

## Deep Ecology, Dams, and Dzonguland Lepchas Protest Narratives about their Threatened Land

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Kerry Little is a Australian writer who is a PhD candidate in the School of Social Inquiry at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). Her work involves recording traditional and contemporary Lepcha stories and examining how modernity and globalization has impacted the Lepchas' connection to their traditions. She records Lepcha stories in the context of a major protest by Lepcha activists against mega-hydro-electric projects which are slated for the Lepcha Reserve in Dzongu in North Sikkim, north-east India. Eco-philosophy and the deep ecology movement provides the framework in which Little understands the Lepchas' (who are nature-worshippers) feeling for their land. Little's PhD is non-traditional, enabling her to present her narrative-based work within the framework of creative non-fiction.

*We belong to nature—nature does not belong to us*

– inscribed on a photo of Dzongu given to supporters from Affected Citizens of Teesta.

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## Introduction



*Figure 1: Lepchas on a pilgrimage in Dzongu, North Sikkim*

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The Lepchas, the indigenous people of Sikkim and its borderlands, are known for their deep knowledge of botany and ecology. Their close relationship to and understanding of nature has been admired for centuries; particularly by the English who, from the 17th century, came to north-east India as trade agents, political officers, explorers and collectors.

The English naturalist, J.D. Hooker, employed a Lepcha “chief plant collector”<sup>1</sup> to assist him during his botanical odyssey in 1848. As well, the British explorer, Major L.A. Waddell, who travelled throughout the Himalayas in the late 1800s, called Lepchas “...a true son of the forest and a born naturalist. He knows the habits of every bird and beast and creeping thing; and the properties of every plant.”<sup>2</sup> Their admiration was shared by the first Political Officer to Sikkim, J. Claude White who wrote that the Lepchas are “great nature lovers and good entomologists and botanists, and have their own names for every animal, insect and plant, and are, I should think, unequalled anywhere as collectors.”<sup>3</sup>

The Lepchas describe themselves as *Mutanchi Rong Cup*—beloved children of Mother Nature—and their creation story comes from Mount Kanchenjunga, which they call their mother mountain. It was the stories of the Lepcha that first brought me to north-east India; they are tales set in ancient landscapes, hidden places, and sacred spaces. Before long I discovered other, contemporary Lepcha stories; protest narratives linked to the traditional stories by an ecological thread, for the new narratives are also about Lepcha landscapes. They are stories of hope, despair and conflict and move forward and backwards, coursing through the past, present, and future.

Nature plays a leading role in these stories. In particular, the Teesta River, which originates from the Zemu glacier and flows throughout Sikkim, where at the West Bengal border it meets the Rangit River, then continues down to the plains.

I crossed the Teesta River to Sikkim and I found that traditional Lepcha stories originate from the big nature that is the natural infrastructure of this small state. The creation stories for the Lepcha clans all connect back to Sikkim's nature; stories about marriage, birth, and death are narratives richly embroidered by forests, rivers, mountains, and lakes and told against a backdrop of the Lepcha's connection with the natural world.

In this paper I reference the deep ecology movement in discussing the Lepchas' relationship with the ecology they are part of. I also explore how Lepcha activists protesting the development of hydro power projects on the Lepcha reserve, Dzongu in North Sikkim, use narrative, and deploy mythology, to build their case against the dams.

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## Green Narratives for a Green State



*Figure 2: Dzongu landscape of the proposed dam site*

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Sikkim, where much of this story is set, is promoted as a green state of India. The Sikkim government has a strong environmental rhetoric which is heralded on the large roadside signs that welcome visitors to the state. “Sikkim: Small But Beautiful”, “Sikkim: Green State” “Sikkim: Eco-tourism Destination”. This narrative is reinforced on websites, in media releases, to frame policy announcements, and to contextualize development projects.

In 1999 the Chief Minister of Sikkim, Pawan Chamling, was acknowledged as the “greenest” Chief Minister in India by *Down to*

*Earth* magazine. The magazine cited the government's action to ban plastic bags (which block rain-swollen drains) after a series of landslides in 1997, the decision to stop open grazing in high altitude pastures, a ban on smoking in public places and, importantly, the scrapping of the Rathong-Chu hydro-electric project at Yuksom, as major reasons for his green rating.<sup>4</sup> Sikkim is marketed as an eco-tourism destination, with seemingly every tour company, hotel, home-stay, and tourism destination exhorting its green credentials. Only the most determinedly obstreperous traveller could locate a tourism site that isn't described as an "eco-destination."

The Lepcha reserve in North Sikkim, Dzongu, which borders the Kanchenjunga Biosphere Reserve, is an emerging eco-tourism destination, supported by the Ecotourism and Conservation Society of Sikkim (ECOSS) as a response to concerns for the upcoming younger generation of Dzongu who were keen to explore alternative opportunities for the educated youth who would provide avenues for self-employment within Dzongu.<sup>5</sup>

Dzongu is worthy of the eco-tourism description. It is a protected area, abundant with eco-narrative tropes: verdant vegetation, a small number of inhabitants (6,000), the birdsong, the roaring rivers, the cleanliness, the *godliness*, and the mother-mountain, Kanchenjunga, strong, protective, benevolently looking down on her Lepcha children. It is a remote place, most parts being hard to reach and its status as a Lepcha reserve has given it precious breathing space from the flight to modernization afflicting other sacred places, long given up for the "greater common good."<sup>6</sup> Its "eco-inhabitants" are happily enmeshed with their landscape, for Dzongu is known by Lepchas everywhere as the birthplace of the first Lepcha couple and therefore, the birthplace of the Lepcha race.

The government's intention to dam the River Teesta and other rivers in Sikkim to create 26 hydro-electric projects (seven in Dzongu) is clearly at odds with its "green" reputation, largely built on the back of cancelling a major hydro-electric project eleven years earlier; however, it incorporates its "green" rhetoric in communications about the dams. It exhorts the "pollution-free nature of hydro power, the low variable costs of generation, and the growing demand-supply gap for electricity in the country" when persuading the Sikkimese of the benefits of developing hydro-electric power.<sup>7</sup>

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## Movements to “Let the River Live”



*Figure 3: Lepcha children pray at sacred stones, the area is slated for the huge dam project.*

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The Lepchas’ feeling for nature and the reluctance of many Lepchas to accept change brought about by mega-development to their sacred Dzongu manifested into a movement to stop the development of large hydro-electric projects which the Sikkim government says will yield approximately 5,000 MW of power valued at approximately Rs. 2,000 crore per annum.<sup>8</sup> The movement, spearheaded by Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) started in 2003 and is still active. Many of the Lepcha youth who are members of ACT are the same Lepcha youth involved in Dzongu eco-tourism. They have a different view to that of pro-dam supporters on the future of Dzongu. The anti-dam Lepchas want to promote tourism and organic farming and to keep Dzongu pristine. The pro-dam supporters, 116 who have sold land for the Panan 280 MW project, see a more affluent Dzongu and the dams as a “harbinger of great economic boom.”<sup>9</sup>

The impetus for the movement echoes a similar protest in Norway in the late 1970s and 1980s in opposition to the building of a large hydro-electric dam on the River Alta in Norway. The Indigenous Sámi tribes-people<sup>10</sup> fought for years to stop the project; a 110-metre high dam near Alta which initially was much larger and would have submerged the Sámi village of Mási. Sámi groups held hunger strikes in front of the Storting (Norwegian parliament), their opposition based on environmental concerns, land and water rights claims and the impact the project would have on the semi-nomadic reindeer husbandry communities that used the land for grazing.<sup>11</sup> “We came first” was the protest narrative at the beginning of discussion on the project.<sup>12</sup> Upon hearing that the project would flood their community, a small group of 400 Sámi carried protest banners. This first protest grew during the next 10 years to become a major movement, the project drawing strong opposition from civil society. The Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess fought the projects and while doing so planted the seeds that would later become the deep ecology movement. Naess and his fellow protestors chanted a protest motto “Let the river live!” which Naess described, “exactly as if a river also had a life of its own ... we never heard people saying, ‘a river cannot be alive’.”<sup>13</sup>

The opposition to hydro-electric projects that were built in Norway after World War II, including the Alto project, led to the ecophilosophy movement. The movement recognized that the threat of the dams went further than the physical environment, also affecting the cultural environment. For ecophilosophy, natural and environmental preservation includes the preservation of both nature and culture, or of culture together with nature ... it sees value in the integration of humanity and culture ... the preservation of various ecosystems or landscapes is also the preservation of cultural character and diversity.<sup>14</sup> Naess and his friend and fellow philosopher, George Sessions defined eight characteristics of the deep ecology movement in 1984. The characteristics accept that all living beings – and diversity and richness of life – have intrinsic value and that the extent and nature of human interference in the various ecosystems are not sustainable.<sup>15</sup> The Foundation for Deep Ecology promotes “recognition of the inherent value of all living beings and the use of this view in shaping environmental policies. Those who work for social changes based on this recognition are motivated by love of nature as well as for humans....”<sup>16</sup>

The Lepchas’ knowledge of nature is vast and personal, and their connection to their land and everything that comes from it is a deeply held belief. Before Buddhism came to Sikkim from Tibet, the Lepchas

were nature worshippers and this spiritual history remains at the heart of Lepcha culture. They are “part of the ecosphere just as intimately as part of their own society.”<sup>17</sup>

The intimacy the Lepcha activists share with nature forms the context for their protest. The reasons for their protest run deeper than land rights, or concerns for the environment or an argument solely around “who came first” for Dzongu is the Lepchas’ holy land. Their protest and their language of protest have much in common with Naess’s eco-philosophy ontology that humanity is inseparable from nature. Rothenburg in his introduction to Naess’s *Ecology, community and lifestyle*, says “If this ontology is fully understood, it will no longer be possible for us to injure nature wantonly, as this would mean injuring an integral part of ourselves. From this ontological beginning, ethics and practical action are to fall into place.”<sup>18</sup>

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### Dzongu is a Holy Land—Lepcha Narratives of Protest

To understand why Dzongu is the Lepchas’ holy land and why Lepchas everywhere consider it and Mount Kanchenjunga sacred, one must go back to the creation of the Lepchas. Mount Kanchenjunga is the Lepchas’ mountain deity, for their creation story comes from Kanchenjunga in Dzongu. They say they are the children of Mother Nature and that the “first and the foremost primogenitors of the Lepchas, Fodongthing, and Nazaongnyo were created by God from the pure, virgin snows of Kingsoomzaongboo Chu’s<sup>19</sup> pinnacles and sent down to live, prosper, and spread all over the fairy land of Mayel Lyang that lies on the lap of Kingsoomzaongboo Chu that is Mount Kanchenjunga.”<sup>20</sup>

SM Lepcha, a Lepcha leader from Darjeeling told me the following story:

Lepchas come from Mount Khanchenjunga. The pure snow, created by God, in his right hand, to pick this up, pure snow from Khanchenjunga. This boy, his name is Fadongthing, created by God. First Lepcha person. Lepcha man. From left hand, from snow, he make Nazaong nyoo, meaning girl, he first created...Lepchas, first mother and father. First god creation of Lepcha boys and girls from pure snow from Khanchenjunga.<sup>21</sup>

It is the Lepcha activists’ unification with their landscape and everything in it that makes it so impossible for them to accept major infrastructure development on their land. Like the Norwegian eco-

philosophers, the Lepchas consider nature and culture intertwined. This is reflected in a letter by the Lepcha activist, Dawa Lepcha who, with other members of the Lepcha community, wrote to the Government of Sikkim seeking a review of Stage III and IV of the Teesta Hydro project: “The land which we have under our possession is our ancestral land tied to our culture and history and dear to us. Our religion based on nature will be destroyed by the advent of such a large project. Our delicate social, cultural and historical fabric will be destroyed by the advent of such a project. The delicate ecosystem of the valley will also be destroyed. The coming of large numbers of workers for the project will unbalance the demographics of the area having long term repercussions on the survival of our tribe.”<sup>22</sup>

Dawa Lepcha’s language was repeated in many forms as the movement became more vocal. His multi-modal protest narrative, incorporating ownership, tradition, culture, religion, and concern for the environment stated the Lepcha activists’ cornerstone messages which were repeated, modified and then codified as a narrative template for the movement.

The activists’ protest narratives draw heavily on their folklore and mythology to establish their position as protectors of a sacred place. They talk frequently about the environment, biodiversity, their culture, their traditions, and their “sacred” relationship with their land. The narratives also extend beyond Sikkim, to elsewhere in India and the wider world. These young, modern Lepchas use the storytelling tools of their generation. Their narratives appear on websites, blogs, online media, banners, *youtube*, and television. The stories are also told in the graffiti that marks the main road through Dzongu, and in verse, in songs, and shouted at rallies. They are told in the eyes of hunger strikers as they lie on hospital beds, their noses and guts joined by a feeding tube, their discomfort and distress filmed and placed on the Internet. They appear symbolically, when Lepcha youth, now accustomed to wearing jeans, don traditional dress, highlighting their distinct identity.

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## Indefinite Hunger Strike—Upping the Ante



Figure 4: The protest movement intensifies with hunger strikers drawing attention on Gangtok's busy Tibet Road.

The footpath in front of Bhutia-Lepcha (BL) House, on Gangtok's busy Tibet Road has become a shrine of sorts to the protest movement. On the June 20, 2007, ACT Secretary Dawa Lepcha and his young friend, college student, Tenzing Lepcha from Concerned Lepchas of Sikkim, sat on a mattress in front of BL House and started what would become Sikkim's longest hunger strike. With their traditional tunic, Thokrodum, slung over their clothes, they sat cross-legged under a banner that proclaimed in large blue letters *Indefinite Hunger Strike* and a photo of Gandhi behind them. Lepcha children wore *Save the Teesta* t-shirts and lit candles in front of the mattresses. During the first week of the hunger strike, there was an upbeat mood at BL House. While outside, the hopeful hunger strikers sat seeking attention from passersby, inside, lamas from Lingthem monastery in Upper Dzongu performed twice-daily prayers asking that their monastery—which is in the scope of the hydel project—be saved.

The number of protest banners outside BL House has increased over time. At first there were just a few banners, perhaps reflective of the Lepchas' early, optimistic view that the hunger strike would be a swift, successful protest. They read: *Save Environment, Save the Land of the Primitive People, Save Teesta Save Sikkim*. "We thought there would be a big flash of light," laughed Dawa Lepcha many months later. "But it didn't happen, we are still waiting. Honestly, I think all of us thought it might just take us 10 to 15 days, two, three weeks and then something would happen." <sup>23</sup>



Figure 5: Dawa and Tenzing Lepcha on feeding tubes in the hospital.

The government begged Dawa and Tenzing to stop their strike "for the sake of peace and tranquillity" in Sikkim; a refrain that was repeated often. Even the Renjyong Mutanchi Rong Ong Shejum (Sikkim Lepcha Youth Association) issued a press release pleading with the hunger

strikers to remain “patient and keep peace and tranquillity.”<sup>24</sup> This narrative was gratuitous from the activists’ perspective as their protest was done in the spirit of satyagraha—Gandhi’s philosophy of non-violent protest—and was therefore peaceful. This, coupled with the Lepchas’ widely held reputation as peace-loving people<sup>25</sup> meant it was unlikely that it would be hunger striking Lepchas disturbing the peace.

Gandhi’s satyagraha provides a common thread for many protests in India, including possibly the highest profile anti-dam protest, that in the Narmada Valley conducted by Medha Patkar’s movement, the Narmada Bechao Andolon against the Narmada Sardar Sarovar dam. Patkar, who has visited Sikkim to support the Lepchas, has employed Gandhian non-violent tactics in Narmada for more than 20 years. Gandhi’s image at a protest site is in itself a protest narrative for in this context it communicates the *nature* of the protest.

Arne Naess believed success in a protest campaign was highly dependent on the level of non-violence in the actions, campaigns, and movements. Naess cited the Alta campaign in Norway, where opponents were contacted before a demonstration or direct action, and if present at the action were treated with coffee and invited to discuss the action.<sup>26</sup> He supported the Gandhian approach and said non-violent direct actions [such as the Alta actions] “must be a part of the fight for sound ecopolitics, but...those actions must not result in neglect of the daily, weekly and yearly type of struggle of a far less spectacular kind.”<sup>27</sup>

The Lepcha’s non-violent protest showed early signs of success for on day 27 of the hunger strike, Sikkim’s Chief Minister, under pressure from the unprecedented media attention, announced that “the sanctity of Dzongu will be protected at all costs.”<sup>28</sup> He directed a committee to look into the “apprehensions” of ACT. ACT responded respectfully, welcoming the Chief Minister’s statement; however, the strike continued, with Dawa and Tenzing in hospital and other activists on relay strike outside BL House. The Lepcha activists weren’t prepared to stop the strike on the Chief Minister’s words alone. Seven months earlier, in order to stop a Lepcha rally being held at BL House, the Chief Minister had offered to review “every aspect” of North Sikkim hydel projects and also expressed “deep concern” for the people of North Sikkim...that culture, tradition and identity would never be compromised for the sake of economic development alone.<sup>29</sup> This led to the Lepcha activists abandoning their rally; however, no review followed.

The Chief Minister's pledge to "protect the sanctity of Dzongu" and review the projects was designed to stop the hunger strike but the Lepcha activists refused to stop unless and until the projects were officially and publicly called off. Instead, the Lepcha activists submitted a '7-Point Appeal' to the government that included conditions for the review committee.<sup>30</sup> The government appealed to ACT to withdraw their hunger strike in order to "bring about a congenial atmosphere within which your demands as raised in your letter under reference could be examined within a period of one month as requested." ACT refused to stop the strike and on the 24<sup>th</sup> July, with Dawa and Tenzing's health further deteriorating, and the activists and government exchanging letters without a resolution, the government appealed again for the Lepchas to withdraw.

The following day, after ACT's refusal to stop the hunger strike and demands that the committee be headed by "an independent person well versed in social, religious, environmental and technical aspects of projects,"<sup>31</sup> the tone of the government's narrative changed substantially. The following day, in a letter from the Chief Secretary, ND Chingapa to ACT president, Athup Lepcha, the government "requested" the hunger strike be called off within 24 hours, "Failing which the State Government would have no alternative but to take necessary action as per law." The government claimed ACT had been "infiltrated by anti-social elements and is now under the influence of vested interests and outside forces that are inimical to the 'peace and tranquillity' prevailing in the State."<sup>32</sup> In one week the government's narrative had come full circle.

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## The Banners and Blog Tell a Wider Story

As the weeks and months wore on without a resolution, new banners were added that dared people to act. "Don't just sit there, do something! Say something!" was one call to action on a banner headed, "They're all set to Dam(n) you!". Another read: "History will judge you, do not lay foundations for the posterity to curse you."

The protest narrative became broader. The UN Charter on Indigenous Rights was cited and the small space in front of BL House was extended to fit more hunger strikers, more banners, and more khadas.<sup>33</sup> The slender bodies of the relay hunger strikers, who took turns sitting out front of BL House, were dwarfed by the rhetoric that surrounded them. Their core messages of religion, tradition, culture, environment,

and “ownership” prevailed and while they weren’t as explicit as the Sámi with “we came first,” there were several references to Article 371F, a law that acknowledges the “first” rights of the Lepcha and Bhutia tribes and endeavours to protect their rights and interests.<sup>34</sup>

At 100 days a special banner was hung: “Affected Citizens of Teesta, Satyagra. 100 Days.....20 June 2007, 28<sup>th</sup> Sept 2007”. A sketch of Gandhi, drawn by Tenzing, with the words “100 Years of Sathyagrah” [*sic*] is pasted to the wall behind the hunger strikers, a reminder that Gandhi would have supported the movement.

The blog, [www.weepingsikkim.blogspot.com](http://www.weepingsikkim.blogspot.com), was launched on the first day of the hunger strike and continues to give updates on what is currently a relay hunger strike<sup>35</sup>. It has articles on the struggle, opinions for and against the dams, and photos of Dzongu and the activists. The narratives on the blog have changed over time. At first there were new entries each day but updates to the site are now infrequent. The site has an update on the media coverage, photos of the hunger strike, photos of the River Teesta and Dzongu. The photos are persuasive: glorious, unspoiled landscapes placed alongside photos of the Dikchu dam, which commenced operation in early 2008, and the excavated Teesta. One photo of the Teesta is captioned “Our Beautiful Disappearing River”. It is compared to a Google Earth photo of the (supposedly low impact) Dikchu project that shows an excavated and unrecognizable stretch of the Teesta, scarred beyond recognition. The “before and after” photo-narrative communicates a clear message of choice—either a beautiful river, or a scarred landscape, so damaged that it can be seen from a satellite.

The blog carries a daily calendar banner featured on the right navigation pane which clicks over each day, a small but powerful narrative of resoluteness: DAY 1...DAY 100...DAY 277...DAY 365

On Day 108, a poem is posted on the blog by Raghav, a supporter.

Weeping Sikkim  
I sit alone in dawn  
Far from a colourful nested world  
When I look down at my feet once I used to stand,  
Memoirs of Mt Khanchendonga kissing my toe.

Now days are gone it used to be often  
Now I live in hands of greed  
My children are now vibrant intellectual  
They feel I am no more worth.

I sing for them, for all, everyone  
But  
Though have sold me in penny  
But my lap will always be comfy for them  
Always till the last drop of my tear rolls down  
Remember my tear, the river Teesta what you see!!

According to the activists and their supporters, the government successfully stopped people from visiting the protestors by punishing those who were government employees, or related to government employees, with “victimization transfers”: a transfer to a remote or undesirable location far way from family.<sup>36</sup> The section of Tibet Road where BL House is situated became quiet. People stopped visiting and those who had business in Tibet Road scuttled past the hunger strikers and their banners, eyes averted. Raghav responded to the shift in support and posted:

Shhhh  
Everyone go pass by down the Tibet Road  
Not a single heart beats seeing us blushing brow  
We lay dead dumb no one to speak for us today.  
Anyway  
We would not stop counting our struggle day  
Hoping those innocent buds will bloom in this soil someday  
And shall there will be a rejoice greenday.

Shhh..  
Tomorrow let them forget our fightings for their future,  
what history is always repeating is true is true is true ...

The narratives on the banners and the blog reflect the activists' experiences. The hopefulness at the start of the movement is evident in the banners that simply communicate information as though this was all that was required for people to understand the projects are undesirable. As time wore on, the desperation felt by the activists is reflected in the blog entries and banners. A photo story, which appeared on the blog a month after the start of the first hunger strike, showed photos of the hunger strikers, their supporters, and their families with a plea underlining each photo; “I need a voice now. You be my voice now. Give me that choice now. I need a voice now.”

Social narratives can help motivate deliberate, often risky action in pursuit of political change (Peterson, 1996).<sup>37</sup> The Lepcha social-protest narratives work in part to shape group identity among young Lepchas. Many youth from Dzongu live at BL House for extended periods where they work for ACT, rallying support, taking it in turns to sit on relay

hunger strikes, and visiting the hospital to support hunger strikers who when their health falters are periodically admitted. Their social environment is split between BL House, the hospital (which when Dawa was admitted was like a satellite office for the movement) and, to a lesser extent, the external world outside BL House. They have become enmeshed with each other and the movement, their main purpose to stop the dams. The wider Lepcha community are either pro-ACT or pro-project. There is very little in between.

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## The Sacred as a Political Narrative

There are landscapes rich in Buddhist history and folklore. One of these places is inside Kanchunjunga National Park at Tholung in Upper Dzongu. There is a sacred cave above Tholung Gumpa where the Guru Rinpoche is believed to have spent many days.

The stories of Tholung are part of the Lepcha activists' protest narrative. In a letter to Sikkim's Chief Minister from Athup Lepcha, the President of ACT, attempts to communicate the spiritual significance of Tholung gumpa and the living relationship between the late Sikkimese king Gyurmed Namgyal and the Lepchas of Dzongu, relayed several stories.

“Another special offering has to be made to the late King, Gyurmed Namgyal, whose mortal remains were embalmed in the gumpa [Tholung gumpa] by the Lepchas but later had to be cremated by an eminent lama to exorcize and avert evil spirits which appeared in the forms of a man-eater bear and other predators. The man-eater bear killed and ate two persons at the Lingdong village in Dzongu. The man-eater bear was killed at Lingdong village by two expert hunters sent by the Sikkim government. The other predators disappeared after the completion of the offering puja performed by the eminent lama at the gumpa.

In 1976 some persons instigated the ignorant and innocent residents of Gor in Lower Dzongu to abandon the aforesaid custom and tradition of making offerings to the deities and the late King Gyurmed Namgyal, at the Tholung gumpa on the grounds that the rule of the king had ceased in Sikkim. So the residents of Gor did not participate in the Pang Lhasol function at the Tholung gumpa as prescribed even though it was their turn to make the offerings. After two months there was a plague at Gor which killed nine persons within a week...realising their misdeed and disrespect to the deities and the late king, they rushed to the gumpa with offerings...instantly the plague disappeared.”<sup>38</sup>

In the same letter Athup Lepcha cites Guru Padmasambhava's<sup>39</sup> prophecies to demonstrate the danger the government is courting if it goes ahead with the projects. First, he proves Guru Padmasambhava's accuracy by relaying prophecies well known in Sikkim to have come true; the coming of Tibetans to Sikkim to spread Buddhism, how a man born in the year of the mouse would be the first king of Sikkim, how the 11<sup>th</sup> king would be born in the Dragon year and the warning that if a Tibetan born in the year of the Pig became the 12<sup>th</sup> king, he would be the last. Then, after more proof of prophecies, and acknowledgement that the Chief Minister had obtained "rarest merit" by building a statue of Guru Padmasambhava at Samdrupti which was sanctified and consecrated by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and His Eminence the Dordrupchen Rinpoche, a veiled warning:

"...in the land blessed by the Guru, [the Chief Minister] may kindly not involve himself in activities to cause destruction of beings which cannot express their sufferings. Let us not forget Guru Padmakara's prophecies relating to Sikkim, Nepal and Tibet. We have a few more prophecies of guru relating to Sikkim, but we reserve the disclosure of them at this point in time."<sup>40</sup>

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## Lepcha Narratives have a Deeper Meaning

In July 2007, Lepchas from nearby West Bengal started actively campaigning against the projects. On July 11, more than 2,000<sup>41</sup> Lepchas from the Lepcha Youth Association (Rong Ong Prongzom), the youth arm of the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association, a well-organized group with a long history of cultural preservation, blocked the National Highway 31A, the road that connects Sikkim to West Bengal. One of the organizers, Azuk Tamsangmoo Lepcha, said "Dzongu is a holy place, where our age-old culture and traditions are still intact. We believe that our souls rest here after death. We will not tolerate any dislocation and threat to this place."<sup>42</sup> Prongzom President Dorjee Lepcha who spoke at the rally said the intention of the rally is to preserve the identity of the Lepchas. "Dzongu is sacred to us and any attempts to destroy it will have to be stopped."<sup>43</sup>

The public narrative of Dzongu as a sacred site for Lepchas has increased since the advent of the hydro projects. In West Bengal, where the Lepcha Association's constitution includes the aim "to protect, conserve, preserve, maintain, and develop the Lepcha cultural heritage" there is a greater focus on explaining the spiritual significance

of Dzongu to the Lepchas in Lepcha literature, festivals, and dialogue with third parties including government.

The President of the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association, Major Lyangsong Tamsang from Kalimpong cites the original Lepcha name of Dzongu, Faokraam-Takraam, in a letter to the Chief Minister of Sikkim (dated February 8, 2008) informing him that thousands of West Bengal Lepchas would make a pilgrimage to Dzongu the following April. “Faokraam Takraam means ‘the source of Lepcha origin and life.’ The Lepcha priests, Boongthing, and priestess Mun, use the name, Faokraam Takraam, indicating to Dzongu in their prayers, invocations and ovations.”<sup>44</sup>

On January 7, 2008, a group of 46 Lepchas from Rong Ong Prongzom in Kalimpong embarked on a spiritual pilgrimage to Dzongu. Their permits had been obtained for a period of seven days, however, after just two nights, following a complaint by pro-dam supporters who said the pilgrims were chanting political slogans, their permits were cancelled and they were forcibly removed from Dzongu and driven back to Gangtok. I met the pilgrims in Tingvong village on the second day of the pilgrimage. I first spotted them on the road from nearby Kesong village and even though I was some 300 metres away I could easily hear them, singing songs and dancing on the road, their exuberance and delight at being in Dzongu clear to see. That night there was more singing and dancing around a huge bonfire. The following morning, the pilgrimage continued to nearby Lingzia Falls where four of the group underwent a “baptism” in the pool under the falls and were given traditional Lepcha names. The slogan they were accused of chanting was the word “aachuley.” It is used by Lepchas everywhere and expresses joy, happiness, and welcome. Its literal meaning, explained by Lyangsong Tamsang in an article in *Auchuley* magazine in response to the removal of the pilgrims from Dzongu, is hail to the Himalayas.

“‘Aachuley’ literally means ‘Hail to the Himalayas’... a sacred and holy word, mantra of the Lepchas. ‘Auchuley’ is a sacred call of the Lepchas to their God, Goddess, Guardian Deity living in the Sikkim Himalayas. It is definitely not, repeat not, a political slogan of the Lepchas...no one can stop and deny the Lepcha people from uttering, calling, exclaiming and shouting their sacred and holy word, ‘auchuley’”<sup>45</sup>

By accusing Lepchas shouting “aachuley” of political agitation the government has given the word deeper meaning in the context of protest. When Lepchas call “aachuley,” it may now have an association that includes the victimization of the Kalimpong and Darjeeling

pilgrims and the destruction of Dzongu. Like many of the songs of love for Dzongu, sung as anthems to culture by Lepchas for many years, “auchuley” now has a wider meaning and poignancy related to the loss of the Lepchas’ holy land. It has a new emotion attached to it and like many other Lepcha words, songs, and stories is part of the “‘glue’ of solidarity”<sup>46</sup> that forms the collective identity of the protestors. Jasper says the “strength of an identity comes from its emotional side.”<sup>47</sup> The narrative from Kalimpong and Darjeeling is deeply emotional and deeply personal. Lyangsong Tamsang’s February 2008 letter to the Chief Minister of Sikkim informing of the pilgrimage goes to great lengths to explain the meaning of Lepcha language, Lepcha beliefs, and Lepcha place names, which “relate to the Lepcha myths and legends that really took place a long, long time ago and these are holy to them.”<sup>48</sup>

A song that pays tribute to Dzongu that was written several years ago by a Kalimpong-based Lepcha song writer, Sukden Lepcha, has renewed meaning in the context of the movement. “Rumlyang” was introduced to the Sikkim activists by the Kalimpong Lepchas and quickly became an anthem, deployed at rallies, protest meetings, festivals and any occasion where Lepchas opposing the projects gathered. I first heard the song on January 6, 2008, 200 days after the start of the hunger strike when the activists held a ceremony at BL House to mark the anniversary. The Kalimpong and Darjeeling Lepchas came to Gangtok to show support and strength. To mark the occasion new posters were made: “200 Days Satyagraha”. And an upping of the ante: “Dams in Dzongu Shall be Built over our Dead Bodies”.

Earlier that day, the call of “Mutanchi Rongcup Auchuley”<sup>49</sup> signalled the arrival of the Kalimpong and Darjeeling Lepcha youth to Gangtok. Wearing traditional Lepcha dress they turned into Tibet Road, their activist brothers and sisters from Dzongu who waited in the doorway of BL House, returning the greeting. “Auchuley” shouted the Kalimpong Lepcha. “Auchuley,” returned the Dzongu Lepchas. “Khameri-mo,”<sup>50</sup> shouted the Kalimpong Lepchas. “Khameri-mo,” back down Tibet Road, their chants growing louder as they drew closer.

Once they reached the steps, they were silent for a moment before together singing the song which has become an anthem for the movement:

### **Rumlyang (God's Land)**

It is God's land, this Dzongu land  
It is where the Gods the Creators meet.

When the Dendrobium bloom in the rich green forest  
When the white snow covers the Kongchen Peak  
This Dzongu land is God's land, where the Gods the Creators meet.

River Rungnue and Rungneet, when we look with deep attention  
The sparkle of the flint in these dark hours  
This Dzongu land is God's land, where the Gods the Creators meet.

Seven houses of Mayel paradise when we think of them  
Of the lakes and peaks where our souls will rest  
This Dzongu land is the holy land where our ancestors soul rest  
Yes it is God's land, yes it is God's land.<sup>51</sup>

I heard it again that night when the Lepcha youth gathered outside BL House to light candles to mark 200 days. Then they sang and laughed together, playing singing games: boys against girls, Sikkim against Kalimpong and Darjeeling. Some sang solo, with the group forming a chorus of spirit and later, when the moon shed light on the gathering, now high from their collective optimism, Tenzing Lepcha (who had told me he was once so shy he would never speak in class) stood on a step and spoke. After a faltering start he found his voice. "Everyone knows we are here to protect Dzongu. But more than that, it is not only for the Lepchas of Dzongu, Kalimpong and Darjeeling, but entire Lepchas of the world."

As he grew in confidence, his voice rose:

"Some people say, we are not gaining anything, but I say we have gained a lot. Here we are at 200 days and we have gathered so much strength. When we reached one week, and after that two weeks, and then 100 days, then 150 days, I didn't see such gathering like today. I have seen such strength today and we are going to win tomorrow!"

He then spoke quietly, referring to the issues of global warming and climate change.

"Every nation has to suffer tomorrow, so it's better that every community should help us and support us and walk with us. So, we have gained a lot. Yesterday I didn't know the value of our motherland. Because of this movement we came to know very well our homeland Dzongu. And because of this movement we have learned many things, and much knowledge we have gained: environmental, cultural, tradition and everything. So I hope all our colleagues have the same fight against our foe that is the implementation of the projects in Dzongu."

He finished with a rousing cry: “We want development but not at the cost of our ancestry.”<sup>52</sup>

Earlier that day Lyangsong Tamsang announced there were 20,000 Kalimpong and Darjeeling Lepchas ready to die to save Dzongu. The rhetoric had escalated and the Kalimpong and Darjeeling Lepchas accustomed to publicly preserving and fighting for Lepcha culture<sup>53</sup>, brought with them an agenda of visible action. This was viewed poorly by the Sikkimese government, for these Lepchas from the neighbouring state could not be persuaded or “victimized” out of their protest. They were referred to as “outsiders” with “vested interests”<sup>54</sup>

During a trip to Sikkim in early 2008 I noticed a new protest narrative. Strung across the main Dzongu Road, large banners, erected by pro-project supporters caution: “Decision Taken by Landowners, Panchayats and Government is Final” and a warning to the Kalimpong and Darjeeling Lepchas: “External Interference in Dzongu is Not Acceptable”. These banners were erected to “protest the protest,” an attempt to reclaim some of the protest narrative.

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## Conclusion

Arne Naess, in his reflective book *Life's Philosophy* mentions a conversation between a Sámi youth and a policeman during the protests against the Alta River hydro-electric scheme. The policeman asked the youth why he was there and he replied: “The river is part of myself.”<sup>55</sup> The Sámi ultimately lost the battle for the River Alta, but the original vast development project was reduced considerably and Mási, whose inhabitants comprise a majority of reindeer herders and small-scale farmers—who pride themselves as being the only fully Sámi speaking community in Norway—was taken out of the plan and saved from flooding and resettlement.<sup>56</sup>

The Lepcha activists have been successful in stopping four of the projects inside Kanchenjunga National Park<sup>57</sup>; however, preliminary work has begun on the largest project, Panan, which is inside Dzongu reserve. They claim their ownership of the land in their narratives while believing that “we belong to nature, nature doesn't belong to us”; however, to trust that sentiment alone will result in more of the land the Lepchas “belong to” being used for development. So while the activists will say that nature doesn't belong to anyone, in order to save it, they must claim it and in order to claim it, they must “prove” their long-held

jurisdiction over it. To do this they cite stories from their ancestors that speak to the “sacredness” of Dzongu. Deployment of their myths is an important tool in their battle to save their land from mega-development.

The Lepcha protest narratives are adapting and evolving as the protest adapts and evolves. They are, as David Carr would say, being “told in being lived and lived in being told.” Carr says the “actions and sufferings of life can be viewed as a process of telling ourselves stories, listening to those stories, acting them out, or living them through.”<sup>58</sup> The Lepcha activists retrieve the stories and traditions of their ancestors in their fight for Dzongu. They attempt to explain their deep connection to Dzongu through these stories. When Lyangsong Tamsang narrates the path of his clan’s (Tamsangmoo) soul after death to the confluence of Teesta and Rangyong rivers he is acting out that suffering that will come if the river dies.

“The soul will go to the confluence of Teesta and Rangyong rivers, the river below Passingdang. The Mun (Priestess) will take the soul through Teesta River and when it arrives at the confluence it will follow Rangyong, the holiest river of the Lepchas which flows in the middle of Dzongu. The Mun takes the soul through the back of the river Rangyong and tells the soul you are dead and you must recognise it for the soul will always say I am not dead, I am still alive. The Mun will then say ‘you are dead, step on the sand of Rangyong River and tell me if you see your step.’ The answer is no, so she takes the soul to where it rests. Our Mun speaks of this river, speaks of the mountain and speaks of the trees; everything the Mun describes, we know it is Dzongu”<sup>59</sup>.

Dawa Lepcha’s young brother Ongyal wrote a song in order to understand the silence that met his brother’s sacrifice. On the eve of my departure from Gangtok one winter, we sat shivering at BL House, where he sang and then roughly translated his song.

“We have the feeling of Dzongu,  
But we are afraid our land will go in the hands of capitalists.  
For this we are fighting without food  
With the help of the morning tomorrow, perhaps our dream will be a reality.  
For this we are fighting  
Drying our blood while we stay on strike.  
River Teesta is looking for help  
It is vanishing in the tunnels  
But nobody is listening to my voice.”<sup>60</sup>

Midway through a second major hunger strike by Dawa, Tenzing and Ongchuk Lepcha, Tenzing's younger brother crouched on the floor upstairs at BL House, just behind the makeshift altar where the lamas chant their daily puja. In his hand he held a fat, red marking pen. He

was creating a new banner with a new narrative and he drew in large, red, deliberate letters on a sheet of white card, “Why Us?”.

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1 Hooker, 1999, first published 1854, p.179.

2 Waddell, 1998, p. 77-78, first published 1889.

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3 White, 2000, p.7, first published 1909.

4 Taking the lead, Down to Earth, Vol 7 No 18, 15 February 1999.

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8 The Telegraph, 2007.

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10 The Sami are the indigenous people of Finland, Norway, Russia and Sweden. They have their own traditional areas with a distinct language, culture, livelihood and history. [http://www.galdu.org/govat/doc/eng\\_sami.pdf](http://www.galdu.org/govat/doc/eng_sami.pdf)

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13 Naess, 2002, p. 109.

14 Arntzen, 2002 p 34.

15 Ibid p. 108.

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17 Naess, 1990 p. 165.

18 Naess A, 2003, p.2.

19 Kingsoomzaongboo Chu refers to Mount Kanchenjunga. There are many variations of the spelling.

20 This quote was made by the Lepcha scholar KP Tamsang in 1983 and relayed by Dr DC Roy, Kalimpong College Darjeeling in King Gaeboo Achyok 2005, a Lepcha Bilingual Magazine, pub Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association. p.2.

21 I interviewed SM Lepcha in Darjeeling, 20 December 2006.

22 Quoted in Environmental and Social Impacts of Teesta Hydroelectric Project, Sikkim, An Investigation Report, found on <http://www.esgindia.org/moefsuno2005/Teesta%205%20Dam%20Sikkim.doc>. Quote confirmed to be correct by Dawa Lepcha in March 2007.

23 I interviewed Dawa Lepcha at BL House in Gangtok on 29 December 2007.

24 NOW! Daily, 28 June 07.

25 'Peace loving' is a term used often to describe Lepchas. It appears in North-east literature and is said by non-Lepchas who share community with them and, by the Lepchas themselves.

26 Naess 2003, p.147.

27 Naess 2003, p. 149.

28 NOW! Daily, 16 July 07, p.1.

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29 Rai 2006. p.1.

30 NOW! Daily, 20 July 2007, p.1.

31 NOW! Daily, 26 July 2007 p.1.

32 NOW! Daily, 27 July 07, p.1.

33 A khada is a white scarf which Buddhists give to show goodwill, respect and compassion.

34 Article 371F of the Indian Constitution allows for special provisions with respect to the State of Sikkim including that the privileges of the Lepcha-Bhutia groups are assured as minorities, that their rights and interest will be protected and that the Government of Sikkim make provision for the number of seats in the Legislative Assembly of the State of Sikkim for them and that the Government of Sikkim shall have special responsibility for peace and for an equitable arrangement for ensuring the social and economic advancement of different sections of the population of Sikkim and in the discharge of his special responsibility under this clause, the Governor of Sikkim shall, subject to such directions as the President may, from time to time, deem fit to issue, act in his discretion. <http://www.answers.com/topic/constitution-of-india-part-xxi>

35 The relay hunger strike involves Lepcha youth taking it in turns to sit outside BL House for periods of time, usually 24 hours, without food. At the time of writing (August 08) the relay hunger strike continues, 14 months since the start.

36 The term ‘victimization transfer’ is widely used in Sikkim to refer to someone in a government job who is transferred away from their family and support networks, presumably because they have said or done something that is anti-government. Many people I spoke to used this term, and many said they had not

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openly supported the activists for fear of being ‘victimized.’

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44 Letter to the Chief Minister of Sikkim from the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Associated dated 8 February 2008 and reproduced in full in *Aauchuly* magazine, Vol 12, No. 1, April 2008.

45 Tamsang, L, 2008, p. 22.

46 Collins, 1990.

47 Jasper, 1998 p. 415.

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48 Tamsang, 2008, p.24

49 *Mutanchi* means children of nature, *rong* means Lepcha, auchuley is a Lepcha cheer expressed in this case to show solidarity and strength. It also translates to *Hail to the Himalayas*.

50 Lepcha greeting.

51 Translated by Dawa Lepcha. Another translation of this song by Lepcha leader, Lyangsong Lepcha is published in *Aauchuley* magazine, April 2009, p 38 under the title: '*Dzongu; the Lepchas' Holy Land*.

52 Recorded 6 December 2007 outside BL House, Gangtok.

53 In West Bengal, Lepcha language is not recognized as an official language or taught in schools. The Indigenous Lepcha Association has lobbied and fought for many years to have their mother-tongue placed on the school curriculum. They also have a history of creating Lepcha literature, and running their own culture and language courses in remote Lepcha villages.

54 *Himalayan Mirror*, 16 April 2008, p.1.

55 Naess A, 2002, p.106.

56 Brantenberg T and Minde H, nd.

57 On 16 June 2008 in response to a second hunger strike by Dawa and Tenzing Lepcha, the government agreed to cease planning on four of the Dzongu projects. Dawa and Tenzing then stopped the strike.

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58 Carr D, 1986, pp. 117-131.

59 I interviewed Major Lyangsong Tamsang in Kalimpong, 28 January 2008.

60 Recorded at BL House, January 2008.