were also tasked with other roles, including the

training of farmers and the marketing of their produce, but the majority of their time was taken up with certification-related responsibilities. It is usual for certification to be carried out by private entities in organic regimes worldwide, and such arrangements fit with the global trend towards entrepreneurialism and the contracting out of government functions prescribed by the new public management (see Introduction). But the contrast with the government-mediated basis of the conversion and the statewide scale and intensity of activities necessitated by the certification model chosen by the Government of Sikkim make these arrangements worthy of note. According to one government publication, the department's programme of certification covered "74,190 Ha of land under holding of 64,726 farming families" (Bhutia 2015, preface) across the state, and the certification process entailed an intensive programme of visits from the responsible agencies. Interestingly, the significant workforce that this process entailed, employed by the service provider agencies, was often portrayed by politicians and officials as one of the benefits of the organic conversion. They frequently added it to what might be seen as the more direct employment effects in farming, trading and agri-processing industry as evidence of the economic benefits of the conversion. This chapter explores the work of certification in Sikkim's organic conversion, and the work of the service provider agencies as privately contracted elements of a state-mediated project.

In January 2016, The Chief minister's declaration that Sikkim had achieved the status of "India's first organic state [Hin: jaywik rajjya]" (*Sikkim Organic State Declaration, 18/01/2016 (Mero Sapanako Sikkim, Vol-2)*. - YouTube 2016) was founded primarily on the claim that almost all of the state's agricultural land had undergone an initial process of organic certification. Reaching this benchmark was the primary thrust of the 'implementation period' of the organic conversion. The celebration of the 'Sikkim organic festival', with the presence of the Prime Minister of India, underlined its centrality. Indeed, the anniversary of the 2016 organic festival declaration became an officially-marked day, celebrated on the 18th January, as 'Organic Day' (Nep: Jaywik Diwas)⁵⁵, with an accompanying 'programme'

⁵⁵ Jaywik literally translates as 'biological', from Skr 'jiwa', meaning 'life'. This occasion and the declaration of Sikkim as an "organic state [Hin: jaywik rajjya]" (*Sikkim Organic State Declaration, 18/01/2016 (Mero Sapanako Sikkim, Vol-2)*. - YouTube 2016) were the only contexts in which I have seen or heard the term 'organic' translated from the English. In some previous years, the day had been referred to as 'Farmers' Day' (Nep: Kisan Diwas).

organised by the state government. During the programme marking the 2019 Organic Day, a senior department officer made a presentation recapitulating the achievements of the organic conversion. A slide from this presentation shows a photo of the Chief Minister presenting a copy of the declaration to the Prime Minister of India. They are flanked by the then Governor of Sikkim (the union's chief representative to the state), the union Agriculture Minister and other senior union and state officials. The venue is the Chintan Bhawan, the main state government conference venue, which shares a compound with the state legislature. The allusion to woods in the epigraph referencing the American poet Robert Frost, a regular feature of the Indian secondary school curriculum, is apposite to the portrayal of Sikkim as a state “in harmony with nature and the environment” (Chamling 2010, quoted in Government of Sikkim n.d.a), but the reference to ‘promises’ highlights the importance department officials invested in what is written in the slide legend below. This states that “by the end of the year 2015, 76,169 ha of agricultural land was brought under organic management.” The text which follows states that “Shri Narendra Modi declared Sikkim as the first organic farming state in the country during a National Conference held in Gangtok in January 2016.”⁵⁶ The same presentation gives Sikkim’s total ‘agricultural land’ as 77,000 Ha, indicating that almost all of Sikkim’s agricultural land had been certified as organic.



⁵⁶ I have been informed by several friends, some within the department, that, in his speech at the Organic Fair, the Prime Minister carefully avoided such a declaration, confining himself to general praise for Sikkim’s organic initiative.

Figure 20: slide presented at a programme to celebrate the 'Organic Day', January 2019.

In their everyday speech, officials tended to employ the term 'cultivable land' more often than 'agricultural land'. They also used the alternative term 'cultivated land' roughly interchangeably with that of 'cultivable' land. The latter term appears to introduce an element of both potentiality and indeterminacy. As we will see, the distinction has important implications for the certification process and can give rise to some discrepancies within it. It is possible that the official making this presentation adopted the term 'agricultural land' to avoid confusion between these two terms. I argue that these measures of land area, along with the aspiration for Sikkim as a 'total organic state', where that totality is also defined by land area, are centrally related to officials' notions of the conversion's success. This relationship is underpinned by the technology of certification, one which constitutes a central, if not the defining, bureaucratic process of the organic movement globally.

Values for the area of land under farming, and for that certified, were a prominent motif in the many publications related to the conversion produced by the Government of Sikkim, particularly during the 'conversion' or 'implementation' phase between 2010 and 2015, when the greater part of land was initially certified. One of the more prominent of these was the State Policy on Organic Farming, undated, but, as far as I can tell, produced in 2014 (Government of Sikkim n.d.a). It takes the form of a brief analysis of Sikkim's agricultural sector and a history of the conversion to that date, with a summary of the main strategies envisaged by the department in order to fulfil the objective of Sikkim achieving the status of "total organic state" by December 2015. The document projects that an area of 7,4303.8323 Ha will be certified by this date (Government of Sikkim n.d.a:12).

Another document shows, in more detailed format, the emphasis placed upon land certification as a central act in the production of a Sikkim organic by design. This publication, printed in book form, is entitled "Sikkim organic mission: journey of a fully organic farming state" (Bhutia 2015). It was produced for the January 2016 organic festival, and so largely takes the form of a retrospective account of the organic conversion, culminating, as per the title, in Sikkim achieving the status quoted in the title. The book

states that “...in three phases the entire state has been converted into organic, covering 74,190 hectares of land under holding of 64,726 farming families” (Bhutia 2015, preface). In spite of this retrospective framing, its account of the conversion’s activities is presented as *prospective* plans, which, according to the publication, were drawn up in advance. One of these takes the form of a “five year plan,” in tabular form, for physical inputs and activities scheduled for the conversion period between 2010 and 2015.

Table-5
Sikkim Organic Mission
Five Year Plan (Physical)

Sl. No.	Component	2010-11 Base year	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15 Final year
1A	ICS development (ha)	Phase I - 18000 Phase II - 18000	Phase I - 18000 Phase II - 18000	Phase I - 18000 Phase II - 18000 Phase III - 14000	- Phase II - 18000 Phase III - 14000	- Phase III - 14000
1B	Certification (ha)	18000	36000	50000	32000	14000
1C	Renewal documentation (ha)	8128 Previous area	8128	8128 18000	8128 18000 18000	8128 18000 18000 14000
1D	Renewal Certification (ha)	8128	8128	26128	44128	58128
1E	Certification - Third Party (ha)	26128	44128	58128	58128	30000
1F	PGS Management (ha)	-	-	-	-	28128
2	Cardamom Certification (ha)	3464	3464	9058	9058	9058
3.	Input adoption (INM)					
	(i) Compost cum urine pits (nos)	1500	5000	2000	2000	2000
	(ii) Vermicompost units (nos)	2400	1300	1000	1000	1000

51

Additional cert. + renewal

plan? -> pits happen!

1C/1B certification complete

8128 8128 26128 44128 58128

Figure 21: five year plan for the organic conversion (Bhutia 2015:51; my personal annotations).

The first seven rows of the table detail the department’s approach to bringing all of Sikkim’s cultivable land under organic certification. Items 1A to 1F detail land which had already been certified prior to 2010, and set out putative targets for the remainder of land to be progressively brought through the three year process required to achieve certified status. This process formally entailed the farmer maintaining a ‘farm diary’ detailing all agricultural inputs and cultivation practices used on the land (see below for a fuller account of this process). Land in the first year of this monitoring process was described as under

“phase I”, land in the second year as “phase II”, and so on. Once land had passed successfully through Phase III, it was considered certified as organic. However, on an annual basis, this land still required a process of regular ‘renewal’ certification which essentially replicated the process of initial certification. Service providers were initially instructed to conduct renewal certification annually, but this was subsequently increased to twice yearly, once for each of the two main growing seasons. Item 2 details measures in place for the certification of land on which cardamom is grown. Here, according to the department, “One or two years of documentation is enough for certification as synthetic fertilizers have never been used” (Bhutia 2015:44), cardamom being a crop traditionally grown in forest clearings.

Another presentation, shown to me in 2016, states the “net area sown” as 77,179.41 ha. The same presentation lists among the “government interventions” a “target of 74,303 ha set for organic certification,” thus agreeing with the State Policy on Organic Farming (Government of Sikkim n.d.a) quoted above. However, the 2016 presentation quotes the actual area certified as 76,169.604 ha, thus implying that the original target had been exceeded (and agreeing with the 2019 presentation, discussed above). Again though, the prime position and level of detail given illustrates the centrality accorded to the inscription and circumscription of land in the certification process.

The figures cited above for area certified represent a bureaucratic operation carried out on land, certification being the technology by which land was “brought under organic management,” as the 2019 presentation put it. The emphasis officials gave to the inscription and circumscription of land in Sikkim’s certification process, as well as in Sikkim’s claim to the status of ‘organic state’, illustrate the centrality of certification to the organic conversion. Indeed, it would be fair to argue that the primary effort of the five year ‘conversion’ or ‘implementation’ period, up to the end of 2015, was on this certification, and that land certification was seen by officials as the most significant prerequisite for the 2016 declaration that the conversion itself had been completed. This also serves as a more general demonstration of the principle that all organic regimes are by their nature bureaucratic, fundamentally structured as they are around the technology of certification. Certification serves the purpose of engendering trust (Seshia Galvin 2018): securing the authenticity of produce for consumers geographically distant from the producers of their

food, and enabling them to trace its origin to a specific area of land with specific qualities. It thus enables food distribution chains to operate on the large-scale, commercial basis which Julie Guthman (2004) argues also constitutes a central tenet of the global organic movement. The tasking of private service providers with the major part of the certification process places both the organic movement as a whole and Sikkim's organic conversion clearly within the New Public Management (see Introduction), with the employees of service providers produced as "adaptable, multi-skilled, self-managed and largely self-driven professionals" (Shore & Wright 2000:79). Meanwhile, the centrality of certification as a cascading process of surveillance and verification shows the conversion and the organic movement as a whole to conform with what Marilyn Strathern (2000) terms "audit culture", a phenomenon she and Shore and Wright (2000) see as co-extensive with the New Public Management.

The weight which officials apparently place on values of land area cultivated and certified is consistent with their background as trained technocrats working in a technical department. It also speaks to the history of that department's developmentalist efforts to bring the green revolution to Sikkim, with the attendant emphases placed during that era on production of, and area under, various crops. Writing on a case of the abduction of a child in Delhi, Veena Das (2020) makes the observation that the police and judicial processes which ensue privilege an overarching priority that the facts implicated should be consistent among themselves and within the logic of the process concerned, with any gaps and discrepancies adequately explained. The importance officials in Sikkim accorded to the coherence between values of land area indicates a comparable logic is at play for departmental officials. But the persistence of discrepancies, some major and some minor, indicates that department officials do not always observe the letter of this principle of consistency, perhaps particularly when under pressure to produce a finished document in time for an upcoming 'programme'. The processes of certification, an ethnographic account of which I include below, may shed some light on these discrepancies. First, however, it is necessary to set out a more formalistic account of the way in which officials held these processes to operate.

Sikkim's organic certification system

Almost all organic regimes share the common principle of assuring food is grown in such a way as to promote human health, environmental protection and labour rights, though regimes accord different emphasis to each and are occasionally criticised for neglecting one or the other (Guthman 2004). But there is no universal benchmark for organic certification or for the standards it enforces. Rather, each jurisdiction adopts its own regime. Produce sold as 'organic' in one jurisdiction must conform to the regime applicable in that jurisdiction, even if it is grown or processed in another jurisdiction. Sikkim's organic regime is designed to meet the standards of the National Programme on Organic Production (NPOP), India's organic certification regime, administered by the Agricultural and Processed Foods Export Development Authority (APEDA), under the Ministry of Commerce and Industry. Much of the detail of NPOP standards and administration was in the process of elaboration as Sikkim's organic certification system was being established (according to another Government of Sikkim presentation, NPOP was announced and formally "notified" in 2001), so the two could be said to have developed to some extent alongside one another. Organic regimes are generally designed with an eye to the market in which certified organic produce will be sold. The NPOP is intended to regulate certification standards for produce both grown and sold within India, as well as in export markets. Sikkim's organic conversion has, since its inception in 2003, been conceived by state officials as in significant measure oriented towards selling produce outside the state, in wider India and abroad. This emphasis may originate in Sikkim's history of trading cash crops, particularly spices, on the Indian and export markets. It could, more abstractly, be attributed to what I refer to in Chapter One as Sikkim's 'outward-facing' tendency.

Here, I give an account of Sikkim's certification system, as assembled from my conversations with the actors involved in it, official publications, and presentations shared publicly and privately by officials. I attempt to provide a formalistic account of the system, ie an explanation of how government officials conceive it formally to function, in fulfilment of the formal ends those officials impute to it. I term this account 'formalistic' because it does not always conform to the ways I experienced it following the work of officials and the staff responsible for certification. Nonetheless, the documentation on the certification process and, I would argue, these staff, articulated a generally clear

conceptualisation of a coherent ‘system’ of organic certification. I will discuss below, from a more nuanced, ethnographic perspective, how government officials and other actors engaged in the practice of the certification regime. Without this formalistic conceptualisation, however, it is impossible to understand this practice.

Land-based certification

The certification system Sikkim adopted is termed third party guarantee (TPG); the ‘third party’ being an organisation independent of both farmers and the government certification regime, termed a ‘certifying body’, whose role was to verify that produce labelled organic had been grown only with inputs and cultivation practices approved as acceptable under the NPOP. Three certifying bodies were contracted to provide third party guarantee certification services during the time of my field research: two private organisations with headquarters in wider India, and one agency established in 2015 by the state government: the Sikkim State Organic Certification Agency (SSOCA). In Sikkim’s case, given the centrality of land, and the emphasis on the certification of all cultivable land in a ‘total organic state’, the largest part of the work under the third party guarantee system was devoted to the certification of this land. The regular certification of land by a certifying body was referred to variously as ‘external control’, ‘external audit’, or ‘external inspection,’ one of two main elements of the land-based certification system. For produce which was grown and sold unprocessed within Sikkim, no further certification measures were required beyond this land certification. However, where produce was processed and sold outside of the state in wider India, or where it was exported, NPOP required further forms of certification which attached to the produce rather than merely to the land on which it was grown.

The principal actors, then, involved in the land-based component of the certification regime, included farmers themselves, the department, and certifying bodies. But interposed between these three were two other actors. Certification, in practice, happened to individual farmers and their individual landholdings. Formally however, these farmers were grouped into ‘grower groups’, usually referred to in Sikkim as farmers’ interest groups (FIGs – see Chapter Two). These groups were provided for under NPOP guidelines (Ministry of Commerce & Industry, Government of India 2014), whose wording would indicate that they serve as a means of aggregating larger numbers of farmers (officially between 25 and

a maximum of 500), and thereby facilitating their certification. Generally, the membership of these grower groups conformed precisely to GPU boundaries, and, in order to ensure the ‘total’ nature of the certification process, every ‘farmer’ (defined as any person who cultivated land) within a GPU was, by default, a member. The guidelines also specified that “the Certification Body shall not certify if there is no ICS as per NPOP and 100% internal inspections are not conducted” (Ministry of Commerce & Industry 2014:156). The acronym ICS refers here to the ‘internal control system,’ the second major element of the land-based certification system. ‘Internal’ refers to the notion that this control is the responsibility of the farmer or grower group, as opposed to the ‘external’ control enacted by an independent certifying body. In principle, internal control consisted of obligations on the farmer to self-report the cultivation practices and inputs used on the land. This was done through two documents. Formally, a ‘farmer’s diary’ was to be completed continuously by the farmer, and should detail all inputs and cultivation techniques applied to the land. An ‘internal checklist’ summarised the information held in the farmer’s diary and was to be completed biannually, for each of the two main growing seasons: ‘kharif’, or monsoon season, lasting roughly from May to October, when crops were rain-fed; and ‘rabi’, lasting from mid-November until April, when colder climate crops that did not require rainfall were grown. In practice, during the conversion period, the department in Sikkim judged that farmers would not be capable of managing the considerable paperwork burden of the farmer’s diary and the internal checklist. It therefore decided to allocate this pivotal role to privately contracted organisations, termed ‘service providers,’ through national-level tender. Contracts were awarded to a mixture of both Sikkim-based organisations and national ones (ie those based outside of Sikkim), and to private companies and registered NGOs. Formally, service providers had responsibility for the completion of internal checklists, in visits termed ‘internal inspections’. This process was also sometimes referred to by service providers and department officials as ‘internal audit.’ While it did not formally take on the official status of an ‘audit’, the use of this term did reflect the significance, and the effort, accorded to this part of the certification system. Informally, it was generally accepted that service providers would also complete the farmers’ diaries on behalf of farmers. In fact, these diaries were in practice usually kept with the individual employees of service providers at their homes, or in the service providers’ offices, and on several occasions service provider employees informed me that, having completed the internal checklists, they were “busy with completing the farm

diaries,” implying that these diaries were updated retrospectively, and from the internal checklists. Thus, grower groups did not generally serve any administrative role, and were purely aggregators for farmers and their land, the entirety of internal control being fulfilled by service providers. As well as this certification role, service providers were tasked with a variety of training and ‘awareness raising’ responsibilities, intended to impart and encourage the adoption of organic techniques among farmers, making their roles overlap somewhat with the extension functions of full-time department field staff.

The internal control system was in fact the point at which the majority of data related to certification was recorded. The staff of service providers were therefore tasked with carrying out the largest part of the work of the certification system. The Gangtok offices of all service providers were staffed with teams of between four and ten young staff whose main task was to enter the data contained in each internal checklist for each farm, via computer terminals, into Tracenet, the national organic information system, overseen by APEDA. The external control system essentially took the form of an audit of documentation already prepared under the internal control system. The staff of certifying bodies were provided with a randomly selected sample of ten to twelve per cent of landholdings, selected by Tracenet, according to an algorithm which weighted the sample towards those which had been categorised as at higher risk of ‘contamination’ or of contravention of organic practices, and towards larger area properties (all landholdings over four hectares must be audited by a certifying body). They inspected these landholdings using an ‘external checklist’, in order to verify the internal checklists already prepared by the staff of service providers. A blank internal control form, or internal checklist, is reproduced below (excluding Nepali translation).

SIKKIM ORGANIC MISSION
Under FS & ADD and H&CCDD
Government of Sikkim

Name of Service Provider: _____

Name of Certification Agency: _____

Internal Inspection checklist

Season	RABI / रबी	KHARIF / खरीफ	
Status	Certified		
Longitude		Latitude	

NAME OF THE PROJECT:

FARMER'S ID NO.																				
AADHAR CARD NO.																				

Name of farmer : _____

Father's name : _____

Contact No. : _____

Total Land area : _____

Name of Grower Group : _____

Name of Village/Ward. : _____

District : _____

FIELD MAP

N

A. General information

Name of Auditors Date of inspection

Village:	Post:	Tehsil:			
District:	State:	Phone No:			
Total Land Holding (Hectare):	Land offered for organic (Hectare):	Total organic site:			
Category of farmer	Registered	IC - 3	Organic		
Document Review					
Does the farmer have Farmer Diary & farm product inventory list?		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> NA	
Is training given as required?		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> NA	
Verify if all required documented operating procedures in place and completed.		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> NA	
Does all the non compliance closed, if any raised during last audit.		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> NA	
Comment if any?					
A. Crop Production Detail					
Name of Crop	Field No.	Area (Hectare)	Estimated Yield (MT)	Actual yield	Comment if any?
Is the farmer engaged in parallel / split production?				<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
If yes, how they prevent the risk of contamination?					

B. Detail of Seedling Transplanting in Field

Name of Crop	Source of Seed	Date of transplanting	Seed Rate	Name of seed Treatment Input	Method of Treatment
If chemically untreated conventional seeds and plant material. Is the documented proof that certified organic seed and plant materials are not commercially available.					<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> NA
Did he inform field/extension officer regarding non-availability of organic seed and use of untreated or treated seeds?					<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> NA
Does farmer have used non-organically produced perennial stock or planting material.					<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> NA
If yes, Is there a minimum of 12 months prior to any harvest being sold as organic?					<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> NA
Does the farmer maintain crop rotation?					<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> NA
Does the crop rotation programme allow boosting up soil fertility and diversity which takes into account pressure from insects, weeds, diseases and other pests?					<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> NA
Comments in any?					
C. Seed Propagation Materials					
Name of Crop	Source of Seed	Date of sowing	Seed rate	Name of Seed treatment	Method of treatment

D. Soil Fertility Management									
Name of Input	Source of Manure	Quantity Applied (Qtl)	Date of Application	Method of Manure preparation					
Does the farmer use raw animal manure? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No, If , yes incorporating into the soil on which stage?									
Does the fertilization program based on the use of biodegradable material of microbial, plant or animal origin?				<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No				
Does the ingredients of the material used for soil fertility management are approved/ restricted?				<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No				
Comment if any?									
E. Pest, Disease and Weed Management, Use of Growth Regulators									
Name of Input	Source of Manure	Quantity Applied (Qtl)	Date of Application	Method of pest control input preparation					
F. Check that weed and pest control is primarily approached by management of the system to prevent problems occurring?				<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> NA			
Has burning taken place?				<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> NA			
Whether it is for suppression of crop disease?				<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> NA			
Verify that no genetically engineered organisms or products have been used.				<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> NA			
Comment if any?									
G. Organic Integrity Management									
Detail of Buffer Zone									
Direction	Buffer Zone Maintain	Detail of Adjoining Lands	Crop cultivated in adjoining land						
East									
West									
North									
South									
H. Detail of Animal Husbandry									
S. No	Live stock	Nos	Purpose	Product	Feed	Source of Feed	Diseases	Control	Remarks
1.									
2.									
3.									
4.									
5.									
Comments if any									
I. Detail of Equipment									
Does the farmer hire farm equipments?				<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> NA			
Does the same equipments used in organic and conventional.									
Verify that all equipment from conventional farming systems is cleaned and free from residue before being used on organically managed areas?									
Comment if any?									

J. Production Standards Harvest, Storage and Transport			
Detail of Harvesting			
Name of Crop	Method of Harvest	Estimated Month of Harvesting	Sale Record & other
What material is used for packaging?			
Does he reuse the packaging?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> NA
If Yes, Check whether he clean it properly before use?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> NA
K. Detail of Storage			
Is there separate store for organic and conventional produce?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> NA
Is there any pest problem in storage?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> NA
What control measures are adopted to check pest in storage?			
L. Detail of Transportation			
How material was transported from farm to market?			
Comments if any?			
<input type="checkbox"/> Checks the following are maintained <input type="checkbox"/>			
<input type="checkbox"/> Field maps are of all parcels/fields	<input type="checkbox"/> Field history sheets for the last 3 yrs.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Input products label, if applicable	<input type="checkbox"/> Compost production record		
<input type="checkbox"/> Attempt to source organic seeds and planting stock	<input type="checkbox"/> Documentation of organic seedlings		
<input type="checkbox"/> Equipment cleaning records	<input type="checkbox"/> Sales records		
<input type="checkbox"/> Storage records	<input type="checkbox"/> Soil Test Report		
Internal Inspector Comments and Non-compliance issues?			
Approval decision <input type="checkbox"/> Approved with condition <input type="checkbox"/> approved without condition <input type="checkbox"/> Not approved			

RISK ASSESSMENT

Risk of contamination from	Low/Med/High	Comments
Neighbouring non-organic fields		
Non-organic activities of same farm		
Industry, motorways, wastewater, etc.		
Others (specify)		
Is there any risk of pollution from the river, canal etc.		
Are there any source of chemical contamination near by (Factory, Pharmaceuticals etc.)		

Any other:

Date: Signature of farmer Signature of Approval Committee Signature of Inspector

Figure 22: reproduction of blank internal checklist. (Nepali translations of prompts excluded).

Produce-based certification

During the period of my field research, all produce both grown and sold within Sikkim, for example at village or Gangtok markets, required no further certification measures beyond land-based certification. Significant volumes of Sikkim-grown produce were sold at markets outside of the state, particularly in Siliguri, but the segregated supply chains required for the marketing of organic produce were not yet well developed, and neither Sikkim nor Siliguri possessed a dedicated organic wholesale market. So the majority of Sikkim's produce sold out of the state was sold as non-organic and therefore at standard market prices. However, significant quantities of certain cash crops, particularly spices such as cardamom, turmeric and ginger, widely grown in Sikkim, were sold as organic, and one of the stated aims of the organic conversion had been to develop organic markets and supply chains for Sikkim-grown produce. Processed produce, such as dried spices or preserves, if sold as organic, must be traceable through the entire value chain to its raw materials, grown on certified land⁵⁷. Accordingly, a significant emphasis was placed by the department on putting in place arrangements for the marketing of organic produce outside of the state. This required further certification measures, which did not merely attach to the land, but to the produce itself, and which followed a given consignment through the value chain to the end consumer. The primary principle operating in produce-based certification is to avoid the risk of produce not grown on organically certified land being passed off as such; in particular, the system was designed to prevent a consignment of produce, grown on a given physical area of organically certified land, taking on quantities clearly larger than that area could be reasonably expected to produce. Thus, the internal checklist required data on the area under the various crops which a farmer had planted for that season, and a projected estimate of the quantity of the harvest, calculated using standard yield multiples for each crop. The service provider then prepared, on the basis of this data, for each farmer, a 'scope certificate' for the quantity of the harvest (in kilogrammes or tonnes) that farmer's landholding was projected to yield. This was also

⁵⁷ During my fieldwork period, preserves sold under the brand Sikkim Supreme, the state food processing enterprise, appear not to have met these traceability standards, and accordingly, all jars were sold with labels on which the word 'organic' had been manually struck through with permanent markers. Also during the time of my fieldwork, on the 1st January 2019, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) issued a notification that a large number of categories of produce, both processed and unprocessed, could no longer be sold within India as 'organic' without the required certification under NPOP.

entered into Tracenet by the young workers in the Gangtok offices of service providers. While the preparation of actual consignments of produce to be sold as organic outside of Sikkim was rare, it was part of the service provider's role to facilitate this process. In terms of certification documentation, this required applying for a 'transaction certificate', issued by the certifying body, which legitimated the sale of the produce on to the next actor in the value chain. Generally, a transaction certificate would not be issued for a quantity of crop greater than that stated in the scope certificate. A transaction certificate was further required along each step of the value chain, so, for example, if the crop was to be processed, the processor would have to obtain its own scope certificate before it was permitted to sell the produce on down the market chain. In this way, the end product was traceable back to the land on which it was grown, no matter how many steps had been involved in its marketing and processing. Thus, even produce-based certification was ultimately premised on the certification of land.

Where produce was intended to be sold for export outside of India, it was required to conform to the NPOP regime as described above, but also to the organic regime in effect in the jurisdiction of the market to which it would be exported. The two markets officials in Sikkim cited most frequently when discussing the export potential of Sikkim-grown produce were the EU and the US. NPOP had been designed specifically for conformity with the EU organic regime. The internal and external control documentation, as well as scope and transaction certificates, were therefore accepted for EU exports. Service providers and certifying bodies were required to use separate documentation for exports to the US, and certifying bodies were themselves required to be separately accredited by the certification authority in the destination market, in addition to NPOP.

There were several particularities to Sikkim's certification system which ran somewhat anomalously to the way certification works in other states in India and, indeed, to other organic regimes globally. Most of these anomalies were linked to the status of Sikkim's organic conversion as a total and compulsory project covering all land across the state, and as a government-mediated project. Among these, the most obvious was that the costs of the extensive apparatus of contracted companies were borne entirely by the state government, and the majority ultimately funded through projects financed by the central government. In other states, these costs are generally borne by farmers themselves, and

offset against the profits expected from the higher prices obtained for organic produce. A second anomaly was that the full gamut of the certification system did not operate within the borders of Sikkim: the state government allowed produce which was grown and sold unprocessed within Sikkim to be marketed with no further certification measures beyond land certification. The legal basis of this exemption is not entirely clear, and there are grey areas between this practice and NPOP regulations and national food standards, but its effect was to place a lower benchmark on organic certification for produce grown for Sikkim's own population.

A third somewhat anomalous feature of Sikkim's organic regime was the status of the 'grower groups' to which Pratap's inspection visit refers. According to NPOP guidelines (Ministry of Commerce & Industry 2014:156), these groups serve to aggregate larger numbers of small farmers (officially between 25 and a maximum of 500) to enable certification where landholdings are not large enough to make it economic on a purely farmer-by-farmer basis. As such, they conform to the model, ubiquitous in development discourse, of the 'solidarity group', as a means for the poor to access services (Gerber 1994). In the context of organic production in Uttarakhand, Seshia Galvin (2018) extends the 'trust' engendered by the organic certification process to the solidarity groups into which production is organised. Conforming with this model, and in states where the organic regime is not total and compulsory, the ideal of a grower group would be a self-formed group of farmers voluntarily organising around a shared interest in organic farming, or perhaps in growing similar crops. The NPOP guidelines contain the provision that, "In case the farmers cannot run the ICS, they may enter into a contract with an external service provider/mandator/trader to facilitate the maintenance of internal control system, training, co-ordination and marketing of certified produce and to facilitate the certification from an accredited Certification Body" (Ministry of Commerce & Industry 2014:157). As the department judged farmers would be unable to fulfil these administrative duties unaided, it allocated this pivotal role to the privately contracted 'service providers,' through national-level tender. I would argue, therefore, that much of the function of engendering 'trust' (Seshia Galvin 2018) was fulfilled by service providers. As Annelise Riles (2006) argues, considered as artefacts, documents, and their relationships to those that write and use them, can provide intimate analytical insight into the logics, explicit and

implicit, of bureaucratic processes (Hull 2012). The following section examines the ways documents operated in one of the significant components of Sikkim's organic conversion.

An internal inspection

During my early discussions with department officials on arrangements for observing activities 'in the field', I was initially referred by a senior officer not to the department's own officials within the rural territorial administration, but to the representative of one of the private service provider companies. This representative was very willing to make arrangements for me to see the service provider's activities in the rural areas, and, in turn, referred me to one of his 'supervisors' who was responsible for certification in one rural development block⁵⁸. The supervisor arranged for me to accompany one of his Field Officers, Pratap Pokhrel, in carrying out his certification duties. Here, I recount my time with Pratap as an instance of the practice of certification as undertaken by service providers. I limit my ethnographic description to internal inspection as the part of the certification process which consumed the main effort of service providers. I do not cover external inspection or the processes of preparation of scope certificates and transaction certificates as space does not allow, and as I gained less direct experience of these processes.

I met Pratap Pokhrel at his block office, and we walked a few hundred metres up the road to the first of twenty houses at which he was due to conduct an internal inspection that day. He carried with him blank internal inspection checklists (see below), together with the farm diaries for all twenty of the farmers he was due to visit that day; and a handwritten membership ledger for the local grower group. The farm diary for our first landholding was in the name of Bim Prasad Pokhrel, to whom Pratap was related through his wife. We met Bim Prasad's wife sitting in the sun, outside the house, sorting dal, and she told us Bim Prasad had left for market to sell some of his newly harvested potatoes. She went inside to make tea, we sat, and Pratap began to fill in the checklist. He copied the farmer's ID

⁵⁸ A rural development block is a level of territorial administration at which certain technical departments of the state government are organised, those departments usually sharing a 'block office'. It is purely administrative level of organisation and does not possess a corresponding level of elected government.

number, which pertained to a national database of all farmers, and the AADHAAR card number⁵⁹, as well as the details of the landholding, its location and total area, from the members' register and the farm diary. The bottom half of the first side of the four-page checklist was taken up by a box labelled "field map". He left this blank, telling me "we will fill this out later," and then proceeded to question Bim Prasad's wife on the crops standing in the family's fields at the time. He filled in a table on Page 2, listing the main crops being grown, as related by Bim Prasad's wife, and detailing the area for each. These he copied from a map included in the farm diary. "She is my relative, and I know these fields and their areas, so I can fill this table in myself," he said. He left the final columns of this table, detailing "estimated yield" and "final yield" blank, and moved to a table on Page 3, detailing "buffer zones," under a section entitled "Organic Integrity Management." Here, under "detail of adjoining lands," he listed the holders of the four landholdings adjoining Bim Prasad's. Under a column headed "Buffer zone maintain," he wrote details of the boundaries between the properties. These he listed as "stone wall", "kholisa [stream]", and "trees". Speaking in Nepali but employing frequent English terms, he explained to me, "The stone wall [Nep: dhunga bhita] is the best, as no contamination can cross it [contamination le cross garnu sakdaina]." He left the rest of the form blank, thanked our host, and we continued on to a neighbouring property. "This one took too long," Pratap told me, "We will have to be quicker with the next one. It's difficult because most of the farmers are related to me and it's hard to leave too quickly." While I tried to keep my questions to a minimum, it was clear that these also delayed proceedings, and, after the next landholding, I left him to continue with the eighteen inspections that remained.


We met again in the late afternoon. He had not been able to complete five of the inspections, but told me he would finish them at home. We walked the 3 Km up the road to his house and fed and milked Pratap's two cows, by which time his wife had prepared dinner. Having eaten, he and his wife washed up, and we were joined by their daughter and Pratap's elder brother, who lived with them, in the living room. It was a January evening, and dark by 6pm. A thick mist had come up from the valley, and the chill radiated from the concrete walls. The five of us huddled under one large, thick, polyester fleece blanket on the guest bed I would sleep on. Pratap's daughter worked at her homework while his wife

⁵⁹ AADHAAR is the nationwide unique identity card system, officially introduced since 2016, and on which the receipt of almost all forms of state aid are increasingly dependent (see Thakar 2018).

crocheted, and Pratap piled up the checklists on the coffee table and started to complete them, explaining as he went. For Bim Prasad's form, he started with the field map. Generously, he filled out an extra, sample, copy of the form for me to keep. He began with the map, by drawing the boundary of the landholding, explaining as he went the nature of this boundary. "Here, uphill [Nep: matipatti], there is a stone wall on the boundary; on this side it's also stone." He explained in Nepali, but used the English term "stone wall." I had seen the wall earlier in the day; it was the typical dry-stone retention wall built on many terraces where suitable stone is available, commonly referred to in Nepali as 'bhita'.

Here I mark the boundary with circles, like this; here I mark them double-coated [with a double-line]. This shows that no contamination can cross the wall. Before, I used to mark them with a single line, but it doesn't look so good. Below, there are trees; these I mark also. And on this side the boundary is a stream.

He used the English terms "hard" to describe the stone wall, and "soft" for the trees and stream.


SIKKIM ORGANIC MISSION
 Under FS & ADD and H&CDD
 Government of Sikkim

Name of Service Provider: [Redacted]
 Name of Certification Agency: [Redacted]

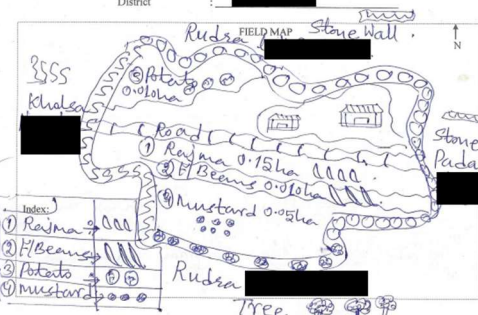
Internal Inspection Check list

Season	RABI / 10	KHARIF / 11
Status	Organic	Certified
Longitude		Latitude

NAME OF THE PROJECT: SIKKIM ORGANIC MISSION

FARMER'S ID NO. [Redacted]
 AADHAAR CARD NO. [Redacted]

Name of farmer [Redacted]
 Father's Name [Redacted]
 Contact No. [Redacted]
 Total Land area : 0.5000 Ha.
 Name of Grower Group: [Redacted]
 Name of Village/Ward: [Redacted]
 District: [Redacted]



A. General Information (write verbatim)

Name of Auditor (write verbatim): [Redacted] Date of inspection (date and time): 08/01/2019

Village (write verbatim): [Redacted] Post (write verbatim): [Redacted] Taluk (write verbatim): [Redacted]

Total Land holding (hectares): [Redacted] Land offered for organic (hectares): [Redacted] Total organic site (write verbatim): 1

Category of farmer (write verbatim): [Redacted] Registered: [Redacted] Organic (write verbatim): [Redacted]

Does the farmer have Farmer Diary & farm product inventory list? Yes No NA/never use

Is training given to you? Yes No NA/never use

Does all the non-compliance closed, if any raised during last audit? Yes No NA/never use

Consent if any (write verbatim): Records are maintain.

A. Crop Production Detail (write verbatim)

Name of Crop	Field No.	Area (hectares)	Estimated Yield (kg/ha)	Actual yield (kg)	Conversion if any
1. Rajma	1	0.15ha	60kg	10kg	
2. MBeans	1	0.15ha	80kg	15kg	
3. Mustard seed	1	0.15ha	12kg	12kg	

B. Detail of Seedling Transplantation in Field (write verbatim)

Name of Crop	Source of Seed	Transplanting time	Method of Treatment
Rajma	Agri. Sec	Aug	Untreated
MBeans	Agri. Sec	Aug	Untreated
Mustard	Agri. Sec	Dec	Untreated

D. Soil Fertility Management (write verbatim)

Name of Input: FYM Source of Manure: Own farm Quantity Applied (kg/ha): 1500 Date of Application: At the time of field preparation Method of Manure application: Pit decomposition

Does the farmer use raw animal manure? Yes No NA/never use

Does the farmer use any chemical fertilizers? Yes No NA/never use

Does the farmer use any pesticides? Yes No NA/never use

Comments if any (write verbatim): Full decomposed FYM is used.

E. Pest, Disease and Weed Management (write verbatim)

Name of Input: Minor pest disease Source of Manure: Naturally Weeding is done manually. Quantity Applied: Problem Control Date of Application: Method of pest control input:

Check that weed and pest control is primarily approached by Management of the system to prevent problems occurring? Yes No NA/never use

Has burning taken place? Yes No NA/never use

Whether it is for suppression of crop disease? Yes No NA/never use

Verify that no genetically engineered organisms or products have been used. Yes No NA/never use

G. Organic Integrity Management (write verbatim)

Detail of Buffer Zone (write verbatim):

Direction from	Buffer Zone Maintain	Detail of Adjoining Lands	Crop cultivated in adjoining land
East	Stone Wall	[Redacted]	All crops are organic
West	Stone Wall	[Redacted]	
North	Stone Wall	[Redacted]	
South	Tree	[Redacted]	

H. Detail of Animal Husbandry (write verbatim)

No.	Live stock	No. of animals	Purpose	Product/Use	Feed	Source of feed	Disease	Control	Remarks
1	Cow	1	Milk	4 liter	Grass	own			
2	Goat	2	Meat		Grass	own			

Comments if any (write verbatim): Rearing of animal for soil fertility management.

I. Detail of Equipments

Does the farmer hire farm equipments? Yes No NA/never use

Does the farmer use any organic and conventional? Yes No NA/never use

Verify that all equipment from conventional farming systems is cleaned and free from residue before being used on organically managed areas? Yes No NA/never use

Comments if any (write verbatim): Farmer used own farm clean equipments are used before and after using.

J. Production Standards Harvest, Storage and Transport (write verbatim)

Detail of Harvesting

Name of Crop	Method of Harvest	Estimated Month of Harvesting	Sale Record & Price / Where the sale was
Rajma	Manually	Nov/Dec	Local Markets
MBeans	Manually	Nov/Dec	Home Consumption
Mustard	Manually	Dec	Home Consumption

What material is used for packaging? gunny bag, bamboo basket

Does the farmer use any pesticides? Yes No NA/never use

Does the farmer use any chemical fertilizers? Yes No NA/never use

Does the farmer use any genetically engineered organisms or products? Yes No NA/never use

Does the farmer use any genetically modified organisms or products? Yes No NA/never use

How material was transported from farm to market? Head load, local road

NT. Check the following records are maintained

Field entry are of all Para/field (showing adjoining land use)	Field history sheets for the last 3 yrs	Field entry sheets for the last 3 yrs	Field entry sheets for the last 3 yrs
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Internal Inspection Comments and Non-compliance issues? Not approved Approved with conditions Approved with no conditions

Risk Assessment

All the farmers are doing organic farming as per International Standard.

Risk of contamination from	Low/Med/High	Comments
Neighbouring non-organic fields	Low	All the farmers are doing organic farming.
Non-organic activities of same farm	Low	
Industry, motorways, waterways, etc.	Low	
Others (specify)	Low	
Is there any risk of pollution from the river, canal etc.	Low	No, any risk of pollution near by farm.
Are there any source of chemical contamination near by (factories, pharmaceutical, etc.)	Low	No, any source chemical contamination near by farm.

Any other: [Redacted]

Date: 08/01/2019 Signature of farmer: [Redacted] Signature of Approval Committee: [Redacted] Signature of Inspector: [Redacted]

Figure 23: sample completed internal checklist (identifying information redacted by author).



SIKKIM ORGANIC MISSION
Under FS & ADD and H&CCDD
Government of Sikkim



Name of Service Provider : [REDACTED]

Name of Certification Agency: [REDACTED]

Internal Inspection Check list

Season	RABI / रबी	KHARIF / खरीफ
Status	Organic	Certified
Longitude		Latitude

NAME OF THE PROJECT: SIKKIM ORGANIC MISSION

FARMER'S ID NO.	[REDACTED]
AADHAAR CARD NO.	[REDACTED]

Name of farmer : [REDACTED]

Father's Name : [REDACTED]

Contact No. : _____

Total Land area : 0.5000 Ha.

Name of Grower Group: [REDACTED]

Name of Village/Ward. [REDACTED]

District : [REDACTED]



Figure 24: full-sized reproduction of the first page of the completed internal checklist, with farm map.

Next, he flipped forward and filled out the table detailing adjoining landholdings, describing the boundaries, or “buffer zones.” I asked if the “soft” boundaries (vegetation and streams) presented more of a risk of contamination.

The trees are on the downhill side [Nep: tallopatti], so the risk of contamination is low [contaminationko risk low ho]. But Sikkim is a total organic state. There are no non-organic fields in the neighbourhood, so I mark it low risk.

He flipped forward to a table on the third page of the form, and completed details of “buffer zones” and “adjoining lands” for each cardinal point of the landholding. Then he turned to the final page which required an risk assessment of each of several potential “risks of contamination,” including “neighbouring organic fields”; “non organic activities of the same farm”; and “industry, motorways, waste water etc.” He wrote, “all farmers are doing organic farming,” and marked each potential risk as “low”. He then flipped back to the map, which he had completed as a draft sketch on site:

Then I mark in the terraces [Nep: gora] and the different crops. This terrace below the road is 0.15 Ha, and it's planted with kidney beans [Nep: rajma]. Above the road is the house and around the house is the kitchen garden. I don't mark this as it's only for home consumption. This one with beans [Nep: simbi] is 0.01 ha, and here he has 0.05 ha of mustard [Nep: tori]. Now I make a key, to show clearly the boundaries and the different crops.

I asked him how he knew the land area measurement. “I take the area from the baseline survey. We have to estimate. One gora means 0.1 hal, and one hal means 0.1 ha, so one gora is 0.01 Ha.”⁶⁰ He spent considerable time working on the map in pencil, hatching the field boundaries and deciding on symbols to represent the different crops in the fields. He drew the key carefully, erasing and re-drawing symbols when he felt they weren’t sufficiently distinct and clear. Finally, once he was happy, he traced over the pencil outline in ballpoint and erased his pencil workings. It was, he said, important for the map to “look good” (Nep: “ramro dekhauncha”⁶¹).

⁶⁰ See below for an explanation of these units of measurement.

⁶¹ The Nepali word ‘ramro’ can be translated as both ‘good’ and ‘beautiful’.

Pratap continued to the table detailing areas planted and crop yields, and filled it in using the field areas he had included on the map. He calculated the estimated yield in kilogrammes from the area sown under each crop, using a standard set of multipliers. He then filled in the column marked “actual yield.” Here, the crops were not yet harvested or were harvested on an ongoing basis for household consumption. He factored in his own knowledge of the “20-25% loss” likely to be sustained from damage due to wild animals, in this area, a diverse menagerie of monkeys, deer, porcupines and peacocks. “I know him, so I think he will get around 80 kg of potato. And mustard around 15 kg, for vegetable and oil.” The final question of the form, under a section entitled “detail of farm equipments,” was phrased, “Verify that all equipment from conventional farming systems is cleaned and free from residue before being used on organically managed areas.” He wrote, “Farmer used own farm equipments. Equipments are cleaned before and after using.”⁶² He joked, “none of us clean our hoes and sickles, but we have to mark it or the inspectors may cause problems.”

I asked Pratap whether he ever came across issues which would threaten the successful certification of land. “Sometimes, when they don’t show the inspector something,” such as a field of crops that the certifier might later discover. “But Sikkim is a total organic state, so these issues don’t come up.” He continued, “Also, this is a required document, so we have to approve without conditions.”

As the example of Pratap’s visit shows, the Field Executives who carried out internal inspections experienced considerable difficulty in managing their workload. They had evolved a number of strategies to fill in the internal checklists within the time dictated by their schedule, and to circumvent some of the problems the form posed in the Sikkim context. In my experience, Field Executives never filled out the entire form sequentially on site. They were generally familiar enough with, and, as with Pratap’s example, often related to, the farmers in their working areas to fill in all but a few details, such as the crops which the farmer had sown in that particular year, though often they knew this information also. On inspection visits, I never saw a Field Executive visually inspect the fields, which would

⁶² Pratap here appears to be interpreting the question as relating to the routine cleaning of equipment, whereas its phrasing indicates it only applies to equipment used for both conventional and organic farming, to avoid cross-contamination. As such, again, the de jure organic nature of all farming in Sikkim would render the response unnecessary.

normally be sited directly adjacent to the house. Rather, they would typically sit with the landholder in a courtyard or on a veranda or, in cold weather, inside the house. When I asked why they didn't view the fields, they would invariably respond that a physical inspection was not necessary, given their knowledge of the landholdings, and took too much time. On several occasions my request to see the fields myself was met with bewilderment or gentle mocking.



Figure 25: service provider Field Executive completing an internal inspection. Her questions are directed at the woman at right, whose husband is listed as the landholder. The Field Executive is not the same person described as Pratap Pradhan in the above description.

Short of time, certification workers would generally not proceed sequentially through the form during the inspection visit itself, but only filled in a few key pieces of information on site – mainly the key variables that could change from visit to visit. They concentrated on a few key sections, flipping backwards and forwards between them. As indicated in the above vignette, the most prominent among these were the sections detailing the boundaries and risks of contamination; area under different crops; estimated production; and the field map itself. These sections were interdependent – the information contained within them interlinked, which explains the recursive and non-sequential order in which certification workers completed them. The remainder of the form was generally completed at home, often in the evening. There, many details were filled in with standard formulae, such as “farm equipment is cleaned before and after using”; or “all farmers are doing organic farming as per internal standards.” These would be repeated on every form. For example,

in the section titled “pest and disease management,” the phrase “Minor pest and disease problem controlled; weeding is done manually” appeared as a response, with small variations, on most forms. The phrase neatly illustrates how such formulaic responses might arise and become generalised in filling in the internal control form.

The order in which Pratap filled in the different sections of the form, the relative emphasis he gave to their completion, and to explaining them to me, and the ways in which information from one section of the form fed into other sections, and into further documentary processes in the wider certification system, are indicative of the key pieces of information that the internal inspection prioritised. The particular care that Pratap showed in completing the map indicate the centrality of this graphic representation of a farm, and of its constituent fields, to the overall certification process. This, in spite of the fact that the map is not completely renewed at each inspection, but is copied from the farm diary. As the precise arrangement of fields did not generally change from year to year, the map drawing took the form of a precise reproduction of a master version, in the farm diary, with only the specific crops planted changing at each inspection. Nonetheless, I take Pratap’s insistence on a particular aesthetic of neatness and clarity - that the map should “look good” (“ramro dekhauncha”) – to indicate that the presentation of the map was important both for his personal satisfaction and in the eyes of others – such as his superiors – who would view it. The map occupied a prominent position on the front page of the form and so was easily seen by supervisors when it arrived at the service provider’s Gangtok office. The map’s depiction of the areas of different fields and under different crops fed into the tables on area and expected yield of crops. This would indicate that these data were centrally prioritised in the internal control exercise, in keeping with the centrality of land to the certification process.

One key category of information which the internal checklist supplied was the risk of contamination of crops from such sources as pollutants from neighbouring land or inputs (such as artificial fertilisers or pesticides) prohibited under the organic regime. Pratap’s cartographic exposition shows the key importance of boundaries here, and the centrality of both the inscription of these boundaries and the resulting circumscription of land to the certifiers. Here, the key quality of these boundaries was their permeability, particularly to water-borne contaminants which could be spread in surface water during rain. Again, the

nature of boundaries was first inscribed on the map, then transferred (usually at home) to the table entitled 'risks of contamination.' Pratap and others considered stone an effective block against contamination from neighbouring properties; vegetation much less so; he was not entirely clear over the efficacy of a stream as a barrier to contamination, implying that it fell somewhere in between a rock wall and vegetation in terms of effectiveness. Pratap's discussion also shows that another key factor in assessing the risk of contamination is topography. Here, certification staff would employ the Nepali terms, ubiquitous in the hilly terrain of Sikkim, 'matipatti' (uphill) and 'tallopatti' (downhill). As Pratap, and, separately, department officials, explained to me, it is generally assumed that contamination⁶³ is spread downhill, as contaminants percolate with the drainage of rainwater, particularly in the monsoon season. Thus, a field uphill from one at risk of contamination would present a much lower risk of contamination than one downhill. However, this question anticipates the risk posed of the use of non-organic chemical treatments on neighbouring farms. Sikkim's history of low penetration of such inputs meant that even prior to the organic conversion, in many areas, such treatments were little used. At any rate, being now banned outright, their use could not be admitted to even if they were employed. Pratap's assertion that "Sikkim is an organic state, so these issues don't come up," indicates a tautological aspect to the absence of contamination, and to the certification process more broadly: Sikkim attained organic status on the basis of each field of land being certified as organic; and the risk of any given field being 'contaminated' are minimal if any neighbouring field also holds de facto organic status.

The other key category of information with which the internal checklist dealt was the area of an individual farm, and of specific fields, and the area under specific crops. As Pratap described, field areas had generally been inscribed during the 'baseline survey' – the initial certification of land. While this process employed GPS, this technology had been used only once, during that survey, to fix a single set of coordinates to locate the landholding, usually marking the house itself (the coordinates were included in the farm diary and internal checklist). Field locations and areas were inscribed by sight, with estimates of the land area being made either by the certifier herself or through asking the farmer. In either case, the area was initially estimated in gora and hal. Both these terms signify quasi-standardised

⁶³ Department officials confirmed to me that this principle also applies to fungal and other crop diseases.

units of area current among farmers and the rural population in Sikkim: 'gora' is used both to signify a terrace, and as roughly the area of a typical terrace, whereas one 'hal' is generally defined as the area a bullock can plough in a day. These estimates were then translated, using the multipliers Pratap describes, into the more scientifically standardised measure of hectares used by government for official purposes.

This area information was then entered into the table entitled "crop production detail," which showed the area planted under different crops and the estimated and actual yield. The form's inclusion here of columns for both estimated and actual yields indicates an assumption that two visits would be made: one when the crop was growing in the field and another after harvest. In fact, only one visit was made, and its timing generally depended on the workload of the Field Executive and her employer. The estimated yield for a given crop was calculated from the area planted under it according to standard multipliers specific to each crop. Information on the actual yield could be taken from the farmer if the visit was made after harvest, but was more frequently estimated by the Field Executive, using local knowledge. Information on yield was important because it was input into the certification system and incorporated into further processes. As I observe above, service providers prepared scope certificates for all farmers as if produce was to be sold outside of the state, though little of Sikkim's produce was exported from the state as organic. Produce to be sold within Sikkim required only land-based certification. Thus, a lower standard of certification was required for produce that would not cross the state border (and the scant attention the form paid to the category of "home production" indicates that, where produce was consumed by a farming household itself, no certification process was required at all). Again, given the tautological principle that all land in Sikkim possessed organic status by virtue of Sikkim being an 'organic state', it would seem that even this lower level of certification was in some sense superfluous.

Elastic fields and unyielding process

Some of the discrepancies in the figures given for cultivable land area and area certified (see above) may have stemmed from the initial process of certification of each hectare of land in Sikkim, often referred to by officials and service providers as the 'baseline survey'.

An acquaintance, who had previously campaigned for election to the Sikkim Legislative Assembly under the auspices of an opposition party, was mystified, not to mention indignant, over how his land had become certified. “I found out from Gangtok that my land had been certified,” he said, “but I never saw one person on my land. Nobody visited me.” This acquaintance’s political affiliation would have predisposed him to criticise the ruling party government and the conversion it promoted. However, it is possible that such experiences go some way to explaining how the pressure of the immense task of certification might have impacted on the activities of privately contracted service providers. My later interactions with service providers may go some way to explaining this acquaintance’s complaint, and some of the discrepancies I discuss above in official figures for the area of land ‘cultivable’ and certified.

Jagadish Kumar Thapa’s office was on the ground floor of a tourist hotel in the upper part of Gangtok. Its main door, to the side of the hotel lobby entrance, gave onto a large but dimly lit room, divided with low wooden partitions, where around five women and men, most in their 20s, sat at computers entering data. Jagadish hadn’t yet arrived, and one of the workers showed me into his small room and offered me a cup of tea. He seated me at a small chair sandwiched between an aged wooden desk and the full-height aluminium and glass partition which separated the space off from the main room. Jagadish came in shortly, welcomed me warmly, and, apologising for his lateness, settled into his large, battered executive chair, asking a worker for a cup of tea, and a second for me. “So, I hope they are showing you a beautiful picture of our organic Sikkim,” Jagadish began, a distinct twinkle in his eye. “What they show in the brochures and the reports is one thing, and the situation in the field is very different. Very different.” He made a balancing gesture with both hands, mimicking a scale swinging towards equilibrium. This was our first meeting and he started off by providing me with an introduction to the history of Sikkim’s organic conversion, replete with many of the landmark dates and events that had become familiar to me from my conversations with government officers. But he very quickly veered off-script. As I come to learn over the following months, he had a habit of referring to government workers as ‘they’, with no further specification.

I avoid them. I don't go there [he motioned down the hill to the Department offices, less than a kilometre away as the crow flies, but several hundred metres below and around 30 minutes by car]. They are always calling us for one thing or another, but I

try to avoid; I send a junior colleague. You see, people tend to run after money. This is the government way in Sikkim. There are a lot of schemes⁶⁴, now that the centre has picked up on this organic business, and nobody really worries about where the money goes, so long as everything looks good.⁶⁵

Jagadish was not the company's owner, but styled himself as the 'In-Charge' in Sikkim, and had responsibility for all day-to-day operations. "There is a problem with certification," he told me. He explained that, as part of the baseline survey, "government" issued the service provider with a 'work order' - a requisition document, usually for the enumeration of the cultivable land in a particular GPU or GPUs. The work order specified, on the basis of land registry records, the land area to be enumerated and certified, for which service providers were paid a fixed rate per hectare.

But the land details they provide are not accurate. They ask us to give them the list within one week. So we have to take the register from the panchayat office without time to verify it. So, for example, say we give the land area as 500 ha. But only 250 Ha is cultivable. The rest is dense forest, or cliffs. If we delay, if we try to check the actual landholdings with the farmers, they [government] tell us, "You are very inefficient, you can't do project work!" But then, they were caught. Because the production was low. The CM was asking, "Why is your productivity declining?" So they asked the service providers to revise the cultivated area downwards, to remove the certified forest land. After this, there was 50,000 ha statewide. They don't want to listen to problems. Government officers don't even give us their email IDs, as we would send them the reports, and they don't want to know.

The phenomenon Jagadish described illustrated the centrality to the department of the two key measures of the conversion: production, in terms of the tonnage of crop harvested; and area under cultivation or, more specifically, under particular crops. These figures were published in detail annually and were frequently quoted by senior government officers. Here, the importance of providing an adequate figure for the land 'converted' to organic production, on the one hand, clashes on the other with the need to show constant year-on-year growth in 'productivity', expressed in tonnes per hectare. An overstatement of the

⁶⁴ I take him to mean 'schemes' in the literal sense in which government officials use the term, of financed projects or programmes.

⁶⁵ Conversation in English.

former resulted in a decline in the latter. But as well as the time pressure he says is exerted by the department on the service providers, he confided, the fact of being paid by the hectare was another reason for accepting existing estimates of cultivated area. “We receive R700 per hectare, which is little enough, so if we reduce the area further, how can we manage the work?”

He told me that he had asked a colleague of his to undertake an analysis of land use in the area for which they had been given certification responsibility. This revealed that, of 26,000 Ha detailed in the work orders, only 20,800 ha appeared currently under cultivation. “We have to make compromises in order to get government business,” Jagadish admitted, with a wry smile.

If we didn't do the work, someone else would, and other companies are more unscrupulous, running after making government happy. It's difficult being a private firm and looking at social issues. We would like to take credit [for improving the situation of farmers], but in practice, it gets diluted when it gets to the field.

The processes that Jagadish describes of adjustment of land area to suit political measures and goals could be part of the reason for the variation in figures for cultivable and certified land area over time. Another possible area for this flexibility is to be found in the category of area under cardamom, listed separately in department plans (see Bhutia 2015, reproduced above). Being traditionally a ‘wild’ crop, grown in forests, the area under cardamom could be treated somewhat elastically, cardamom plantations being coextensive with, rather than mutually exclusive of, forest land⁶⁶. Figures quoted for area certified under cardamom varied significantly with different versions of plans for the organic conversion. One might term the elasticity of area under cardamom, as well as the adjustment processes described by Jagadish, as ‘retrospective planning’.

⁶⁶ In fact, as a high value export crop, much cardamom cultivation in recent years has taken place in cleared plantations with minimal forest cover, as opposed to the ‘traditional’ forest cultivation techniques often associated with the Lepcha people.

Two service providers

Around the same time I first met Jagadish Kumar Thapa, I was also introduced to Prakash Singh, the representative of another service provider company. His offices were housed in two light, airy rooms in the annex of another tourist hotel. In the large main room sat four workers in front of computers, entering data from internal inspection forms. One of these workers greeted me and showed me to Prakash's room, the window of which gave a sweeping view over Gangtok to the hills on the other side of the valley of the Rani Khola river. Prakash was warm and welcoming, and eager to explain the conversion and his company's role in it. "With other service providers, by 2015, we were able to complete a systematic mission to certify the whole of Sikkim." He was also proud of the fact that, unlike some service providers, "We are one hundred per-cent Sikkim local staff." He showed me thick lever arch files containing the annual reports they had recently prepared for the department on each FPO⁶⁷, together with scope certificates for each group. The binder also contained one transaction certificate. "We issued this to a local entrepreneur who is buying 20,000Kg turmeric from our farmers to process. We only secured this last month, and it's a real success for us," he said. "I don't just work for the [service provider] company" he told me. "I work with the department, and for the farmers, so that we can make this vision of a one hundred per cent organic Sikkim come about". Prakash's optimism contrasted markedly with the more jaded outlook on the conversion of Jagadish Kumar Thapa, and gave the sense that not only department officials, but privately contracted service providers could share the commitment to the organic conversion required by the Chief Minister (see Chapter Two). At this stage, service providers were mainly occupied with certification and with the training of farmers, so he was pleased to have been instrumental in securing the sale of a consignment of produce that could be sold at the 'premium price' promised by the conversion. Prakash arranged for me to visit his company's network of local offices and accompany Field Executives in their certification activities. We subsequently met regularly through the period of my field research.

⁶⁷ Food Producer Organisation (see Chapter Two).

Towards the end of my period of field research, when I visited him in his office to say goodbye and thank him for his help, his usual friendly and open demeanour was changed. “Actually, I’m a little worried,” he said. “Re-contracting is going on and we’re not sure what the result will be. The department could have made the decision earlier, and it would have been more simple, but now the election is coming and there’s all sorts of uncertainty.” He told me that the contracts of all service providers were due to end. They were unsure whether they would be renewed and, if so, what services the companies would be asked to provide. The staff of service provider companies, he told me, had been lobbying for ‘regularisation’: to be employed on contract directly to the department without the mediation of private service provider companies.

To date, we have been doing certification for the cheapest rate. In Rajasthan, certification costs R3,000 per hectare per year. In Sikkim it costs R1,200. We are using the mandatory manpower [the number of staff per hectare of certified land, as specified by the department] and we’re using the minimum people on the minimum wage. So naturally, staff would like a better salary and greater security [of a direct government contract]. If this happens, I will be happy, but it’s difficult for us to know what will be the future for the company.

It appeared the uncertainty had led to tension with the staff, and Prakash was worried some staff might be manoeuvring against his position. As he copied some of the materials his company used for the training of farmers onto my USB drive, he asked me to copy it to my computer immediately I returned home, and to delete it from the portable drive. “you may ask someone for other documents and they will quickly look and see if there is anything interesting on the pen drive, and quickly copy it to their computer,” he said.

The following day I went to visit Jagadish Kumar Thapa, with whom I had also maintained intermittent contact during my field research. Jagadish Kumar greeted me with his usual wry smile, but more cheerily than I had seen him before. When I asked him about the re-contracting process, he answered quite casually “We’re not too worried about that. It has been difficult, and we’re often working at a loss, so if it happens, it happens, if it doesn’t we will see.” Rather, he said, his company was “much more positive about marketing. The sale of goods is going quite well now,” he explained. “We’re tired of waiting for them [government]. We’re moving into the business side of things.” Jagadish explained that his

company was arranging transport for produce from its working area to “supermalls” in Kolkata. Department stores in these malls were hosting small stalls dedicated to Sikkim Organic produce.

It's very early. It's hard to arrange cold chain transport and we're selling very small quantities. Also, it's difficult to assure the quality. The farmers send us trash. Currently the waste is about 40 per cent. It should be fifteen to twenty per cent. The field staff have to be there with the farmer, or it will be even worse. So we're not actually getting profit. We're buying for R30, getting back R15, because of the wastage.

Despite these problems, Jagadish gave a strong sense of optimism. “We don’t know how it will work in the long term, but it’s exciting to do something new,” he said. The foray his company had started to make into the marketing of organic produce had caused him to trade his previous scepticism on the department’s role in the conversion for hopes of a successful marketing model independent of the difficulties of dealing with government. It is cogent to note, however, that the trading model he placed these hopes in still relied on the support of government to fund the certification process, and thus, indirectly, the ‘field staff’ who could control the quality of produce at the farm. But this sense of independence made for a personal trajectory from scepticism to ‘positivity’ which contrasted with that of Prakash Singh, who began committed to “working with the department,” but became despondent and suspicious over time.

The work of authentication

The processes of authentication that are entailed in Sikkim’s organic certification regime represent one of the most important elements of the work of a Sikkim organic by design: the production of Sikkim as an ‘organic state’. In them, we see the ‘field’, the imaginary of department officials I discuss in Chapter Three, reappear in several guises. Jagadish portrays it as the site where good intentions founder, or “get diluted”, as if the complexities and contradictions of the certification system are tested by stubborn reality. At the same time, other service providers, like Pratap Pokhrel, conceive of the field as reality in another sense: as the ultimate source of the data that are fed into the certification

system and ultimately produce certified organic produce, notionally for markets outside of Sikkim. These data are collected through direct observation, or, where time does not permit, through the extant knowledge of the Field Executive. The certification process produces the field as physical, bounded entity, with specified degrees of protectedness from the threat of contamination from adjacent fields. In this sense, the field is bounded in a comparable way to that in which Sikkim is bounded from the contamination of neighbouring states, and to which historic Sikkim provided sanctuary as beyul. More broadly though, this act of observation of the field can be seen as the fundamental underpinning of the production of Organic Sikkim itself. But in another sense, the certification system is well-insulated from the ‘reality’ of the field. Here, in Jagadish’s account of the shifting targets for land area certified, as well as in Pratap’s tautological observation that “Sikkim is an organic state, so these issues don’t come up,” we see an instance of the requirement for the internal consistency of bureaucratic process to which Das (2020) refers. In this sense, it is not the direct observation of the certifier that captures the reality of the field, but the certification process which *constitutes* the field, and, by implication, Organic Sikkim itself.

Conclusion: work and authenticity in Sikkim’s organic conversion

It was mid-November 2018 and the department was unusually busy after having been almost empty for the three weeks around the Dasain holiday⁶⁸. Statewide and national elections were four months away and campaigning was gaining momentum. A month previously, it had been announced that Sikkim had been conferred the Future Policy Gold Award, a prize jointly organised by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, the World Future Council and IFOAM. More specifically, the prize had been awarded to “Sikkim’s State Policy on Organic Farming (2004) and Sikkim Organic Mission (2010)” in recognition of their “noteworthy achievements, holistic approach and its respect for the Future Just Lawmaking Principles and Elements of Agroecology” (World Future Council 2019). Several of the most senior departmental officers had recently returned from Rome, where the Chief Minister had accepted the award. The prize had been widely covered in local and national media (India Today 2019), and a series of banners and signs had gone up on pedestrian overpasses around Gangtok and in other major towns. Ostensively placed by local branches of the ruling party and community organisations, these displayed photos of the Chief Minister accepting the award and congratulated him specifically. This coverage had provoked something of a backlash among acquaintances of mine in Gangtok, with reactions ranging from wry humour to indignation. The focus of this disquiet was not only confined to the ruling party, but extended to the international organisations that had conferred the award, some of which had been instrumental in the organic conversion (see Chapter One). One acquaintance, an official in another department, who had previously rarely commented to me on the organic conversion, had exclaimed, “These international organisations: have they even looked at what’s going on? They’re not being serious!”

⁶⁸ The major annual festival for Hindus in Nepal and Sikkim, which takes place in October, and is, for government and businesses, the main holiday period in the year. The term Dasain properly refers to the festival of the goddess Durga, celebrated on the tenth day of the holiday period, but is also generally used to refer to the holiday period as a whole.



Figure 26: banner on a pedestrian overpass in central Gangtok congratulating Sikkim's then Chief Minister on the Future Policy Gold Award, 2019.

On the third floor of the Krishi Bhawan, Doma Lamu Bhutia's desk was covered in stacks of files. She was often drafted to organise 'programmes', or high-profile events, but was usually ready to talk with strangers such as myself, who happened to drop into her room. On this occasion, while polite, she seemed preoccupied. She was tasked with organising a meeting for gram panchayat chairs and farmers which would be "following up on the Future Policy award." "We need to make sure the farmers will turn up," she said, smiling. She told me that if I was interested in attending, I could contact another official, but warned me, "I don't know whether it will be of interest to you; it's a political programme." She explained that 40 farmers would be awarded a "kissan [farmer's] pension," a measure recently introduced by the state government, and that she was tasked with approving their application forms. This was not her only task for the day. "There's a delegation from Delhi on tour, from a parliamentary committee, focusing on trade and commerce, but they're looking particularly at organic agriculture," she told me. Doma Lamu was busy with their

travel arrangements. “I think the air must be very polluted in Delhi,” she said. “After Diwali⁶⁹ there’s a lot of smoke. They are benefiting from some organic air.”

Leaving Doma Lamu to her work, I found Girik Kumar and Sunil Acharya a little down the same corridor, similarly busy with the tour logistics for the parliamentary delegation. “After the award, everyone wants to come to Sikkim; it’s making my life a little tough,” Sunil said with a smile. “I’m arranging for them to go to Bardung,” he told me, mentioning a demonstration farm in South Sikkim that was a frequent destination for official visitors, “and to Nathula,” the pass connecting Sikkim with Tibet and China that is a popular stop on the tourist route. “Everyone must go to Nathula!” Taking his ironic tone (and that of Doma Lamu) as a cue, I mentioned that I had heard some criticism of the award. Sunil hesitated, looking concerned. “Criticism is there,” he said, straight-faced. “The important is to make progress.”⁷⁰

It is my impression, from interaction with acquaintances outside of the department, that the award precipitated something of a sea-change in public attitudes to the organic conversion. As I describe in the Introduction, up to this point, these attitudes had divided roughly on party lines. Ruling party supporters had generally been enthusiastic, while others had frequently been sceptical, blaming the department for poor implementation, but acknowledging the concept as a “good idea.” Now, many accused the Chief Minister himself of pursuing international acclaim as “India’s greenest Chief Minister” at the expense of attention to problems closer to home. While it was not the only factor in the ultimate election defeat of the ruling SDF party, there was a sense from this time that, after 23 years in power, a win was no longer assured. As the interactions described above indicate, the criticism was much more muted within the department, tending to take the form of humour and irony. But raising my impressions of the public criticism was an error that elicited a stony response from Sunil. I have argued that these criticisms were voiced importantly through notions of authenticity, as were the responses of officials to them, whether those responses took the form of agreement, apologia, or a frequently more equivocal and less comfortable range of reactions, as exhibited by Sunil Acharya and others.

⁶⁹ The Hindu festival celebrated in central India, commonly understood to celebrate the victory of light over darkness, which coincides with the Dasain festival celebrated in Nepal and Sikkim.

⁷⁰ All conversations in English.

The outward-facing nature of the organic conversion interacted with notions of authenticity in three ways. Firstly, it rendered questions of authenticity in significant part outward-facing in focus, in keeping with the impetus of the global organic movement. Secondly, it heightened the stakes of this authenticity: the choice of the Government of Sikkim to adhere to a specifically organic mode of authenticity, with its commitment to an agriculture free of ‘artificial’ inputs and its “transparent-making” processes (Mathur 2012) of certification brought distinctions between ‘authenticity’ and ‘sham’ into sharp relief. Thirdly, from the internal perspective of the Sikkim populace, it had the effect of bringing the notions of authenticity to bear on the outward-facing nature of the conversion itself. Criticism which cast the Chief Minister as revelling in the global spotlight to the neglect of domestic issues, and international organisations as facilitating this, can be seen as hinging on the notion of authenticity to place and people (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009; Mazzarella 2003). Questions of authenticity also moved comparatively freely from a narrow focus on produce, land and agricultural practice to a wider one that included the government, the department, and state bureaucracy more generally.

I have also argued that the authenticating process of certification, central as it is to the principles of the organic movement, is fundamentally predicated on the spatial bounding of land, in the form of defining and demarcating the field. The provenance of any produce which might be sold is traceable back through the certification chain (in India, the informatised Tracenet) and through any processing transformations it undergoes, to its farm, and theoretically its field, of origin. The boundaries inscribed by the certifier provide an assessment of the risk of contamination from neighbouring fields. In the case of Sikkim, the fact that this bounding is made largely superfluous by the state’s ‘total organic’ nature does not diminish the procedural import of the bounding itself. In this process, the field is a site of authenticity not only by virtue of the provenance of organic produce, but also of the uniquely privileged position of the certifier (or Field Officer) as direct observer.

The bounding of the field also calls to mind the bounding of Sikkim itself as a ‘total organic state’, its borders protected from contamination by artificial inputs or by non-organically grown produce. This in turn resonates with the historical bounding of Sikkim as beyul, its borders protected by mountain barriers and its doors, at its cardinal points,

negotiable only by select persons (the shifts of geopolitics have now reduced these doors principally to the southern border checkpoint at Rangpo). Resonances with Sikkim's ancient and more recent history are also found in the privileging of authenticity and the outward-facing nature of the conversion. Rulers saw their legitimacy as predicated on the authenticity of the religious-mythical notions of prophecy, terma and their revelation. They mobilised these notions to secure the polity against challenges from within and without, but these challenges, in turn, similarly took the form of questions of authenticity.

On the same afternoon as the account I relate above, at around 5:30 PM, I visited Dorjee Wangyal Bhutia in his room. To enter, I had to tread carefully past several boxes and a large sack of chayotte (Nep: *iskus*). Three staff were cleaning and packing the fruits into gifts for the visiting delegation. The atmosphere was light-hearted and Dorjee Wangyal was joking with the staff. "Do they work like this in your country?" he asked me, referring to the staff staying late in the office. "We aren't formal," he added. I took his question to refer to a combination of intensity and informality. He and his subordinates were working after office hours, and even longer after the time when many officials would have left. On previous occasions he had stressed to me his belief in the practical importance of this combination of hard work and "informality".

This hard work, I have argued, was a central moral structuring principle of the professional lives of department officials, honoured as it often may have been in the breach. I suggest that the ideal of the hardworking official was, at least in a significant part, premised on the model of the hardworking farmer. This exemplary figure contained officials' aspirations for the organic conversion's revival of the dignity of farming. Serving the farmer was also the focus of officials' ostensive purpose, in pursuit of the public good (Bear & Mathur 2015). Officials, usually from rural backgrounds themselves, articulated a nostalgic notion of a farming past marked by hard work as a central element of their own moral grounding, as inspiration for this agricultural revival, and as a mark of the authenticity of the organic conversion. Accordingly, for officials at all levels within the department, 'the field' and 'fieldwork' constituted an imaginary ranked as morally superior to 'the office' and 'paperwork'. This was true even if their plans for future material security depended significantly on 'the office'. While Dorjee Wangyal's organising of a gift to representatives of central government might be seen as a peripheral task to his duties as a senior officer, I

suggest that the nature of this gift, as produce of ‘the field’, and as of a variety typical to Sikkim, made the task count all the more powerfully as ‘work’. For department officials, the hard work of the farmer, together with Sikkim’s natural state, largely untainted by the green revolution, produced a Sikkim ‘organic by default’. That of the official was essential to one organic by design.

It could be argued that the commitment that Dorjee Wangyal demonstrates to ‘hard work’, as well as his laments over the laxity of his colleagues (see Chapter Three) and the seemingly personal hurt of AK Shreshtha (see Introduction) when confronted by the market sellers’ demonstration, show a level of personal commitment at odds with the “spirit of formalistic impersonality” (Weber 1964:330). It is certainly the case that the organic conversion introduced to the department a level of entrepreneurialism and private sector involvement that conforms with du Gay’s (2008) description of the New Public Management. Weber’s formulation, however, that an official should obey the demands of office “as if the order agreed with his own conviction” (Weber 1989:10) would indicate that the bureaucracy retains a role, or even a requirement, for conviction, provided it remains exclusively in the service of office. Ultimately, I suggest that the rigorous separation of person and office, along with the intrusion of the entrepreneurial self into public life, could be seen as belonging to the category that Weber (1964) terms “ideal types”: analytically useful distinctions that are rarely if ever found in their pure form in the world. As such, the forms that the personal commitment of Dorjee Wangyal, AK Shreshtha and their colleagues took highlight tensions between notions of person and office, and between personal authenticity and official artifice. These provide ripe grounds for irony of the sort demonstrated by Sunil and Doma Lamu. As writers on the subject have noted (Carrithers 2014; Fernandez & Huber 2001), irony takes the form of a refusal to reconcile complex and sometimes contradictory “sub-certainties” (Carrithers 2014). We can see such a dynamic in tensions between person and office in the professional lives of officials, as well as between field and office (the latter in the sense of the physical space of work), and between a Sikkim organic by default or one organic by design. However, as Carrithers reminds us elsewhere (Carrithers 2012), there are moments where irony is rejected, as when Sunil or AK Shreshtha refuse to acknowledge criticism of the conversion. At these moments, the organic conversion takes on an unquestionable seriousness (Carrithers 2012).

While these ironies are thrown into particular relief by the high political stakes of the organic conversion and its outward-facing nature, I argue that they are specific instances of a more general phenomenon within bureaucracies. Bureaucracies are constructed from a complex architecture of idealised notions: from their officially espoused goals, through projects and plans, to the offices (in the Weberian sense) inhabited by individual officials (du Gay 2008) and the professional concepts that they employ on a daily basis. The latter, in the case of Sikkim's organic conversion, range from the notions of 'hard work' and the 'field' as a site of virtue, to the boundaries that separate specific fields in space. Das argues (2018, see Introduction) that in these 'as-if' spaces, "the individual is educated in self-formation through which he or she can break his or her normal patterns of response." I do not take Das's argument to excuse their use by officials as instruments of power and privilege, as Gupta (2012) and Graeber (2015) argue. Rather, I also argue that they constitute a particularly acute example of a structuring principle which is essential to bureaucracies, recurring fractally at every level of the organisational architecture, from the broad aims of policies to accounts of the area and production of particular crops, to the structures of an organigram and the specification of the roles occupied by individual officers. In the case of Sikkim's organic conversion, I contend that officials are generally well aware of the tensions between these idealised notions and their own experience, or the accounts, such as my own, of outsiders. Their reactions to these tensions effect a significant part of the 'work' of bureaucracies.

There are numerous aspects of Sikkim's organic conversion I have neglected or touched on only tangentially in this dissertation. One of these is the department's plans for the marketing of organic produce. In many ways, marketing operates alongside certification and is an extension of the same logic, by which information on, and trust in, produce is conveyed to distant consumers (Lien 1997; Mazzarella 2003). In the case of organic production systems, it is particularly essential, in that the 'value chain' must be isolated from that of non-organic produce in order to prevent contamination (Seshia Galvin 2021). The department had supported several service providers and entrepreneurs to develop marketing links to large cities, particularly Kolkata (in neighbouring West Bengal, a state which borders Sikkim, but a journey of some 700 Km from Gangtok) and Delhi. However, in general, the department was unable to develop effective market links on a large scale. As several service providers pointed out to me, Sikkim lacked a physical wholesale market of

any sort, let alone one devoted to organic produce. This meant that the state was dependent on Siliguri for these facilities. As the wholesale markets of Siliguri were principally for non-organic produce, this made it difficult to ensure the separation of an organic value chain, and so necessitated that much Sikkim produce be sold as non-organic. Officials tended to speak of marketing and the branding of Sikkim produce (Lien 1997) in the same breath, as ‘marketing and branding’. The department had invested in the development of a logo for ‘brand Sikkim Organic’. The development of an organic value chain, on the other hand, with the much greater investment this would have necessitated, constituted something of a receding horizon. In my initial visit to Sikkim in 2016, just after the declaration of an ‘organic state’, officials told me that the next phase of the conversion would prioritise the ‘marketing and branding’ aspect. When I left at the end of my field research in April 2019, they continued to characterise marketing as the ‘next phase’. The new government elected in 2019, while continuing its rhetorical commitment to the organic conversion, placed it on a ‘voluntary’ footing and, presumably, a smaller scale, meaning that large-scale organic value-chain development had not yet come about.

Another aspect of the conversion I have not covered is that of the support for it of the Indian Prime Minister. The Prime Minister's association with the declaration of Sikkim as an ‘organic state’ indicates that there may be some resonances between the organic conversion and the political thought of his party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). This ideology is glossed as Hindutva, a religious-nationalist political movement which accords primacy to Hinduism in national life, notably to the detriment of Islam, but also of other identities considered marginal to a contemporary definition of Hinduism⁷¹. The BJP has not been a historically significant political force in Sikkim, whose politics have been dominated by state-specific parties, though the former did make significant advances in the 2019 elections. An exploration of possible resonances between the organic conversion and Hindutva lies well beyond the scope of this dissertation and does not necessarily imply that politicians in Sikkim sympathise with the more communal aspects of the Hindutva agenda. Sikkim’s political parties and its citizens often portray an exceptionalist image of the state in contrast to a national politics they characterise as riven with communalist and caste

⁷¹ It is important here to avoid following Hindutva’s tendency to portray contemporary and historic Hinduism as continuous and monolithic (Thapar 2003).

ideologies. But for Modi and the BJP, such resonances could be based in notions such as Hindutva's promotion of 'traditional' Hindu cultural and spiritual practices, such as vegetarianism, and the centrality of mountains in Hindu mythology. The entrepreneurial strand in the organic conversion also accords with the BJP's espousal of libertarian economic principles and the projection of an aggressively entrepreneurial image of India as a whole (Deb 2011; Kaur 2012).

Whether through courting the global organic movement; the political support of Hindu nationalism; project funding from the central government; or distant markets in the Indian cities and abroad, a large part of the work of the department and of its officials has consisted of anticipating the gaze that others focus on Sikkim. Such imagined imaginaries were a natural consequence of the outward-facing nature of Sikkim's organic conversion.

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