

Gandhigiri in Sikkim

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The indigenous Lepchas of Sikkim are using Gandhian methods of protest to prevent construction of hydel projects that will destroy their land and the environment. At a time when politics has been reduced to a numbers game, they know that their minority status is against them. But they are determined to continue the struggle.

In the remote Himalayan state of Sikkim Gandhigiri is being practised as a method of popular democratic protest. The heroic duo, Dawa Lepcha and Tenzing Lepcha broke their indefinite satyagraha on June 13, 2008 after fasting for 96 days at Gangtok in Sikkim.¹ These two youth activists broke their fast after a written assurance from the government of Sikkim that it was shelving the four hydel projects in the Dzongu area of north Sikkim. This took place just six days short of the first anniversary of the formal protests launched by the Concerned Lepchas of Sikkim, the Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT), and the Sangha of Dzongu against 26 hydel projects at Bhutia-Lepcha house in Gangtok on June 20, 2007.² This was not the first time these two brave youth had decided to adopt non-violent Gandhian methods not only to force the government to listen to their demands and alter its development policies, but also to ensure that democratic ethos get firmly rooted in contemporary Sikkim.

Dawa and Tenzing's first round of indefinite fast lasted 63 days and was called off after they were assured by the government that it would reconsider these projects by forming an independent review committee – a promise that the present democratically elected government of Sikkim did not keep. "Dams over Dzongu will be built over our dead bodies", proclaimed the banner marking the 200th day on January 6, 2008 of this historic satyagraha. Subsequently on March 10 about 300 Lepchas of Dzongu staged a rally at Gangtok carrying placards and banners demanding an end to all hydel projects in north Sikkim. Preceding this rally, the activists offered prayers at the sacred stones at Kabi on March 7 to galvanise moral support. Dawa Lepcha and Tenzing Lepcha commenced a second round of indefinite fast on March 10, 2008. In April 2008, nearly 100 Lepchas from Kalimpong and Darjeeling commenced a pilgrimage to their holy land, Dzongu but had to abandon it due to a clash with supporters of the project. All these protesting Lepchas are demanding that the government

duly recognise the sanctity of the Lepchas' ancestral roots in Dzongu and the necessity of safeguarding it from greedy capitalism.

A Decade of Protests

These protests by associations of the Lepchas against the desecration of their sacred landscape are not new. These can also be traced to the Rathongchu agitations wherein the lamas of Sikkim and activists belonging to the Lepcha and Bhutia community forced the government to shelve another hydropower project located in west Sikkim in 1997 [Arora 2005, 2006c]. The leaders of the Rathongchu movement, Choki Topden and Sonam Paljor Denzongpa have extended their moral support to these Lepchas and influenced some of their oppositional strategies. Many of the people who are now at the forefront of the agitations had voiced their concerns strongly during my fieldwork visit in 2001. In 2005, this opposition acquired a popular following in north Sikkim and took an organisational form with the constitution of the ACT.³ Other organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) joined hands in 2006 to actively oppose land acquisition and any construction activities in Dzongu.

Tired of not being heard and their land being destroyed in the name of development, the activists commenced a hunger strike in June 2007 after the failure of numerous rounds of negotiations and discussions with the chief minister, the chief secretary and the power department. To these struggling Lepcha activists, Dzongu represents the last bastion of their cultural heritage and the only place in the region where they feel free to follow their distinctive cultural and religious traditions. Dzongu contains a number of important sacred sites such as caves where Guru Rinpoche meditated, the Keshong Lake, the Kongsas hot springs, and the Tholung temple that is revered not merely by the Lepchas, but by all the Buddhists of Sikkim. Its alienation is unacceptable to the indigenous Lepchas [Arora 2006a, 2006b]. During my fieldwork in Dzongu in 2006 and 2007 the villagers expressed grave concern about the unchecked development and the erosion of safeguards that have protected them in the reserve area. This accounts for the uncompromising posture of many Lepcha residents, that declares "we will accept nothing less than a complete scrapping of hydel projects

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in Dzongu". Some families have been divided with some members backing these projects while the others oppose them on several grounds – environmental, ethnic, religious and demographic.⁴

High-risk Dams and 'Outsiders'

In a situation where India faces a severe energy crisis and rising oil prices fuel inflation to alarming double-figures, should we reconsider and shelve hydropower projects over the river Teesta? M K Pandit, the director of the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies of Mountain and Hill Environment (CISMHE) under whose supervision a carrying capacity study of the Teesta basin was conducted over nearly six years admitted in December 2007 that stages I-III of the Teesta project are neither environmentally advisable nor feasible. He warns that many of the hydropower projects on river Teesta are located in the high-risk zone IV of the seismic zoning map [Pandit 2007: 31]. He points towards the drastic increase in the number of landslides in the Teesta basin due to increased developmental activity, especially after commencement of construction and blasting. Scientists strongly warn against dams above the height of 80m in north Sikkim (ibid: 220). These researchers note that people in Sikkim are opposed to infrastructural development that is achieved at the cost of the loss of culture and identity (ibid: 193). Scientists and social scientists of the carrying capacity study have jointly recommended an evolution of a mechanism to check influx of migrants and ensure that they do not settle there and dilute the cultural specificity of the indigenous and other groups of Sikkim (ibid: 220).

Geographer Maitreyee Choudhury documents intense local opposition to the projects located in Dzongu that is due to fear of influx and settlement of outsiders, culminating in the loss of Lepcha culture while bringing crime and disease in this restricted-access area. Her report documents the high level of awareness among the Lepchas about their rights as an indigenous people including the right to self-determination, protection from cultural ethnocide and right to control, use, and oppose the alienation of their natural resources. She even recommends that Teesta projects should not be implemented by ignoring either

these local sentiments or the vocal opposition of the indigenous communities affected by them [Choudhury 2007: 134-35].

Amidst all these arguments for and against the hydropower project over river Teesta, and debates in corridors of the state government and in corporate boardrooms, Dawa and Tenzing have been transformed into fervent Gandhians. In a telephonic conversation in November 2007, Dawa told me that he was reading Gandhi's autobiography yet again. In a later press release the duo stated that, "these fasts symbolically recall the sacrifice made by the freedom fighters, particularly Mahatma Gandhi to achieve democracy and self-rule for ordinary Indians". Dawa and Tenzing have emerged as youth leaders demanding the rooting of morality, consensual politics, people-centred development, and a strong democratic ethos within Sikkim. There are other unsung heroes and Buddhist lamas who are participating not merely in these relay hunger strikes at Gangtok but also in neighbouring Kalimpong and Darjeeling. Even the Lepchas of Illam district of Nepal have extended solidarity to these protests.

Determined Minority

At a time when politics has been reduced to a numbers game, the Lepchas know that being a minority they can never win. However, they are making history by adopting Gandhigiri and doing this effectively. In April 2008, the Narmada Bachao Andolan activist Medha Patkar went to Gangtok to extend support to these struggling Lepchas. Strapped for funds but not lacking in moral strength and determination, these protestors are emotionally supported by their families and fellow-villagers, friends, neighbours and colleagues, and lastly, tourists who spontaneously embrace and extend their support and spread their message nationally and internationally.⁵ In strong contrast, neighbouring Darjeeling smoulders under indefinite bandhs with the "violent" demand for a separate state of Gorkhland and a partition of West Bengal. Ironically violence seems to get quicker attention and resolution than non-violent protest.

The Teesta activists only won a battle and not the war in June 2008. The official communication of the chief engineer-cum-secretary of the Sikkim state power

department, Pema Wangchen dated June 12, 2008 declared that the 90 MW Ringpi, 33 MW Rukel, 120 MW Lingza and the 141 MW Rangyong projects were being scrapped. Simultaneously in Chungthang in north Sikkim, the chief minister Pawan Chamling laid the foundation stone for the 1,200 MW Teesta stage III hydel project. He firmly declared in his speech that the controversial 300 MW Panan hydel project would not be scrapped. ACT coordinator, Tseten Lepcha's official press release on June 14, 2008 applauded and welcomed the government's decision, but simultaneously affirmed the continuation of their relay hunger strike. The Gandhian protestors firmly believe that their satyagraha's effect may be slow paced but the message it imparts will be strong.

NOTES

- 1 Due to medical complications, another activist Ongchuk Lepcha was advised to withdraw after 81 days.
- 2 Readers may refer to an earlier article of mine [Arora 2007].
- 3 Their web site defines as "an organisation of the indigenous Sikkimese citizens to protect the land and the people against the threat of devastation of the biodiversity hotspot (Khangchendzonga biosphere reserve), endangering the demographic profile of the indigenous primitive Lepcha tribes and the right to live in one's own homeland in dignity and security in the name of development harbingered by numerous mega hydropower projects at one go." See www.actsikkim.com.
- 4 These issues are discussed elsewhere in the paper [Arora 2008].
- 5 Many such expressions are to be found on the activists' blog – weepingsikkim.com

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