

Sikkim dams on the horizon

by Kanchi Kohli

Today's story goes back to 1998 when the Teesta river in Sikkim was the subject of intense hydro power debate.

At that time the expert committee for River Valley and Hydroelectric Projects in the MoEF was in the process of granting approval to the 510 MW Teesta V Hydro project to be constructed on the free flowing Himalayan river, Teesta. This approval was required as part of the procedure prescribed under the Environment Impact Assessment Notification (EIA). An initiative of the National Hydro Power Corporation (NHPC), this project was set to be the first of the six stage 'cascade' plan to harness 3635 MW of hydropower, all within 175 km of the river Teesta.



At the initial stage, discussions within the River Valley Committee were veering towards the view that the Teesta V project should be allowed to go ahead only after a comprehensive carrying capacity study of the Teesta river is carried out. The purpose would be to ascertain the extent of load the river can actually take when it comes to social, ecological and environmental impacts. But this never happened and approval to the Teesta V project was granted in 1999 following pressure from the Ministry of Power. It came with the condition that no other project in Sikkim would be considered for environmental clearance till the carrying capacity study was completed.

Even as the Centre for Inter-Disciplinary Studies of Mountain and Hill Environment (CISMHE) in New Delhi began studying the carrying capacity of the Teesta, the processes for the grant of approval to the 1200 MW Teesta III project (another run of the river scheme) was initiated and approved by the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF). In fact, the MoEF granted approval to five projects on the Teesta river basin, in violation of the condition prescribed for the Teesta V project. CISMHE's study funded by the NHPC took six years to complete from 2001 to 2007.

In a parallel development the Government of India announced a list of another 10 hydro power schemes for the river Teesta as part of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's initiative to boost power generation in the country. It did not matter that the findings of the carrying capacity study had not been ascertained or articulated at this point of time.

This was also the time when several youth from Sikkim and the Affected Citizen's of Teesta group took to the streets of Gangtok and launched an unending *satyagraha*.

Representatives of the Lepcha tribal community began an indefinite hunger strike to save Dzongu, their traditional homeland. It was one of the most inspiring campaigns led by the youth which received national and international attention. The Lepcha community and their supporters were deeply concerned about what would happen to the free flow of the Teesta and how it would impact their identity. Apart from land acquisition a crucial concern was of cultural erosion due to the influx of outside labour into this protected region once dam construction begins.

It was in October 2008 that the MoEF issued a letter to the Government of Sikkim that no activities related to dams (even investigations) should be taken up North of the Chungthang region, home to the Lepcha, Bhutia and other communities. Whether this was in recognition of the satyagraha was not stated, but it was certainly a critical step forward. What the MoEF admitted was that their decision was in the light of the observation of the Carrying Capacity Study by CISMHE on the ecological sensitivity of the Teesta Basin in North Sikkim. MoEF asked the state government to scrap five projects – Teesta I (300 MW), Teesta II (480 MW), Bhimkyong (99 MW), Bop (99 MW) and Lachung (99 MW) HEPs, with a total installed capacity of 1077 MW.

But the tug of war continued between the Sikkim government and the MoEF. In January 2010, the Power Secretary of the Sikkim government attended a meeting of the Expert Appraisal Committee (EAC) on River Valley and Hydroelectric Projects set up as part of the environment clearance process. What is interesting is that the resource person for the Sikkim government at this time was PG Sastry, who was Chairperson of the EAC for River Valley Projects as late as 2007. Professor Sastry said that the carrying capacity study by CISHME was exemplary and the project developers were willing to take on board the concerns raised in the CISHME study. But the developers and Sikkim government were constrained by the decision of the MoEF to carry out exploratory work upstream of the Teesta, where they can gather additional data.

In February 2010, the EAC gave permission to Teesta I and II projects to conduct investigations based on revised location and parameters. As the projects were close to the Kanchandzonga National Park, the Government of Sikkim was asked to take permission of the National Board of Wildlife (NBWL). In March 2010, EAC members visited Sikkim and were hosted by the government and, local activists allege, by the project authorities themselves. In April 2010, the remaining three projects in North Sikkim were allowed to carry out investigations. These were Lachung, Bhimkyong and Bop HEPs. In the judgment of the sub- group that visited the sites of the above projects, Bop and Bhimkyong do not have any rehabilitation issues and the 10 km stretch of the tunnelled river is intercepted by several perennial streams.

Till then the MoEF had stuck to its decision of not allowing any dams upstream, though the processes were pointing to the inevitable. In November 2010, the MoEF granted Terms of Reference (ToR) to Lachung, Bhimkyong and Bop HEPs to initiate EIAs which will set the ball rolling for procuring environment clearances. This was facilitated by the 'optimisation study' that the MoEF allowed to ascertain the impacts of all three projects together so that the diversion structures/tunneling can be minimised, environmental flow determined and so on; and following which survey and investigations were approved in September 2010.

What all this means is that one has gone back to the pre-1999 scenario and opened the door for hydro power development in Sikkim's fragile ecology. The MoEF which can at one stroke decide on "no-go" or "go slow" regions chooses to turn the picture on its head.

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