

Unheard Voices of Protest in Sikkim

The Teesta hydel project promises development in the long neglected region of north Sikkim. However, the region's indigenous inhabitants, largely the Lepchas and the Bhutias, along with the Buddhist community, have been engaged in a sustained campaign against the project. Such protests are not merely on grounds of displacement but that the region's cultural and ethnic traditions are rooted in the river Teesta and its environs.

by Vibha Arora

I have just (July) returned from field-work in Himalayan Sikkim where it is raining hard with the arrival of the monsoons. The Indira bypass in Gangtok was blocked by a huge landslide in the previous few weeks causing traffic jams on the national highway from Gangtok, and the incessant rain triggered major landslides in Sikkim. As the taxi-driver quipped, "These landslides are aggravated by the recent construction activity under the 'able' guidance of the NHPC." The Buddhist lamas might pray for divine intervention and protection, yet ecology takes its own course and the river Teesta muddied by soil deposits and whipping boulders looked furious on its way downward from north Sikkim towards north Bengal. I noted how the bulldozers were cutting up mountains and slicing through the hills to construct reservoirs and project colonies, making channels and diverting the course of the once mighty river Teesta into "abject" submission for generating hydel energy, while labourers toil under rain and sunshine, day and night at these construction sites to earn their daily wage. The environmentalist needs to keep a strict vigilance of this situation. Ironically, though, it is the Tibeto-Burman Lepcha tribals, popularly classified under hunting-gathering forest-dwelling primitive groups, who are waging this battle against the government of Sikkim and the project developers in courts and in villages.

Since June 20, 2007, Lepcha leaders and youth have been on an indefinite satyagraha at Gangtok demanding the closure of the Panam hydel project in Dzongu, the Lepcha reserve. They also wish to pressurise the state government into reviewing many of the 24 hydel projects planned on the river Teesta in Sikkim as well as in north Bengal. Sitting under a white-silken 'khada' covered picture of Mahatma Gandhi and listening to sacred Buddhist chants, surrounded by their supporters, the activists continue undaunted in their struggle. The activists explained to me, "We respect national interest and that of the state government but we are here to fight for our rights. Look at our condition. Look at all the Teesta projects in totality. We are being bulldozed into accepting this (hydel) project." As the group's ideologue Athup Lepcha emphasised, "We don't want to lose our Mayellyang, if it is desecrated then our culture becomes extinct!". Concerned Lepcha men and women are participating in this indefinite relay satyagraha while Buddhist lamas and Lepcha shamans are performing rituals at the venue of the hunger strike. Other Lepcha organisations including the Tarzum, the Sikkim Lepcha Bhutia Youth Association, the Sikkim Bhutia Lepcha Association, and others including the Buddhist sangha and tribal organisations are being propelled to take an explicit position on the hydel project, while some minority factions are getting politicised and splintering due to vested interests.

The Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) is the rechristened name of the Joint Action Committee, an organisation formed by the people living in the basin of river Teesta in the northern district of Sikkim in 2005. Non-government organisations and activists are gathering support, instilling

courage among the Sikkimese perceived hitherto as too docile to fight for social justice and oppose their unjust displacement from their homeland, farms, and forests, all in the name of development and state interest. The project affects other communities apart from the Lepchas such as the Bhutias, especially the Lachenpa and Lachungpa, living in the Lachen and Lachung valley of north Sikkim and other Nepali communities of Sikkim who will also be displaced by the project. Thus, it would be erroneous to regard the issue as merely a Lepcha affair. Although some families of the Lachung community have accepted compensation for land acquisition, however, officials of the forest department reveal that much of this land belongs to the forest department and the Lachungpa only had usufruct rights to this land. In strong contrast, the Lachen families have passed a unanimous resolution in their traditional panchayat ('dzumsa') condemning the hydel project and refusing to give away their ancestral lands.

Since July 2006, the Affected Citizens of Teesta have been engaged in a legal battle with the Teesta Urja at the appellate authority level where their case is being fought by Ritwick Dutta and other legal associates. United with other organisations in Sikkim and north Bengal such as NESPON, these activists are opposing a series of hydel projects planned and also under construction on the river Teesta in this area. The courts have not yet decided the matter, however land acquisition began in May 2007 in the Lepcha reserve in north Sikkim while the public hearings held in April 2007 are being challenged in the courts by ACT. The recent land acquisition activities in end-May 2007 in Dzongu prompted these affected Lepcha activists to take the extreme step of going on an indefinite hunger strike. They are strongly opposing the project on social-cultural and humanitarian grounds. "The decision of the state government to give the green signal to over 14 mega hydel power projects in north Sikkim without taking larger environment and social implications into consideration is totally wrong," Dawa Lepcha stated during an interview. "The double standards of the state government is revealed in the fact that while on one hand it has accorded primitive tribe status to the Lepchas of the state, on the other hand, it has plans to take away the very land and indigenous culture of the people it claims it is protecting", Dawa Lepcha explained to the people gathered. Six projects have been planned in the Dzongu area alone, out of which, a survey has been conducted for the 260 mw Panang project and the project has already been awarded to a private consortium. The affected people of Dzongu are demanding a closure of all projects planned in the Dzongu area in north Sikkim and a review of all the other projects in the pipeline in the rest of the state. They are also demanding the restoration and protection of the true identity of Dzongu and protection of the environment and ecology of the Khangchendzonga national park and Khangchendzonga biosphere reserve. They are voicing their concern and protesting against the decision of the state government to go ahead with the Teesta Stage III project in Chungthung in north Sikkim. "We feel betrayed by other Sikkimese politicians and our community representatives are mute spectators to their own destruction. If the Lepcha and Bhutia community itself is finished, then whom will they represent?". In December 2006, ACT had postponed a mass rally scheduled for December 12, at Gangtok after being assured personally by the chief minister that the government would review the project taking into account the socio-cultural implications and ecological impact of the project. Chief minister Pawan Chamling assured the activists that any development would not be at the cost of annihilating the indigenous tribals of Sikkim.

The banners behind the fasting activists at the Bhutia-Lepcha house read "Save the Primitive people", "Save Teesta, Save Tholung" (Tholung is a historic 18th century Buddhist temple located in Dzongu), while other posters proclaim, "Right to life includes wholesome environment" and yet another emphasises "Don't destroy the mountains. The rivers. The forests, wildlife, above all the Lepchas who are on the verge of extinction." These satyagrahis are demanding a sincere environmental impact assessment study of the Teesta basin. Many of these hydel projects have not yet secured the necessary clearances from the union ministry of environment and forest affairs. On June 10, 2007, representatives of the Buddhist monasteries of

north Sikkim decided to establish a separate unit known as the Sangha of Dzongu and a public meeting took place on June 13 at the Bhutia-Lepcha house. At this meeting they resolved to unanimously support the activists' plan to launch an indefinite hunger strike since some sacred sites would be desecrated by the massive disturbances to the landscape and large-scale construction activities. This meeting was attended by influential Rathongchu activists, namely, Sonam Paljor and Chokila Toden, and other Buddhist lamas and concerned activists.

Ethnic conflict becomes acute with the influx of migrants and the fear of the indigenous inhabitants that they would be submerged and alienated in their own land. The Lepchas argue that almost all development projects in the region have displaced and caused untold misery to them. In June 2006, Tseten Lepcha stated publicly during a hearing held at Chungthang in north Sikkim, "Our fears are compounded by the fact that despite these laws, we have seen in earlier projects that it brought in massive influx. These hydro projects are being touted as harbinger of immense money and prosperity but it has also made us a minority in our own homeland. The project report says that the area has 22,000 people but we must remember that it is not just Stage III that is coming up on the Teesta river. There are six such projects and accordingly, the influx would be manifold. So if there is an influx of about 25,000 to 30,000 people from outside, what will happen to our population numbering merely 22,000? The presence of the Garrison Road Engineering Force (GREF) and the army has already diluted our unique identity. The GREF and the army have already taken about 40 per cent of our fertile land, and some of our poor tribals are on the verge of becoming landless. If such mega projects come, what will happen to the local original Sikkimese residents? It is not easy to understand the impact of influx (from India) immediately."

Cultural Aspects of Protests

On May 16, 2007, the Buddhist Sangha of north Sikkim held a meeting at Gangtok and decided to support the activists fighting against the implementation of the Teesta Project in Dzongu, the Lepcha reserve located in north Sikkim. The *Bras Mo Gshongs Gnas Yig* (the pilgrimage guide to Sikkim), which was written in the 14th century by Jigme Pawo in the Tibetan language reiterates Sikkim's status as a place of refuge for Buddhists and spiritual accomplishment and 'sadhana'. According to the guide, "Bras-mo-gshongs is very rich and fertile. The land possesses mines of several metals such as iron, copper; there are many varieties of fruits and medicines in the forest; and the forest is rich in flora and fauna. The land is also rich and things grow naturally in this fertile valley and cultivation of crops does not require much labour. The landscape of Sikkim has everything to satisfy the needs of both human and other living beings and hence it is expected that they live in peace and harmony." The lamas warn against large-scale perturbations as this may lead to irreparable loss of hidden treasures and sacred texts concealed by the Padmasambhava, a reincarnate of Sakyamuni Buddha, in the eight-century AD during his travels and his conversion of Tibetans into the Buddhist faith. The current performance of the sacred rituals, the gnas-gsol, by the Buddhist sangha of Dzongu at the Bhutia-Lepcha house has a strong potential to galvanise Buddhist sentiments in Sikkim and other parts of India and neighbouring countries of Nepal and Bhutan. It may be recalled that during the Rathongchu agitation similar protests and rallies by Buddhist lamas, tribal men and women, had forced the government to submit to pressure. At the height of the Rathongchu agitations in 1995, the lamas had threatened to burn their sacred scriptures if the project was implemented against their wishes.

For the Lepchas, the implementation of the Teesta hydel project and the loss of Dzongu (the ancient Lepcha reserve) may result in ethnocide, the disappearance of their cultural heritage that is rooted to their ancestral connections and performance of rituals connected to the land, forests, mountains, lakes, and nature, in general. Dzongu and the sacred peaks of Mount Kanchenjunga are considered a 'mayellyang' (a celestial paradise) in Lepcha cosmology and revered by all

Lepchas. The historic Tholung monastery safeguarding Sikkim's nationalist treasures and sacred texts is also located in this endangered reserve and has survived many earthquakes over the last few years. It is a very sacred site associated with Lhatsun Chenpo, one of the patron saints of Sikkim.

The river Teesta is not merely a source of water, but the very lifeline of Sikkim. Sikkimese folklore is aflush with myths and stories about how civilisation and humans settled along the course of the river and the Lepchas skilfully constructed cane-bridges across this river. According to an ancient Lepcha myth, an infuriated Teesta caused a deluge when he lost the race to his lover, the sacred river Rangit. In this ancient myth, the rest of Sikkim was flooded and all life perished in that great deluge. On August 8, the Lepchas annually worship Mount Tendong, as this mountain offered sanctuary to human, animal, and other living creatures during the deluge caused by the river Teesta. During these prayers, gods and the spirits of the land are propitiated to ensure the fertility of the land, maintain the environmental balance, and ensure peace and harmony in Sikkim, the Darjeeling Hills and the entire world. This myth of deluge has a renewed ecological relevance in the current context of objections raised to the implementation of the Teesta hydel project in north Bengal and Sikkim. This myth encodes an environmental wisdom that has sustained the Lepchas in this shifting precarious landscape for centuries.

In the context of the Teesta hydel project protests, this ancient myth further reminds us that a furious Teesta is capable of ecological destruction in the region. Initial talks held on June 23 and June 29, 2007 at Gangtok between the government of Sikkim representatives including D D Bhutia (deputy chief minister) and the activists including the Lepcha ideologue and leader Athup Lepcha, Tseten Lepcha, Sherab Lepcha, Sonam Paljor (the Sikkimese leader of Rathongchu hydel project movement 1993-97 that forced the government into shelving the hydel project) and other representatives were not successful. As Tseten Lepcha stated, "The activities of ACT will continue as long as the people's wishes are ignored and state sponsored harassment continues to endanger the aborigines and if the future of Sikkim and the country is put at stake for so-called economic betterment by vested elements."

On June 29, 2007, the government representatives finally gave some of the documents demanded by the activists on June 23, 2007, but resolution looks distant until the chief minister Pawan K Chamling returns to the state. Are the indigenous Lepchas-Bhutias and the Buddhist sangha of Sikkim still powerful enough or have they been finally reduced to becoming a powerless minority in their homeland? Although a demographic minority in contemporary Sikkim, the Lepchas and the Bhutias command the cultural mandate to challenge any government. The activists' battle over their rights to their sacred Teesta river is neither ethnic-cultural or environmental in nature, although they are being misrepresented as being politically motivated by the regional press. The issues are complex and require a timely resolution.

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