

Once there was a River

More than 20 dams are being built on the River Teesta on areas that come under seismic zone IV and V (the areas that have high and highest earthquake occurrences) Building these dams also will submerge entire tracts of tropical forests in Sikkim.

by Soumik Dutta

There are plethoras of small and medium hydel projects in Sikkim, primarily on the Teesta River, awarded to national and private companies, many of which have poor environmental record and no power generation credentials.

Geological reports say the Tsolhamo area is part of the now cold desert. The entire region of the Tibetan plateau and the Himalayas, when they were being formed million of years ago, was a sea called the pre-historic Tethys Sea. Fossilized remains of water creatures have been found in the area. The brackish lakes and the fauna in the area are remnants of this pre-historic sea. The visible remains of all the geographical changes is the present Tsolhamo Lake, situated well over 17,000ft above mean sea level in north Sikkim, and the Teesta Khyantse glacier also near the lake, is the origin of the mighty Teesta river, the life-line of Sikkim. Sikkim also is a meeting point for the three tribes, Lepchas, the original inhabitants of Sikkim and the Bhutias and the Nepalis came, looking for work and are now assimilated in the mainstream. Dzongu, on the banks of the Teesta, overlooks the sacred Khangchendzonga – the world's third highest mountain – and is home to red pandas, snow leopards, and the famous Khangchendzonga National Park. The Lepcha tribe is waiting in apprehension for the harbingers of "development" – the giant bulldozers and the heavy cranes. Dzongu has been reserved for the Lepcha community and borders the Kanchenjunga Biosphere Reserve, which hosts a large number of biological curiosity. The Lepchas are one of the three ethnic communities resides in Sikkim. The 40,568 Lepchas as per the 2001 census, who call themselves the Rong-pa, are Sikkim's earliest inhabitants and popularly classified as hunting-gathering forest-dwelling primitive groups. The culture, customs and traditions of the Lepchas are inextricably linked to the nature. Now the Lepchas are facing serious threat of their existence. Meanwhile Topgay Lepcha, an erstwhile landowner tells us his story; Topgay owned about 3 acres in the fertile lands, irrigated by River Teesta but all this is past now. Today, Topgay faces a bleak existence as a daily wage earner, thanks to the Teesta stage V 510 MW plant, between Dikchu in the north and Singtam in the east. Topgay's story is a story of exploitation, of innocent, illiterate indigenous people. From a being a well to do land owner, Topgay is now a refugee in his own land. He was taken aback when the government and the NHPC approached him for his land and offered Rs 9 lakh and upped it to Rs 12 lakh as compensation. This was too much for the Topgay to reject. He, like many others, obliged the land sharks in the garb of development. They paid him too and tricked him into signing the land papers, including signing away his residential plot. What Topgay did not know when the land was 'acquired' from him was the executor of the project, The National Hydro-electric Power Corporation (NHPC) have a long record in not maintaining the ecological and environmental balance in their areas of operation and

more significantly, arm-twisting their way in acquiring land and this has been punctuated with a dire lack of corporate social responsibility. Topgay had no knowledge of what to do with the money, where to invest it, save it for his old age or future. 'Friends' cropped up from nowhere and they helped him blow up the money; even the local panchayat took loans from him, which they did not repay. They promised to build him a home. His house is worse than a dilapidated cow shed now. With little or no money, today Topgay is homeless, land less and is a daily wage earner, breaking stones for a pittance, ironically near the same Teesta River project site. Another tragic tale is that of a Bhattarai family, once again in Teesta stage V, in the rehabilitation colony. NHPC and the government had promised his sons employment in lieu of his entire land, apart from some compensation. They paid him a paltry sum, took all his land and gave no jobs. His son committed suicide in 2009 due to depression. This is the general picture across the State of Sikkim, by and large. And it is said that compensation rates varied with the clout a landowner can wield on the local MLA and the panchayat.

Accusations, doubts and threats

Opposition parties allege that the Teesta projects have been improperly allotted. Several of the companies selected, for instance, had no background in hydroelectric generation or even general energy production. The State and Central officials have given indication of their intention to continue to flout, circumvent and outright ignore the vast range of policies.

Teesta V

The environmental clearance granted to the Teesta V project by the Ministry of Environment and Forests in August 2006, for instance, was in stark violation of a stipulation that the ministry itself passed on the project, just seven years earlier. At that time, ministry officials involved in evaluating the Teesta V plans stated that no new project in Sikkim would be considered for environmental clearance until a study on carrying capacity in the watershed had been completed. Information received under a Right to Information Act application revealed that this study was never completed, but the ministry has cleared the construction of several new projects in Sikkim. Indeed, denial of information has seemingly become standard practice in Sikkim. The Sikkim government is yet to make available any copy of the various agreements that have been signed between the NHPC and private power companies, despite the fact that doing so is a prerequisite to land acquisition. Though exact figures of land acquired by the government thus far (and the related compensation paid) are unavailable, it appears that compensation is being paid in phases, to certain affected households. "There have been delays in the disbursement of compensation, also inadequate relief to communities that have been adversely affected by construction on the Teesta V projects, including due to landslides caused by dynamiting". In addition, a number of affected communities have lodged grievances that the NHPC has been haphazard in its choice of whom to compensate, as well as how much it is offering – anywhere from INR 5,000 to INR 15,000 per family. (Compensation rates are fixed at INR 18 per square foot for paddy lands and INR 16 per square foot for 'barren' land.) The NHPC recently gave around Rs 16 million to the State government to be used as compensation money, although it is not clear just how much of this will filter down to those who are affected most.

The 96 MW Lethang project

The reconstituted National Board of Wildlife Standing Committee has rejected the 96 MW Lethang hydro-electric project in Yuksam, in the west district. The Board, headed by the Prime Minister, is the apex body on wildlife issues under the Wildlife Protection Act. It rejected the proposals on October 13 last year. KHC Lethang Hydro Project Pvt Ltd, developers of the 96 MW Lethang hydro-power project in Yuksam, have been in the eye of a storm with project opponents like Sikkimese Bhutia Lepcha Apex Committee (SIBLAC) and National Sikkimese Bhutia Organization (NASBO), demanding that it be scrapped, mainly citing religious sentiments and violation of the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act of 1991, extended to Sikkim in 1998. There have also been newspapers reports that the project developers have been trying to acquire land without proper government or local body permission.

The 280 MW Panan project

In spite of strict, specific clearance condition from the Ministry Of Environment and Forests that no labour or staff colony should be set up in the Dzongu Lepcha reserve, the Himagiri Hydro Energy Private Limited has bought land for setting up just such a colony in Lingzya (dam site of Panan 280 MW HEP) Dzongu, in blatant violation of the environment clearance condition. The Teesta V project, will offer 510 MW of power, and is the first in a planned series of installations. Teesta V is considered a runoff- the-river scheme and would, therefore, not require a reservoir – although activists insist that this is merely a cover that the NHPC is employing to downplay the intensity and potential impact of the construction phase. "There are already cracking foundations in houses nearby the dam site, as a result of construction activities" Prakash Tamang, a local affected person said. In addition, and much more significantly, the site also falls in Zone IV on India's seismic-activity ranking, indicating a high level of instability. National regulations stipulate that an EIA report be submitted to the Environment Ministry within a year of starting the clearance process. In the case of Teesta V, clearance was granted in August 2006 despite the fact that the EIA report in question was alleged to be erroneous, incomprehensive and, in parts, grossly falsified, say the Affected Citizens of Teesta. Video footage of the public hearing for the KHC Lethang project recorded by the power department, showed to the media, said there was support for the Lethang project by all sections of locals comprising Nepalese, Bhutia and Lepcha. KHC Lethang had allotted a local area development fund, under its CSR provision for generating employment and development of the area, a top official of the company claimed. Locals like P T Bhutia, added that KHC Lethang was also lending support to renovation of local religious structures. Secretary, Power Department, P. Wangchen told this correspondent, "Every single move till date has been made by the company with knowledge and approval of the government and local people. On paper, KHC Lethang has full public mandate, including those of monks from the Dubdi and Khecheodpalri monasteries. In fact, these people have submitted a memorandum to Chief Minister Pawan Chamling, expressing their full support and mandate in favour of the project."

"They reiterated the same during the public hearing conducted by the Sikkim Pollution Control Board (SPCB) on September 16," Wangchen added.

Myal Lyang

The Dzongu area, site for the controversial Panan hydro-power project, was traditionally known as Myal Lyang in Lepcha or Beyul Demazong in Bhutia – the latter meaning 'land

of sacred and secret treasures' and the former meaning, essentially, paradise. It was here that, according to legend, the Lepcha god created the first Lepcha man and woman from the sacred snow of the mighty Khangchendzonga (Kanchenjunga), the massif that the Bhutia and Lepcha revere to this day as a protective deity. Within the core area of the proposed Panan project are a host of sacred sites: the Kagey Lha-Tso Lake, the Drag Shingye caves, and the Jhe-Tsa-Tsu and Kong- Tsa-Tsu hot springs, which are said to be endowed with healing properties. Sikkim has numerous such 'treasures', each of which was blessed by Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava), the patron saint of Sikkim. Panan is one of the more disputed projects proposed for Dzongu – an area not only sacred but also falling dangerously close to the Khangchendzonga National Park and the biosphere reserve, an area rich in flora and fauna. Sikkimese Bhutia Lepcha Apex Committee (SIBLAC) convener Tseten Tashi Bhutia told this correspondent, "Any project on the Rathong Chu, a tributary of the Teesta, is not acceptable to us since it is on the water of the most sacred river. According to Neysol Buddhist texts, the water of Rathong Chu is used by the Tashiding Monastery for the annual Holy Bum Chu festival." Kunga Nima Lepcha, spokesperson for the Sikkim Pradesh Congress Committee (the SPCC) urged that development in Sikkim be 'people-centric'. Before going ahead with any of the pending projects, Kunga Lepcha says, the Gangtok government needs to address the negative impacts currently being fervently discussed by the public. H L Bhandari, a member of the Sikkimese Association for the Environment, speaks of a "heinous genocide of the Lepchas of Sikkim through mega-hydel projects to fill the pockets of ministers, bureaucrats and businessmen".

Pitching for Teesta

On March 14, 2011 (the International day of Action for Rivers), volunteers of the Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) pledged their allegiance to the river Teesta and vowed to fight to defend it, at the site where the dam of Teesta Stage IV- 520 MW hydropower project is planned. "If the dam is built, the last free flowing stretch of Teesta river will be put into a tunnel and the entire river Teesta will disappear forever into tunnels", said Dawa Lepcha, ACT general secretary. Dawa represented ACT at the 3rd International Rivers Meet at Temacapulin, Guadalajara-Mexico from the October 1-7, 2010 under the umbrella organization the International Rivers Network (IRN), chaired by its executive director Patrick Macully. The South Asia's director of the International Rivers, Samir Mehta, led the Indian delegates. Tseten Lepcha, ACT's working president represented the people of Sikkim in another forum, at the UNESCO. "My trip to France on 25 Sept to 10 October, 2010 was on the invitation and sponsorship of the World Mountain Peoples Association (WMPA), a global organization of the mountain people based in France. We had a meeting at UNESCO, Paris on October 4, at which there were 6 participants from India. I was elected to the plenary board of the organization, representing Asia (total 8 representatives from Asia, 6 from Europe) which is permanent member of the UNESCO", Lepcha said, adding these are the various international platforms where Teesta's case is being represented.

Conclusion

The hydroelectric dams that the Government of India is on its course of building to rein in the Teesta river systems will pour another 5.0 gigawatts into India's electric power grid. Sikkim will be an energy exporter. And the cost to be paid for this is that these dams will consume lands and habitats and ecosystems will be drowned. The Teesta River system is one of the most beautiful watersheds of rivers left in the world. These

fresh water rivers of Sikkim are about to be tamed, fresh water will be harvested and stored, and they will generate hydroelectric energy. Building water storage capacity is not necessarily a bad idea – what if storage and hydropower could be implemented the main watercourses? What we do need to think about is to implement a course of green dam engineering that could be put to work in Sikkim. To simply build a dam, a powerhouse and a reservoir on every river, inundating every valley, every village, eliminating flora and fauna that is native and rare – that is not necessarily a good idea.

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