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Himalayan Youth Resist through Art: Debunking "Development" in Kinnaur

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Abstract

This photo essay outlines our reflections on the role of art as a means of protest and, in particular, as an expression of the identity struggle that drives resistance. "Artivism" as a form of protest seems to be (re)gaining traction, especially in youth mobilizations worldwide. Our case study is from the Kinnaur district in the western Indian Himalayan state of Himachal Pradesh. Launched as a mobilization against the negative impacts of hydropower projects in the region, the No Means No campaign is likely on its way to becoming a broader socioecological movement that confronts the adversities of state-led development policies and mobilizes cultural identity in creative ways. Art in various forms, from paintings and rock graffiti to poems and songs, plays a significant role. Against the backdrop of current debates on environmentalism, identity politics, and political aesthetics, the primary aim of this essay is to situate the selected artifacts in relation to the campaign and give their creators a voice—or an image.

Keywords: art, resistance, space, identity, Kinnaur, India

Introduction

This essay has been inspired by the creative use of art in the current No Means No campaign, originating in Himachal Pradesh's Kinnaur district in the western Indian Himalayas. Cognizant of the fact that people in all societal situations and places have expressed their resistance through aesthetic means, our case study offers a contemporary regional and generational perspective on questions prompted by the convergence of art and protest. These include: What role does art or aesthetics play in resistance? Where is the dividing line between art and politics? Does such a line even exist? How is art as protest or the art of protest—or both—reflected in individual

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cases? What is the role of the artists, and their respective spatial and generational belonging?

Drawing on artifacts related to the campaign, we hope to offer some food for thought here.[1] Launched as a mobilization against the adverse impacts of hydropower projects in the region, and likely on its way to becoming a broader socioecological movement, No Means No makes for an interesting case study in several respects. First, it reflects a current generation environmentalism that is only slowly garnering attention in social movement studies and related fields. As a youth-led mobilization, it lends a dynamic of its own to the contemporary moment.[2] Due to its location, positionality, and resources, it also has the potential to put western-centric approaches in perspective and to add a decolonial angle, which will be explored in the course of this essay. In this respect, it also serves as a case in point for the importance of spatiality and "cultural identity" in socioecological mobilizations (and their study), arguably gaining renewed momentum in recent times.

Secondly, it draws attention to the specific generational background of those involved and raises important questions about the space for social movements today, particularly with regard to the provenance of and possible changes in narratives and means.[3] At this point, a small note on the legacy of No Means No seems in order. In conversations with campaigners, frequent references are made to environmental movements outside the district and state, as well as the history of protest in the area. It is worth noting how the current participants are growing into their activism and drawing inspiration from previous protests in Kinnaur.[4] Networking and learning from peers seems as important as listening and learning from those who have lived through it all years ago. This is evident not only from the fact that the youth and the "old guard" appear side by side at many public events, but also in the campaigners' regular visits to

[1] The name of the campaign appears in several variations. For instance, NO MEANS NO can be seen on posters, banners, and graffiti, while the campaigners use #nomeansno, #no_means_no, No means No, and No Means No in captions and comments on social media.

[2] A brief note on the use of the term "youth": The campaign originated from the local youth clubs and the networking of their (male) members. Age plays a lesser role than status (e.g., being a bachelor), and extends into their thirties. In distinction to the previous generation, the cut seems to be relatively clear though.

[3] Incidentally, this could also provide an insightful perspective for the debate on global youth environmental movements such as Fridays for Future or Extinction Rebellion, readily dismissed as "spoiled angry kids" by mainstream feuilletons or opinionated academics, see, e.g., TalkTV 2021.

[4] The ecologically and geologically sensitive Kinnaur region has a long history of struggle against the construction of hydroelectric power plants. Prior to No Means No, there have already been a number of longstanding groups, e.g., Him Lok Jagriti Manch (literally translated: Himalayan people awareness platform) and Hangrang Sangarsh Samiti (Hangrang [valley] struggle committee), resisting the unconsenting and excessive realization of hydroelectric projects in the region. In contrast to the Kinnaur-wide approach adopted by No Means No, however, previous struggles were often localized (e.g., the struggle in the village of Lippa, see Pardikar 2020).

their predecessors in the various villages to discuss with them current events, difficulties, and strategies.[5] Two aspects seem to be decisive regarding the legacy and possibly the transformation of protest in the region: the way in which space is recognized and/or appropriated, and the ways in which cultural identity is brought to bear as political resource.

Given the focus of this essay, the very use of art as a means of addressing the current historical moment is as crucial as the choice of specific forms and forums of expression. With No Means No, the use of art as a means of protest acquires an intriguing form. The engagement of art in the campaign goes far beyond the traditional use of songs, poems, and crafts to express affect and aversion. What is striking is the synchronicity with which different art forms emerge and appear as almost "organic" parts of the same cause. Most telling, however, is that although the events seem well-nigh orchestrated, there is no recognizable "conductor." The artists perform their roles without being "led," without necessarily conceiving of themselves as "activists" or "artivists,"[6] and without necessarily being part of a larger whole with a specific goal. And yet the artifacts produced align with the general protest, and everyone is playing their part.

A final aspect to be mentioned in this introduction concerns the visibility or rather accessibility of the artifacts in question. The role of social media is decisive in this context.[7] It has changed how art is displayed as a means of protest and how it is received. This touches upon the role of space, which will be discussed in the last section of this essay. The cases presented here are characterized by the creative use and synergy of different spaces, in particular through the interplay of online and offline spaces.

[5] There is a continuity of protest across generations, even if the means and narratives may differ. The younger generation seems willing to learn from the past, just as their elders appreciate and support their struggles. See, e.g., this video in which Roshan Lal Negi, an expert on Tibetan language and Buddhism from Jangi and a frequent critic of hydropower development plans for the region, can be seen alongside the youth, lending his voice to the struggle: https://www.facebook.com/Savekinnaurcompaign/videos/4175529005847365/.

[6] The neologism "artivism" used here does not refer to a self-designation, but to a term coined by scholarship. Claims about its origin vary, and often it is not referenced at all. Sandoval and Latorre's article on "Chicana/o Artivism" (2008) seems to be the likely source. Drawing on Judy Baca's work, they define "digital artivism" as a "convergence between 'activism' and digital 'artistic' production" (ibid. 81). With its emphasis on the critical role of youth, identity, and empowerment, this approach is quite instructive here.

[7] We have not made a detailed distinction between the various social media in this essay. Here, it suffices to say that the role of social media for the campaign is primarily in using it as a platform for the presentation of events, which often takes the form of video artworks. The coordination of real-time events via X (formerly Twitter), as happened with Occupy or the Arab Spring, for example, plays no role in No Means No.

The reader will notice that the images presented in this essay are of varying pictorial language. There are photographs and posts of artworks, but also images of artist performances and their representation, as part of videography created and formatted for social media. As such, there are also different artists involved in performing different roles. The blend of art forms and cultural repertoires discussed below shows two things in particular. First, it acknowledges that "tradition" is fluid and changes at different paces, not least depending on the person who mobilizes it for different purposes. Secondly, it shows that art's mode of display is a crucial part of its reception, which is influenced not only by the background and concerns of the artists, but also by those of the viewers. This is also reflected in the format of this essay. We have provided the images with context and commentary, but there is room for interpretation, both for the recipients and in terms of the artists' own intentions. As such, it is ultimately up to the reader to make sense of the images and imagery used.

No Means No

On August 11, 2021, while the world was still recovering from the devastation unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic, Kinnaur, the easternmost district of the western Himalayan state of Himachal Pradesh, was struck by another tragedy. It was a disaster that many had warned about. A landslide near the village of Nigulasari on the National Highway-5 claimed the lives of 28 people who were traveling that day (Bodh 2021). On August 26, 2021, a huge rally was organized in the district capital, Reckong Peo. The message was clear: The protesters, presumably representing the views of the vast majority of the local population, did not want any more disaster-enhancing hydropower projects that ignore the vulnerability of the region and are considered key contributors to the increase in landslides in the area (Bisht 2021).

Kinnaur, located on the border with Tibet, is one of the 12 districts of Himachal Pradesh. Covering an area of 6,401 km², it is sparsely populated with a density of approximately thirteen people per km² (Department of Economics and Statistics, Govt of HP 2022, 9). Land distribution is a major problem in the region, predominantly dependent on agriculture, as only 1.6 percent of the total area is arable (ibid., 38). The district is located on the upper reaches of the Sutlej river basin. The Sutlej is revered by the locals as Zangti Kulang, with *zang* meaning gold, *ti* meaning water, and *kulang* meaning river. Sutlej has the largest catchment area of the five rivers in Himachal Pradesh. It is also the most utilized river when it comes to harnessing its hydropower

potential. Being declared the "power hub" of the state, Kinnaur generates more than a quarter of Himachal Pradesh's total energy production, which is estimated to be nearly 16,751 MW (Directorate of Energy, Himachal Pradesh n.d.). In their 2023 report, Asher et al. highlight that the energy harnessed by the region's small and large hydropower projects exceeds 4,000 MW (2023, 44).

The geological and climatic conditions of the region make it susceptible to earthquakes, landslides, floods, and droughts (Himachal Pradesh State Disaster Management Authority 2017, 53-54). The tragedy that occurred at Nigulsari in 2021 was by no means a one-off event. Disasters of varying scope and severity have hit the region in the years that followed. 2023 was a particularly challenging year for the whole of Himachal Pradesh, as heavy rainfalls during the monsoon season triggered a series of flash floods and landslides. In Kinnaur, the disasters continued even after the monsoon season. Several landslides occurred on NH5, close to the previously affected stretch, cutting Kinnaur off from the rest of the world (Bhandari 2023; New Indian Express 2023). Residents were severely impacted by the roadblocks for several days as they were transporting their apple harvest for sale. The local livelihood, today primarily based on apple growing and tourism, is existentially threatened by the continuous expansion of infrastructure, project-enhanced or even -induced disasters, and climate change.[8]

To reach the villages of Rarang, Khadra, and Akpa, about 45 minutes from the district capital Reckong Peo, one has to take a turn off the National Highway after Akpa checkpost and drive a good distance on a semi-paved road. Along the road, one can see huge boulders with colorful graffiti and catchy slogans referring to the campaign. Notably, the rock art was placed in the landscape surrounding the villages where the campaign emerged but also disseminated as photographs on social media and online news.

[8] See also this video by Narender Kavil Kirti Negi, demanding accountability and investigation after the repeated landslides: https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cy-ntN0rfLD/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=MzRlODBiN_WFlZA== (last accessed 22.12.2023). Through his video work and constant support, Kavil Kirti has created space for the campaign from the very beginning; the campaigners refer to him as *atey*, the Kinnauri word for "elder brother."

Figure 1: Rock graffiti near Akpa village: *Aj himalay jagega lutne wala bhagega* | #No Means No (The Himalaya will rise today and the plunderers will have to flee. #No Means No). Photograph by HW

It was in Akpa village that the catchphrase "No Means No" rang out for the first time on July 23, 2021, during a meeting on the proposed 804 MW Jangi Thopan Powari Hydroelectricity Project. The event turned public when people from the nearby villages mobilized and marched to the venue.[9] Under the constitution, Kinnaur is recognized as a Fifth Scheduled Area and is governed by the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA Act), 1996, and the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, commonly known as the Forest Rights Act (FRA). Section 3(2) of the FRA stipulates that conversion of forest land for development projects such as schools, hospitals, roads, and transmission lines must be approved by the concerned *gram sabha* (village council).[10] However, dysfunctional administration

[9] See https://fb.watch/otDNfi93ft/?mibextid=Nif5oz (last accessed 21.12.2023). Originally, it was to be a closed meeting of the members of the Monitoring Committee appointed by the district administration, with only selected representatives of the affected villages.

[10] The *gram sabha* is the forum of eligible voters (18 years and above) living in the village. It deliberates on matters pertaining to village development and governance.

and poor implementation of the FRA in Kinnaur has repeatedly undermined the rights of the local people (Kumar 2020). Earlier approval processes for hydropower projects in Kinnaur, where attempts were made to influence and/or subvert the will of the *gram sabha*, were still well-remembered, and this time they rejected all negotiations and conditions loud and clear.

Figure 2 and 3: Rock graffiti on the road from Akpa checkpost to Rarang. Photographs by HW

There are various stories about the origin of the campaign's name, some of which differ and some of which overlap, not least depending on whom you ask. A key aspect is certainly the aforementioned general dissatisfaction with the earlier approval processes. The companies involved have often sought to procure conditional consent, e.g., to exchange promises of jobs or infrastructure facilities in return for approval. It is in the nature of the beast that the costs of conditional consent are typically recognized when it is too late. In light of these experiences, the meeting on July 23, 2021, was met with collective rejection—*nahin* (Hindi for "no")—of all the company's assurances and promises. A few utterances of "No Means No" were also heard. Subsequently, the campaigners strategically deployed and amplified the slogan "No Means No" to achieve a wider reach. One of the ideas that eventually emerged was the analogy to the feminist campaign "No Means No." The idea of consent (project approval by the *gram sabha*) and exploitation (of the Sutlej) was seen as running parallel to the core tenets of the global movement.[11]

[11] By insisting on consent as a process and not as a one-off instance for obtaining a No Objection Certificate (NOC) by the *gram sabha*, the FRA aims at strengthening local governance. For a "feminist critique of consent," see, for instance, Loick 2020.

Two things are particularly worth mentioning here. First, although No Means No was ultimately coined as an English campaign name, there is no discrepancy, but rather a continuum with *nahin* as a general expression of resistance in the local languages. As such, it contains both local and global references and has acquired a quasi-translingual meaning. Secondly, the references—such as the link to global feminism—are not necessarily known or affirmed by all or else these are attributed to different provenances. The active *nahin* upheld by local women's organizations or *mahila mandals* is frequently stressed and seen as an important source of resistance, corroborating both the feminist link and a local story of origin.

Creating spaces for protest

The widespread publicity achieved by No Means No has forced the average citizen in Kinnaur and even beyond the district to take note of the current situation.

Figure 4: No Means No campaign. Courtesy of The Pahari Zone, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tcWEw85qw2w (last accessed 22.12.2023)

What characterized the campaign from the very beginning has been the use of offline and online spaces, sometimes alternating, often simultaneously. In addition to rallies such as the one mentioned above, which certainly had a major impact as an initial spark, the use of digital space has proven crucial from the outset. It may be somewhat redundant to speculate about the original reasons for the unfolding of the campaign on

social media; the COVID-19 pandemic and the increased accessibility of the internet arguably played an important role, but so did the routines and skills of the campaigners. What is important here is to shed light on the implications this has had on the shape and reach of the campaign.

Since its inception, No Means No has made a mark through images and songs, and through their creative representation on social media. This offers an interesting angle on the use of art in resistance movements. In the case of Kinnaur, while the artistic expressions clearly refer to the indigenous epistemologies of the region, the way they are used by the young campaigners is informed by a creative, one could perhaps say "syncretic" view of "cultural identity." The potential of this "artivism" seems to lie in particular in the dynamic synthesis between "traditional" and "new" art forms—a dynamism that debunks the dichotomy itself. The demands for impact, reach, and connectivity thrive on the use of means that are "global" by default. And yet, what is at stake globally is distinctly localized.

Figure 5: Rock graffiti near Akpa village: *Chilgoja bachao, paryavaran bachao, sanskrti bachao* | #No Means No (Save Chilgoza pine, save the environment, save culture. #No Means No). Photograph by HW

The emphasis on indigeneity plays a major role in this respect. It is about the recognition of cultural and political autonomy. Decades of exploitation of the local population's *jal, jungle, jameen* (water, forest, and land) in the name of development has challenged people and left them feeling dejected, but also compelled them to engage in dialogue and to take a stand. Adding to the history of protest in the region, the No Means No campaign has mounted a strong response in this regard in recent times, especially in terms of its reach, visibility, and Kinnaur-wide approach. It has attracted people who share the same critique and created lasting solidarities and relationships that ultimately form the basis for any nascent movement to have a future.[12] The (self-)perception as "tribal" plays at least two roles in this context. On the one hand, it serves as a reminder that the region and its inhabitants are endowed with constitutional rights that ought to be upheld—or effectively gained in the first place. On the other, it serves as a cultural signifier representing both a demarcation from the "mainstream" and a link, a potential solidarity, to other indigenous peoples facing similar threats.

Figure 6: Rock graffiti near Rarang village. Photograph by HW

[12] The campaigners have always made an attempt to forge friendships and pursue new avenues within and outside the region, as evidenced by a recent exploratory trip to Lahaul and Spiti, and by visits both to Kinnaur students' associations across Himachal Pradesh, and to villages affected by previous projects. It is also noteworthy that many of the campaigners, although they are related to each other and come from neighboring villages, did not know each other before the joint campaign, but gradually grew into firm network and relations. For the Lahaul Spiti visit, see https://www.instagram.com/reel/CttNlhmO4Xn/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&_igshid=%20MzRlODBiNWFlZA%3D%3D (last accessed 22.12.2023).

It is interesting to observe how notions of Kinnaura identity are elicited in the art sites of resistance.[13] This relates to the artistic appropriation of space, as with the rock graffiti above (see also section 4). It visualizes the relationship of the protest to the landscape in which it is taking place, as is also reflected in the narratives evoked in stories and songs.

On roots and means: Seeking answers beyond "glocalism"

Kinnaur has a rich linguistic diversity. The district is home to several languages, most of which are classified as Tibeto-Burman or Indo-Aryan; many are endangered today (Negi 2022). Most of the languages of Kinnaur have no script. Evidence of the literary tradition is therefore rather sparse. However, the region has a rich oral culture, reflected in folklore and songs through which knowledge and information is passed on from generation to generation. Notably, folk songs are not only repositories of knowledge, but have themselves created space to talk about marginalization. Stories of despair, hardships, and inequalities frequently feature in old folk songs (see Negi 2022).[14]

Numerous young singers from Kinnaur have taken up this legacy in various ways and supported the campaign in song with their own contributions. One of them is Deep Poet.[15] The musician chooses hip-hop and rap to express himself—formats that have not been part of the region's cultural repertoire to date. Particularly remarkable is that he performs in his mother tongue, Kinnauri.[16] Deep's lyrics evoke a strong emotional attachment to Kinnaura identity and land, and call for unity in the region. At the same time, he reflects on the fractures within society and does not hesitate to take a stance on regional politics.

[13] Kinnaura is the name of the predominant group living in Kinnaur. Different spellings are prevalent, such as Kinnaura, Kinnora, Kanaura.

[14] Additional information and songs can be found at zedtells.com/folksong (last accessed 22.12.2023), and https://www.zedtells.com/ archive (last accessed 22.12.2023).

[15] https://tribegang.online/deep-poet/ (last accessed 22.12.2023). For the song "No Means No", see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jhaRWQnCDCM (last accessed 22.12.2023).

[16] More precisely, he raps in Hamskad, the "standard Kinnauri," a language that is today endangered and spoken by ever fewer people. Younger people in particular no longer learn the language, not least because it is not part of the school and higher education curriculum.

Figure 7: Deep Poet performing at "Awaz-e-Kinnaur" on August 26, 2023, in Reckong Peo. Photograph by PN

Deep recently composed a song for No Means No, which was released in December 2023. Throughout the song, the word *phayul* (that occurs several times) is used as a synonym for Kinnaur. *Phayul* is an interesting word that is frequently employed within the songs of Kinnaur. In Bhoti Kinnauri, from which the term originates, *phayul* literally translates to fatherland and is used to mean "place of origin."[17] In older songs, *phayul* was used to denote a person's village or a place to which they belong. Interestingly, this belonging is relative to spatial context. Within Kinnaur, *phayul* is used for the village to which one belongs, as can be seen from lyrics that are encountered in many old songs: "*Namsha hamch dugyosh? Namsha ta lonana phayulo bairang*, or, *namsha ta lonna phayulo komo." "*Where is the daughter-in-law from? The daughter-in-law comes from outside the *phayul* (she hails from a different village), or the daughter-in-law comes from inside the *phayul* (the same village as the son)." When people leave Kinnaur, however, *phayul* refers to the entire region, as is common in modern day parlance. As more and more young people move to cities outside of Kinnaur to study and work, the strong attachment to their place of origin is reflected in a (diasporic) sense of community; they navigate the perceived alienation and tensions in the cities, acting as "reminders that belonging is elsewhere" (Smith and Gergan 2015, 123). No Means No

[17] There are different names for the language, reflecting locally varied external or self-designations, among them, Navakat, Nyamkat/d, and Bud-Kat. See Saxena 2022: 169-271; 407.

has successfully evoked this identity as a community, as seen reflected in the slogan: "*Ek Kinnaur, ek awaz*" ("one Kinnaur, one voice").

Deep Poet's lyrics speak to this sentiment. The recurring bridge in his song tells of the "*phayul*" rising up and jointly saying "No means no:" "*Ang ju fayul ringo no means no, ringo bodhi kera aakha hun no means no, toshim byased damaro hala hacho çhat hun çaiki eke hachis lonniseya* no means no" (My *fayul* says: No means No. They say the pain is unbearable now. No means No. Accustomed to sitting in the dark, how will there be light. Everyone must unite and say: No means No).[18] The remainder of his song focuses on landscape transformation and the internal fractures within Kinnaur's society, including the ignorance and negligence of some of its people, the flaws of party politics, and corruption.

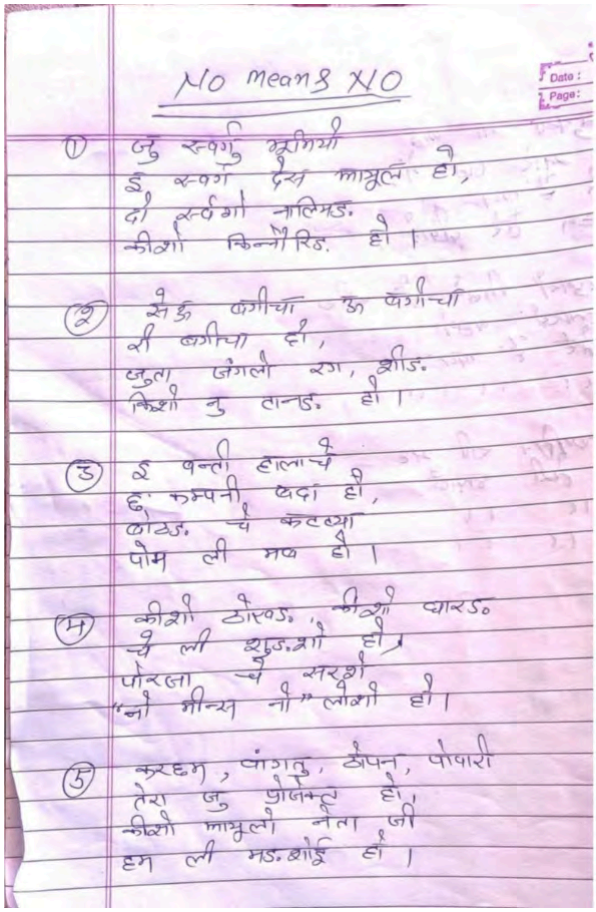
Thakur Bhagat is another young singer who has contributed a song to the campaign. He hails from Jangi, one of the villages that will be affected by the Jangi Thopan Powari Hydroelectricity Project.[19] Unlike Deep's, his song is more akin to folk songs in style and music. He sings about the destruction of mountains, rivers, and land occurring with the advent of hydroelectric projects in Kinnaur. In the music video, Thakur Bhagat wears a No Means No T-shirt and is performing a traditional dance, while one of the largest power projects in the region, Karcham Wangtoo, can be seen in the background.[20]

Figure 8: Still from Thakur Bhagat's "No Mean[s] No|Protest Video Song." Courtesy of the artist, https://youtu.be/cf__qtPD3Lg?si=K9HE1AkG0SrhD34Y (last accessed 22.12.2023).

[18] Translation by PN with input from the artist. The transliteration used is his.

[19] November 18, 2023, was a temporary triumph for the opponents of the project. On this day, the government of Himachal Pradesh issued a statement in which it canceled the allocation of the project to the previous operator SJVN (Satluj Jal Vidyut Nigam) due to delays in construction work. See, http://himachalpr.gov.in/OnePress Release.aspx?Language=1&ID=32087 (last accessed 22.12.2023). The campaigners keep pushing for the project to be scrapped completely.

[20] The T-shirt was designed and printed by a young supporter of the campaign who gave it to the movement at cost price. Incidentally, he is the grandson of R.S. Negi, retired IAS officer (Indian Administrative Service) and convener of Him Lok Jagriti Manch.



No means No

1) Upon this heavenly abode
there is a heavenly *phayul*,
the name of the heaven
is our Kinnaur.

2) Apple orchards, flower fields
Chilgoza forests,
the stones and woods in the forests
are our ornaments.

3) What a strange thing
that the company has come,
trees are all chopped down
and now the snow doesn't come.

4) Our mountains, our rivers
all has perished,
the public has risen
"No Means No," everyone says.

5) Karcham, Wangtoo, Thopan, Powari
how many projects,
our *phayul's* politician
where will you hide.

Figure 9: Lyrics of "No Means No" by Thakur Bhagat. Courtesy of the artist.

In addition to official music release, people who use Instagram and other platforms to disseminate their art have also contributed to the campaign. One such example is the video of the user a_v_brown, which has been circulating on Instagram since July 29, 2021. One campaigner's comment reads: "Other social media platforms FB or YT *pr bhi daalo apne is rap ko...*" (Upload your rap on other social media platforms such as FB or YT), followed by raising hands and clapping emojis, which obviously suggest an appreciative reception. The video is by rap artist Avinav Thakur, also known as a_v_brown. He raps in Hindi and questions the discourse on disasters as allegedly "natural events." The song's chorus goes, "No more hydro projects *humein nahi chahiye, bohot ho gayi chuppi ab ap bhi kuch kahiye*" (We don't want any more hydro projects, enough silence now, you too say something). As an independent rapper who has released a few music videos in collaboration with Punjabi artists, Avinav is an interesting case in terms of what has been said about the protest not being "instructed" and yet seemingly orchestrated. Avinav is not associated with the local music industry, he does not rap in

the local language and is not an active part of the campaign, yet he felt the urge to speak up for the local cause—"This is for my birth land," his song's intro says—and it has been well received and seen as a supportive part of the campaign.

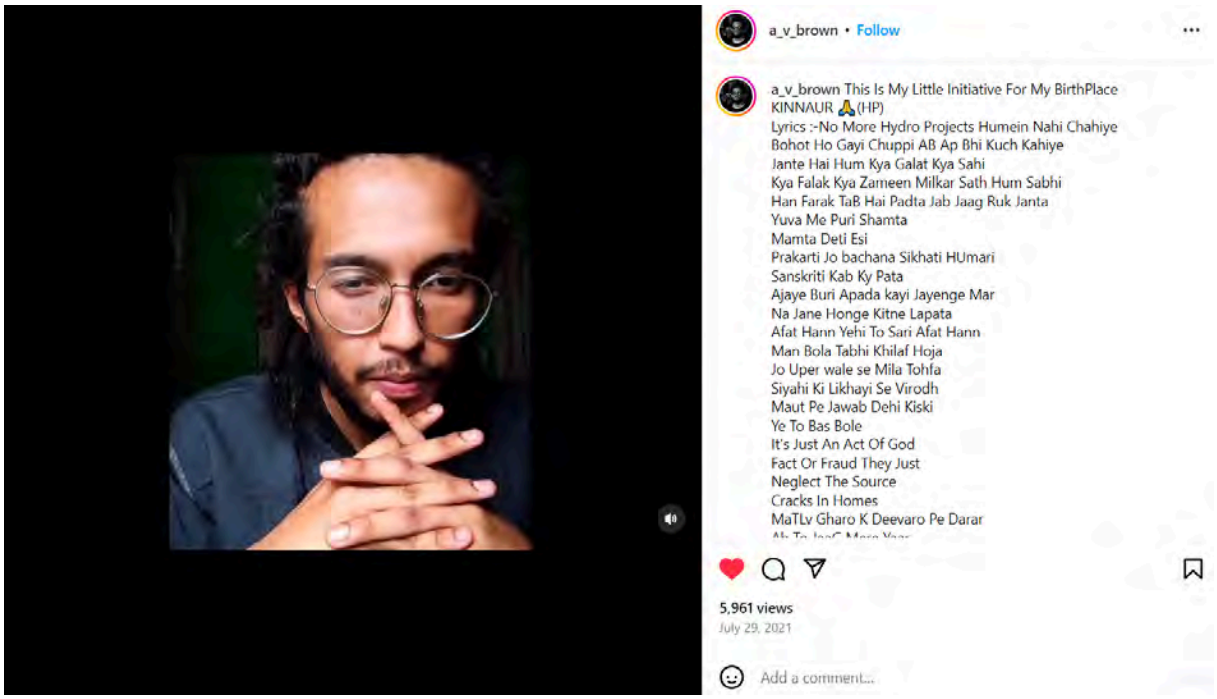


Figure 10: Still from a_v_brown's Instagram video with lyrics uploaded as captions. Courtesy of the artist, https://www.instagram.com/p/CR6NC3ajCls/ (last accessed 22.12.2023).

Songs are just one of the many art forms used in the campaign. The incorporation of Kinnaur's arts and crafts tradition also deserves attention. Among them are wooden carvings in the *santang*,[21] jewelry making, handloom weaving, art, and architecture inspired by Tibetan Buddhism, and the fabrication of musical instruments—many of which are reflected in the campaign's posts on social media, featuring a mix of cultural repertoires.

Mahesh Negi, who uses the page "Kyang" for his awareness and educational work, has long been with the campaign.[22] Kyang, through its social media channels, not only promotes the campaign, but also educates people about environmental issues, such as waste management awareness, the adverse effects of unsustainable tourism, and the like. The artworks seen on Kyang's page are framed by the *topru*, which is one of the common patterns for woolen goods such as shawls, scarves, and *dodu* (wraps) in

[21] The abode of the local *devta* (deity).

[22] *Kyang* is Kinnauri for "spark" and is related to the initial ignition—or spark—of the campaign. The metaphor also appears in Deep Poet's song.

Kinnaur. The art of weaving has existed since ancient times and is closely interwoven with Kinnaur's culture, history, and economy.[23]

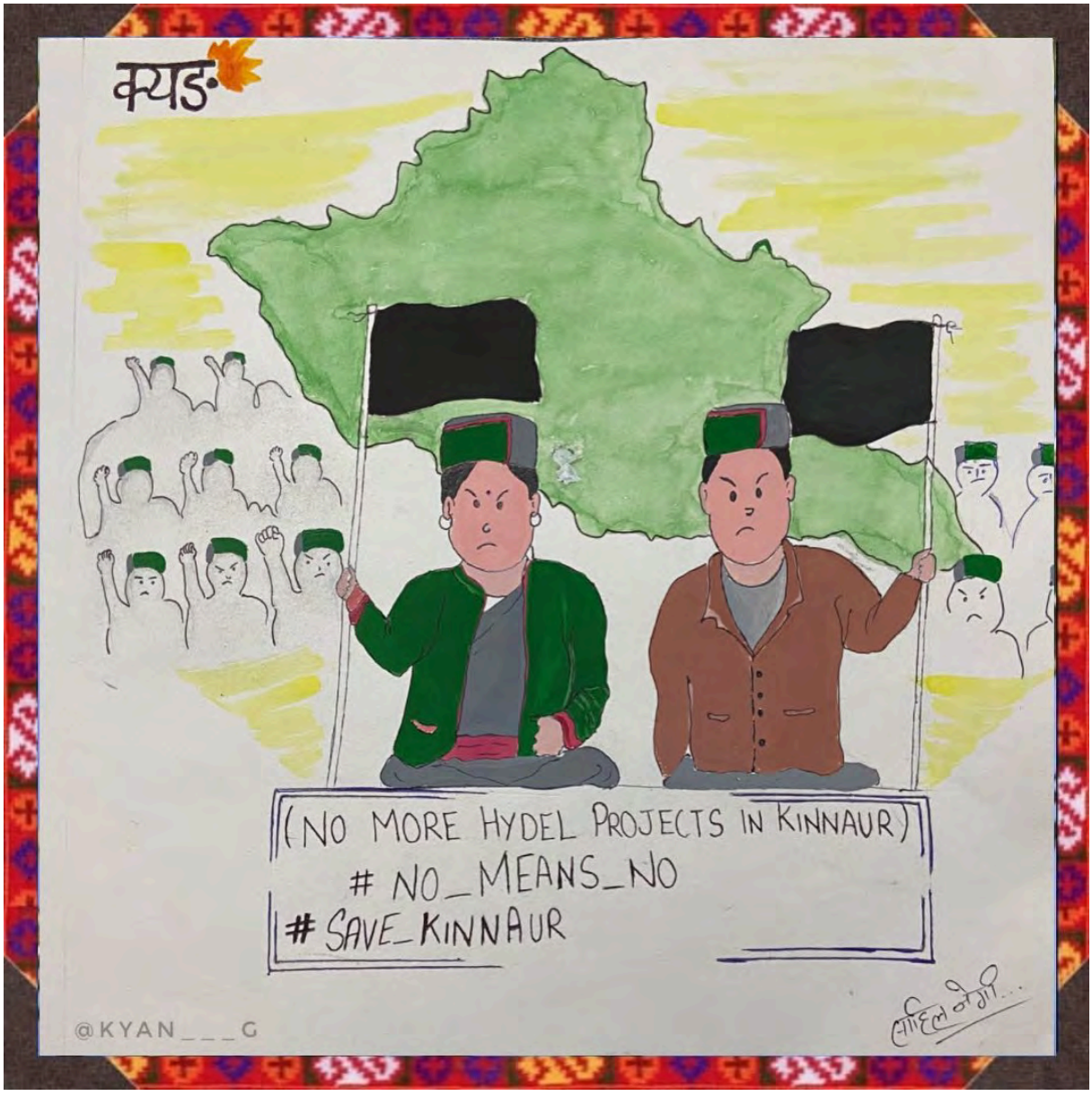


Figure 11: "No more hydel projects in Kinnaur."
Artwork by Sahil Negi and Prabhakar Negi. Courtesy of Kyang and the artists,
https://www.instagram.com/p/CRvF1BMLeJv/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==
(last accessed 22.12.2023).

[23] Kinnaur is located on the old Hindustan Tibet route, an ancient trade route that connected Tibet with the Indian subcontinent. Sheep farming and the trade in wool products became the primary economic activity in Kinnaur at the time. The weaving tradition that followed dates back thousands of years (Copley Patterson 2002).

Figure 12: Post shared on the occasion of Raksha Bandhan.[24]
Artwork by Sahil Negi and Prabhakar Negi. Courtesy of Kyang and the artists,
https://www.instagram.com/p/CS3ZsP6hJ8o/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==
(last accessed 22.12.2023).

[24] Raksha Bandhan is a festival in which a sister ties a *rakhi* (sacred thread) on her—literal or figurative—brother's wrist and the brother promises to protect her. It is not customarily celebrated in Kinnaur. Across India, the festival has been appropriated by various groups and political forces.

The above artwork was uploaded by Kyang in August 2021 and appeared a second time in a video released on International Women's Day 2022. The image, titled "Tribal women," is followed by clips of women chanting the slogans "*Naari shakti zindabad*" ("long live the power of women") and "*Awaz do, hum ek hain*" ("call out, we are one") at two rallies, one of which was held on August 26, 2021 in Reckong Peo. Another video featuring the artwork was created by "The Pahari Zone," one of the campaigners from Rarang village who runs a social media account under this name, and published on his Instagram page. In the video, students can be seen jointly painting variations of the artwork. The video's caption is particularly interesting in context of this essay. It translates roughly as: "Whenever we meet our friends from Kinnaur (students), they ask us: How can we ensure our contribution to Kinnaur ... and they tell us that even if we can't do things on the ground, we can always contribute to creating a better Kinnaur through painting, singing and various platforms. Salam to the children who retain such sensitivity for their motherland."[25]

Sunder Negi's recitation of Bhagat Singh Kinner's poem *"Kal maine Satluj ko rotey dekha"* ("Yesterday, I saw Sutlej crying") is another example of the fusion of repertoires, debunking once more any heavy-handed dichotomy between "traditional" and "new" art.[26] Sunder, who left his job as a banker in the city in 2018 for a life in the village, has played a crucial role in the campaign's launch and expansion. The video brings the words of the poem to life by placing visuals of the dammed and tunnelled Sutlej alongside images of indigenous customs and rituals associated with the river. It reflects different repertoires and temporalities both in terms of content, giving meaning to indigenous worldviews in contemporary times, and with regard to the medium and format (video recitation), which has the clear intention of broadening the audience for the poem, as Sunder writes in the caption: "*Ise humne video format mein sabke samne lane ka prayas kia hai. Ummed hai aap sabhi ko pasand ayega*" ("We have made an effort to bring it [the poem] before everyone via video format. Hope all of you like it").

[25] See https://www.instagram.com/reel/CgCIcWdghdf/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA== (last accessed 22.12.2023).

[26] Bhagat Singh Kinner, who hails from the village of Rarang, is associated with the history of protest in the region.

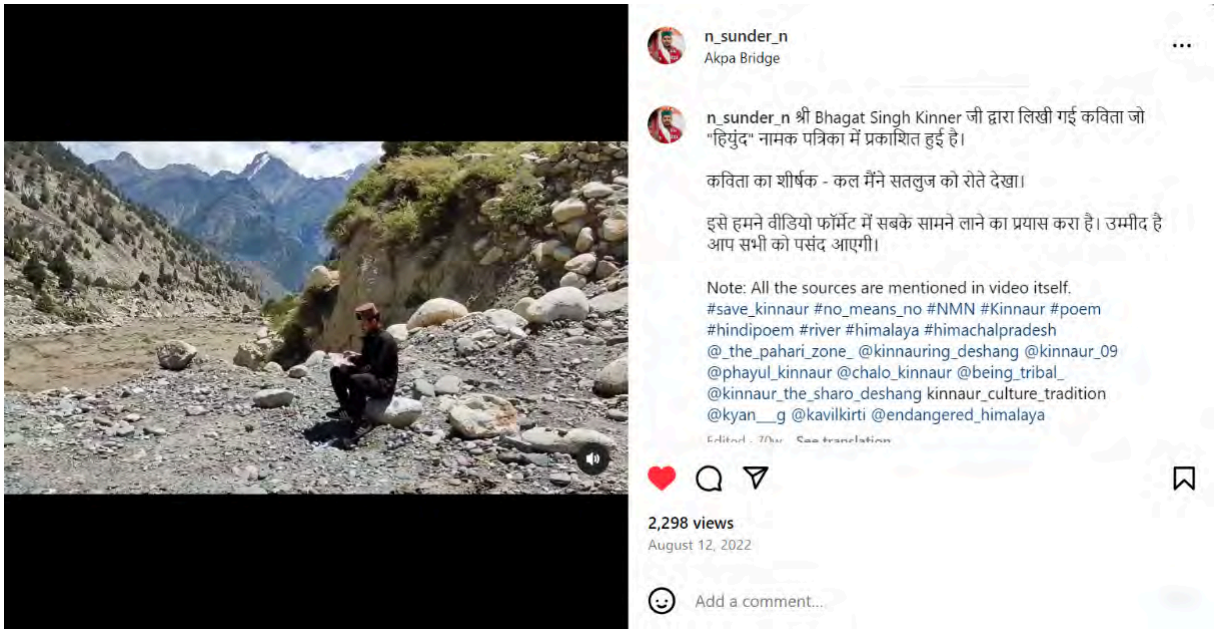


Figure 13: Sunder Negi reciting Bhagat Singh Kinner's poem "*Kal maine Sutlej ko rotey dekha*" on the shore of Sutlej. Courtesy of Sunder Negi. https://www.instagram.com/p/ChKRF5xhVGM/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA%3D%3D (last accessed 22.12.2023).

Competing (for) spaces

One crucial aspect to which these artistic expressions draw attention is the interrelation between the campaign's use of art and space—an observation not unique to this mobilization. Two variants can be distinguished here. On the one hand, there is the creation of dedicated spaces in which art can thrive; these include online and offline spaces for specific events, exhibitions, or happenings. On the other, there is the utilization of public space for protest through artistic expression. Alongside considerations of distinct places, landscapes and sites of protest, space is conceived here as a participatory setting for political articulation and mobilization. Movements shape space as much as they are influenced by it. The significance of spatiality for matters of culture and identity has long occupied scholars (for anthropology, see Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 1997; further Dirlik 2001; Escobar 2001, 2008); more recent studies on various sites of struggle confirm the importance of spatial aspects with regard to questions of resistance (see, for instance, Daphi 2017; Johansson and Vinthagen 2020; Juris 2012; Milbourne and Mason 2017).

The public event on August 26, which has been recurring every year since the abovementioned tragedy in 2021, and the subsequent representation of the event on

social media, is a good example of the intertwining of spaces. What happens in offline and online spaces is not necessarily practiced by different actors, nor does it pursue different goals.[27]

Figure 14: *Awaz-e-Kinnaur: Apda, astitva, adhikar aur sangarsh | Paryavaran, satat vikas va janjatiya asmita par paricharcha* (Awaz-e-Kinnaur: Disaster, survival, rights, and struggles. Discussion on the environment, sustainable development, and tribal identity).[28] Poster announcing the event on August 26, 2023. Design: Tanisha Negi

[27] As Jeffrey S. Juris likewise notes with regard to the #Occupy movement: "It is clear that new media influence how movements organize and that places, bodies, face-to-face networks, social histories, and the messiness of offline politics continue to matter (…)." (2012, 260)

[28] This was the English title chosen by the organizers, which retained *"Awaz-e-Kinnaur"* instead of "Voice of Kinnaur." Eventually, the Hindi title found its way onto the poster and into wider distribution. The choice of "*janjatiya*" and "tribal" in conjunction with Kinnaur's collective voice and identity is worth noting.

Particularly interesting is how events take on a new quality and find a new reach when they are disseminated via social media, often as part of artistic video contributions. Not only is the audience potentially different, but the context in which the artifacts are placed, mixed, and possibly modified also shifts. To state the obvious, but nonetheless important, the commentary function on the videos also allows recipients other than those at the event itself to voice their opinion. Videographic representations enable a different temporality and scale of reception, which brings a new dynamic to the perception and self-perception of those staging the event as well.

Figure 15: Deep Poet's performance at "Awaz-e-Kinnaur" featured in a video of the event. Courtesy of The Pahari Zone, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SR9QII01sYw (last accessed 22.12.2023).

Figure 16: Jaswant Negi's paintings at "Awaz-e-Kinnaur," August 26, 2023. Photograph by PN

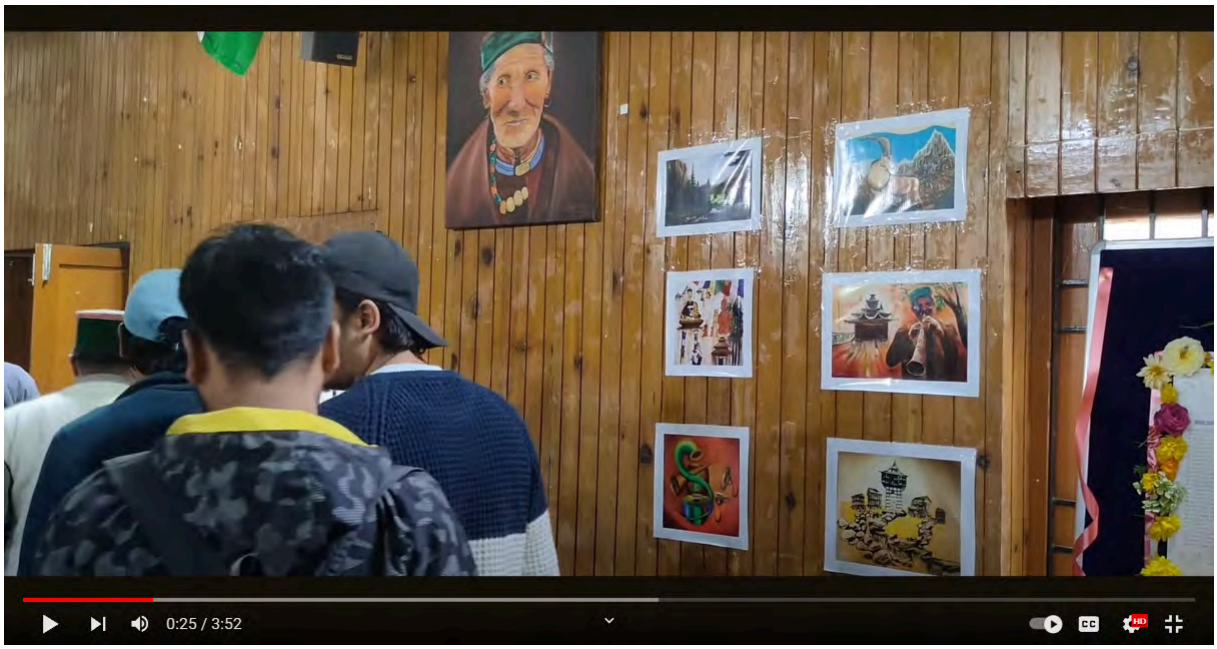


Figure 17: Jaswant Negi's paintings at "Awaz-e-Kinnaur" featured in a video of the event. Courtesy of The Pahari Zone, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SR9QII01sYw (last accessed 22.12.2023).

The campaign is certainly not the only player engaging spatiality to further its aims. State actors have long focused on appropriating space for their goals, including the promotion of a preferred version of "culture." Different spatial levels come into play here, including physically tangible places, where variants of more or less "staged authenticity" are produced, as well as virtual spaces, such as the Himachal Tourism Official Website, where landscapes are made accessible—and coined—for non-locals.[29] As can be seen from these and the above examples, both online and offline spaces operate with varying degrees of mediation and mediatization, which ultimately blur the boundaries themselves. Given the hybridity and interplay of spaces, "(...) any opposition between the 'virtual' and the 'real' is fundamentally misleading in almost the same manner as a distinction between the 'digital' and the 'nondigital' (or 'analog') is untenable" (Frömming et al. 2017, 13).

The government of Himachal Pradesh has decorated public walls all over the state with paintings depicting the culture of the region. The ones below can be seen at the bus station in the district capital of Kinnaur, Reckong Peo.

Figure 18: The picture wall, bus stand, Reckong Peo. Photograph by HW

[29] Images of "Kinnauri tradition" feature quite prominently on this page, see https://himachaltourism.gov.in/ destination/ ethnic/ (last accessed 22.12.2023). The title of the URL/sub-page is also noteworthy.

Figure 19: Traditional architecture in Kamru village, embellished with ripe apples, bus stand, Reckong Peo. Photograph by HW

Figure 20: Kinnauras dancing in ethnic attire in the santang of Kalpa village, bus stand, Reckong Peo. Photograph by HW

Comparing the images displayed at the bus stand with the paintings shown in the art gallery at Awaz-e-Kinnaur, one may not recognize much of a difference in the motifs at first glance. What is shown are features of "culture and tradition," such as women in folk dress, traditional architecture, landscapes, and animals, aestheticizing the place. That is where space as a participatory setting for political articulation and mobilization becomes crucial. The context in which the paintings are shown matters. It makes a difference whether the apples are a nice decoration that might attract tourists who come in season for a cheaper buy or whether they are shown in an event where a clear (symbolic) link is established to a threatened economy. It makes a difference whether the pristineness of nature is shown as if nothing has happened, to appeal to those who pass by the projects on their way to unspoiled landscapes, or whether it is shown, still aesthetically pleasing, but everyone in the room knows what will happen if the projects were to go ahead. It makes a difference whether the Kinnaura woman in the traditional attire is featured in a clip about the beauty and modesty of "tribal women," or whether she is holding a placard reading "No Means No," as in the images above. After all, the way in which the campaigners see the landscape they inhabit and envision their future is quite clear:

Figure 21: Rock graffiti near Akpa checkpost. Photograph by HW

Conclusion

This essay has been an attempt to present our reflections on the relationship between art and resistance in the context of socioecological mobilizations. Using the case of the No Means No campaign in western Himalayan Kinnaur, we hope to have shown essentially two things. First, there is no inherent relationship between art and resistance that prescribes roles and goals; it is a dynamic process in which neither the role of the individual artist and the trajectory of the artifact nor the choice of art forms and content are predetermined. Secondly, the repertoires used by the artists are fluid and the critical potential of the artworks arises precisely through creative synthesis and shifting contexts. The ability to navigate different cultural registers in terms of means and narratives is as crucial as the versatility of form and performance that co-creates the spaces in which the works are presented and received.

To give an example of this rather abstract claim: Jaswant’s paintings clearly illustrate that purpose is as important as context—in this case, that of the exhibition. But they also show that “tradition” may change at a different pace than its critical scrutiny, which means that the aim of cultural preservation can potentially serve very different purposes. Displaying artifacts seen as representative of one’s culture takes on a practicality beyond “strategic essentialism” (Spivak 1993). In the moment of the resistive act, “who we are” and “who we want to be” conveys a powerful message without necessarily implying a concession in terms of content. Although it is beyond the scope of this essay, the aspect of “learning,” constantly stressed by the campaigners, plays a crucial role here: learning about themselves, their combatants, but also about “activism,” not yet defined, as a possible way to create a different future. Tomorrow, I may want to be someone else if I realize I have taken the wrong path. If we rethink essentialism in the present context, it can have both a resistive and possibly subversive potential, as it offsets the content of what is shown at the very moment it is shown because of the context in which it happens. Images of “traditional architecture,” “scenic beauty,” and “rich folk heritage” fulfill this function, as do songs replete with feelings of loss and nostalgia. This is not a reactionary longing for the past (even if this is a possible direction), but rather the expression of an identity crisis that juggles a future yet to be created. While the campaigners evoke a strong sense of community, many have critically reflected on their people’s role in bringing unwelcome societal change to the region. The cooperation between colonial state authorities and the local elites, for example, has been called into question time and again. Critical

questions directed to the political leaders of Kinnaur have been posed in songs and social media posts.

Scholars have long have argued that the Indian state is behaving in an imperial and colonial manner in its "tribal" and border areas, turning them into hubs for large-scale development projects and extractive industries that violate indigenous people's rights to their lands and autonomy (see, for instance, Anand 2012; Baruah 2012; Kikon 2020; Xaxa 2016). Such criticism is reflected quite vividly in No Means No. The campaigners challenge the development interests of the state and contrast this with a different future. Not necessarily a future that is finalized in all aspects, but a future that is "decolonial" because it holds a vision of space where the people have more control over decision-making processes and ancestral territories. Beyond the common tropes of "development critique," sustainability is high on the agenda, including livelihood issues, reconcilable tourism, horticulture, and self-paced—and self-defined—development.

The context is equally clear—and by extension equally decolonial: From its location, positionality, and resources, No Means No has to struggle against a long tradition of hegemonic historiography and ethnography in India (and elsewhere) that has always sought to incorporate its margins into the mainstream. The (post-)colonial Indian state operates on a hierarchized social structure (Xaxa 2016). This reflects prominently in the long-held and partly prevailing view that indigenous peoples or "tribals," to quote the still common official language, are basically "backward Hindus" whom the state should strive to assimilate into the Hindu mainstream civilization. In view of the current political transformations in India, this becomes even more pertinent. Although not yet as widespread as in neighboring regions of the Himalayas, sanskritization[30] is already a significant phenomenon in Kinnaur. It is against this backdrop that, e.g., Kinnauri rapper Deep Poet's art can be read. Rapping in his mother tongue becomes a decisive means for asserting cultural and territorial autonomy, and a fitting example of Kinnaur's present-day "artivism." The resistance of the region's youth is decolonial through its criticism of development paradigms. But it also debunks these terms through its very being and acting on the ground.

[30] The hierarchization of castes, by which lower castes and "tribals" are classified and assimilated into a Brahmanical worldview. This includes the marginalization of indigenous rituals and customs as well as the supersession of languages of non-Sanskritic origin. The replacement of terms from the vernacular with non-equivalent Hindi terms—such as in *santang* (deity's residence, but also place of assembly) through *mandir* (temple)—results in considerable shifts in meaning, which have an impact on local customs.

Recalling the questions posed in the introduction to this essay, we must concede that there is no necessary relationship between art and resistance (here, as throughout the essay, understood in the narrow sense of political action). Nor is resistance per se transformative.[31] Chances are good, however, for art to assume a resistant role through the spaces it creates or appropriates. Beyond questions of intention and impact, the campaign's political aesthetic has manifested and spread with a vigor certainly not conceivable at the outset. Even though art in its various forms is only one element of the campaign, it is crucial in visualizing the potential and tenacity of the resistance. This is perhaps most evident in the rock graffiti shown in this essay, situated as they are between materiality and metaphor. At first glance, a rock may simply be a rock, but as soon as it is used as a canvas, it changes its valence. And so, the rock, as a symbol of resistance, underscores the resistance itself. The message written on it interacts with its unbreakability: No Means No.

[31] Whether art is resistant in itself is another question, given the homonymy of the term "resistance." See Rancière (2008).

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