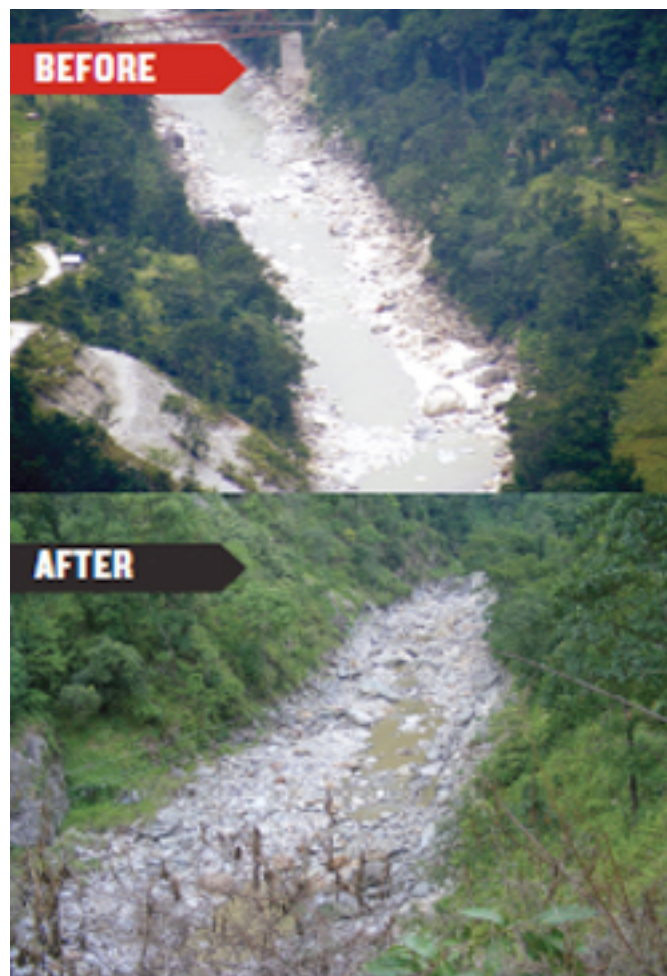


A Paradise Dammed

The 6.8 magnitude quake that shook Sikkim was termed a natural disaster. The devastation caused, however, was just as man-made.

Sai Manish reports from Ground Zero

The smell of rotting human flesh that mingles with the noxious diesel fumes of army bulldozers signals the end of the road here. In north Sikkim's Toong, men of the General Reserve Engineers Force (GREF) are at their wits' end in the persistent drizzle; their bulldozers and drillers, after days of pounding on 20-tonne boulders, manage to conjure just enough hydraulic power to keep the work going. A road once existed below the rocks that have now tumbled like freshly baked biscuits from the impact of the 6.8 magnitude shallow earthquake that struck Sikkim on 18 September. Its epicentre just a few miles from where the men are trying to force an opening.



Wash out

Rangit, a tributary of Teesta, is a trickle owing to a 60 MW dam project

Beyond the mist-covered mountains further north of Chungthang, Lachen and Lachung, an occasional army chopper appears on the horizon and flies over the rescue workers as a stark reminder of the gargantuan task that lies ahead in finding that elusive patch of tar below the debris for another 40 km. What is ironical here is that the very mountain whose debris the GREF is clearing has a tunnel running right through it - one of the many 'hollow mountains' all along the right bank of the roaring sediment-laden Teesta river. The 14.6 km-long tunnel constructed by Teesta Urja Pvt Ltd - a consortium of four private contractors - is meant to divert the waters of the river through the mountain to be dropped on turbines that generate electricity.

"Teesta Urja has messed up big time," says a GREF officer overseeing the clearing work at Toong, "but at least they are letting us use their machines to do the job. It's going to take another month to clear it all up till Chungthang and Lachen." Teesta Urja too is flying select reporters to its tunnels to show that nothing has happened to its investments and staff. Any possible impact of the tunnelling, blasting and reservoirs in inducing seismicity had been dismissed by Sikkim Chief Minister Pawan Kumar Chamling on 26 September as a "rumour".

Just a day before Chamling made the statement, people in the region were wondering why their CM preferred to receive P Chidambaram and Rahul Gandhi in Gangtok for the first few days after the quake rather than move out of the state capital to take stock of the situation.



Vocing Concern
Anti-dam protesters now stand vindicated

Despite the denials, retractions and dismissals, it is not hard to see the influence of human activity in greatly exacerbating the impact of one of the worst natural disasters to hit Sikkim in decades. All along the landslide-dotted road from the district headquarters in Mangan to Toong, the heavily tunnelled mountains on the right bank of the Teesta show signs of utter devastation - bald patches of exposed rock, collapsed slopes and felled trees. Teesta Urja is undertaking a 1,200 MW project as a part of Teesta Stage 3, the single largest power generation scheme in the six-stage cascade plan to harness the hydro power potential of the swift-flowing river. Environmentalists believe that these run-of-the-river schemes that divert

rivers through mountain tunnels in Sikkim's young Himalayas are damaging the fragile geology in an area that is classified as Seismic Zone-IV.

Environmentalists fear that once the river starts flowing through these tunnels, there will be extensive damage. The state government does not seem to have learnt from a similar project completed in 2008 by the National Hydel Power Corporation (NHPC). Although public hearings were held before the project was undertaken, they were a mere formality as they were held in Gangtok, with not many local people in attendance. Even though they were briefed, they realised the impact of their reduced water levels, cracked buildings and occasional landslides only after the project was commissioned.

On the way down from Toong, NHPC's 510 MW Teesta Stage 5 project bears testimony to the wrath of the quake. Debris from landslides, including logs of wood and silt, has accumulated at the dam at Dikchu, posing a serious threat to its stability and also raising questions about the hazards of damming a fast-flowing river that erodes its banks.

Like the Teesta Urja project, this too was cleared without establishing the carrying capacity of the river. This, despite an expert committee of the Ministry of Environment and Forests in 1999 clearly stating that no new projects should be cleared until it is proven that the Teesta can support the mushrooming of mega and medium dams across its entire course. Now, the Teesta has the largest number of dams in a single state. Sikkim is just 112 km from north to south, and with close to 30 dams proposed, there would be a dam every 3.7 km on this magnificent untamed river and its pristine crystal clear tributaries.

If nature has borne the brunt of the earthquake in the sparsely habited areas of north Sikkim, in the more densely populated areas in east Sikkim it is the people living close to the dams who are the worst hit. Shanta Bai lives on the banks of the river with a clear view of the Teesta Stage 6 being built by Lanco Infratech owned by Congress MP Lagdapati Rajagopal. "First my house cracked because of their blasting and I did not get a single rupee from them. Every now and then we used to feel tremors. I went and lodged a complaint with the police but they took no action. Now my entire house is damaged in the quake and still nobody from either the company or from the government has come to assess the damage," says Shanta Bai.

Almost every hour, groups of 5-6 migrant workers arrive at Toong, where the army would put them on a truck and reach them to the nearby camp at Naga village. Despite demographic concerns over the influx of migrants, the locals have left no stone unturned to provide a comforting shoulder to thousands of workers from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal, who came down from the heights barefoot to escape the after-effects of the quake. In Mangan, locals have set up a kitchen to feed every single man who comes walking down from the power project sites in north Sikkim.

This is in sharp contrast to the attitude of the workers' own employers and contractors of Teesta Urja who have not even bothered to keep a staff list to check whether all workers have made it to the lower reaches from dam sites in Chungthang and Lachen.

Sandeep is one of the workers who was working at the Teesta Urja project in Chungthang when the quake struck. "We went out and saw huge rocks had fallen down on the dam and on many of the houses near the dam site. The army was airlifting only injured people so I had to walk. Now I just want to go home to Siliguri. I swear I will never come back," he says. Another worker from Lachen, who trekked all day to reach Mangan, recounts, "There were six others who left before us. We did not see them on the way and they are not here also. Around 15 bodies were cremated at the dam site itself."

It is because of the fear of losing more people that Mangan District Collector SP Pradhan was heard telling the GREF area commander, "Just give me a footpath to Lachen somehow. I don't even need a road for now." That is how desperate the situation was getting even as the death toll mounted by the hour. Most of the casualties in north Sikkim too have occurred at mid-tunnel openings (called Adits) where work was being done by Teesta Urja. The worst affected are Adit 4 and Adit 5, where work was in full swing. Initially, Teesta Urja officials denied any damage to life or property even as the control room in Mangan counted the dead at the Adits near Saffu and at the dam site in Chungthang.

Among the dead at the dam site in Chungthang was the AGM of Amalgamated Trans Power India Ltd (ATPIL), 63-year-old DD Gupta (employee code 110741) and five employees of Navyuga Engineering Company. At Adit 5 near Saffu, apart from a junior electrician and other workers, a B Tech graduate from Andhra Pradesh's Chittoor district, Mohan Reddy (employee code 110716), was killed by the landslides caused by the earthquake.

This opacity from the private contractors in admitting damage to human life has been compounded by the laxity of the state government. Chamling, who has been the CM since 1994, faces virtually no opposition in the state Assembly - all 32 MLAs belong to the ruling Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF). The Opposition Congress has termed Chamling's hands-off approach and partisan attitude in the face of disaster as shocking. Even former CM Nar Bahadur Bhandari and the president of the Sikkim Congress RM Lepcha, have lashed out at Chamling for destroying the fragile ecology of the state and the lives of people dependent on the Teesta.

Bhandari, who has also levelled charges of massive corruption against Chamling in the past, said during a visit to Gangtok from Delhi, where he was hospitalised, "We will submit a memorandum to the prime minister to immediately stall all hydel power projects in Sikkim. There is no doubt that the earthquake has been aided by the massive hydro projects across the state."

Chamling has been projecting Sikkim as the next big investment destination and his approach throughout this disaster has been to keep that image intact, irrespective of the cost to human life and property.

When Tehelka visited the village of Lingza in the Dzongu Reserve, SDF cadre were tutoring people not to speak out against the dam projects and even objected when Tehelka tried to talk to the indigenous Lepchas on their sustained opposition to massive dams in the vicinity of their sacred lands.

The Dzongu Reserve is an area that has been marked exclusively for the indigenous Lepchas, who have been inhabiting its pristine environs for centuries now. In the picturesque Lingza village, Lepchas survive without depending on the comforts of the outside world. Green paddy fields at the village entrance surrounded by hills of cardamom plantations, ginger fields and milch cows tied in their barns: that is a typical Lepcha village in a land they consider sacred.

Tengdup Lepcha, 70, whose grandson Lengdup is now taking care of his paddy fields and cardamom trees, says he has never seen anything on the scale of the present earthquake that has flattened complete villages in Upper Dzongu just an hour's walk from Lingza. Here the dominance of the Chamling-appointed panchayat is complete. All the relief that has reached this place is distributed through the panchayat with SDF cadre and members of power developers promoted self-help groups in attendance throughout.

Says Dawa Lepcha, who has been heading the anti-Teesta dam stir since 2007, "The power structures in Sikkim are meant to subdue people's voices. The big politicians act through panchayats, who in turn clearly warn people that they would not receive benefits from the government if they oppose Chamling's policies."

In the capital Gangtok, there is a unique problem. Grizzly bears have been appearing on the streets of Gangtok and in nearby places like Burtuk and Chanmari in the past three years. Many locals blame the power developers and their indiscriminate blasting and drilling in the forests. "The channelling of water through tunnels has also drastically reduced the inflow in rivers and has led to mass disappearance of fish on which these bears feed," says Tashi Thompa, a wildlife filmmaker based in Gangtok. "Nature is telling us something and we need to listen or the entire state risks major hazards," he says.

Documents available with Tehelka show that Chamling went on a contract-awarding spree between December 2005 and March 2006, inking 12 MoUs. On 1 March 2006, he cleared five projects worth over Rs 4,500 crore envisaging power generation along the Teesta to the tune of almost 1,800 MW. Till date, Chamling has sanctioned power projects that would produce an astounding 5,352.7 MW even though Sikkim's own requirement is just 80 MW. The 30 new projects, including the 24 active projects of private players cleared by Chamling, are worth Rs 17,100 crore - a huge investment in hydro power for a small state like Sikkim. None of the power projects given to private players have been done through the process of bidding.

When a group of people protested against his policies, they were put behind bars for a month on charges of damaging the property of private power companies. Documents with Tehelka show that the Sikkim government might end up undercutting its stated objective of generating additional revenue because of some baffling clauses in the MoU the government has entered into with corporates. By keeping the option of buying 26 percent equity in the projects open in the MoUs, the government would have to take a loan at

an interest rate of 15 percent to fulfill its equity commitment. This was also stated in a white paper on the modalities of the power project taken out by a private consultant in 2007 in which it was inferred that even if private companies give the government a return of 25 percent and a royalty of 12 percent for the first 15 years, the Sikkim government would only stand to lose revenues from such a move.

Moreover, as a minority stakeholder, the Sikkim government would also have to share liabilities and have little room to assert its view before majority private stakeholders.

So in essence, Sikkim is not only giving away land in reserved and ecologically sensitive areas to developers with concessions but also insuring them against any misadventure in the quest for unbridled profits for the first 35 years (The project reverts to the state government after that).

Speaking to Tehelka, Power Minister Sonam Gyatso Lepcha says, "We need revenue to be less dependent on the Centre. In Sikkim there is no other option except hydro power for increasing revenues."

The Congress has also accused Chamling of striking dubious deals on the pretext of developing these power projects. He is accused of openly facilitating private sector power players' entry into Sikkim's hydro power sector - a case in point being his decision to secure a Rs 50 crore loan with Sikkim government as guarantor for a project to be developed by a Delhi-based power company ATPIL, owned by one PK Das. However, the Sikkim Cabinet scrapped the project and the government was forced to repay the amount with interest.

The lack of strong political opposition meant that nobody questioned the government over the pilferage of public funds for private gain without any tangible benefits to the people. And when Sikkim's civil society started growing disenchanted with his policies, Chamling did the unthinkable - he introduced what came to be known as the 'Black Bill'. The Sikkim Prevention and Control of Disturbance of Public Order Bill, 2011, sought to ban hunger strikes, processions, squatting, sloganeering and waving of black flags in public! Open ridicule from the public forced the subsequent withdrawal of this Bill.

The mindset of authoritarianism under Chamling has also transformed into a culture of absolute corruption, with government officials trying to siphon off funds that were supposed to be given to quake victims. People of the Limbu tribe, whose houses suffered 'major' damage, were entitled to a compensation of Rs 30,000. However, many like Sukangma got just half that amount despite the quake having made her house unlivable due to broken walls and cracked roof. Others like Gore Singh, who suffered minor damages to his house, waited all day at the BDO office only to be turned away with promises of being given the cash "very soon".

This scale of corruption in every aspect of life in Sikkim - be it in times of prosperity or in times of a tragedy like the earthquake is evident everywhere. The bane of Sikkim is the government's stifling hold over its own people through money, power and the culture of fear. "The land has

enough for everybody. The hydel projects are not development. They are the rape of Sikkim,” says a young Revenue Inspector on condition of anonymity.

The earthquake has reminded the people of the consequences of disturbing the fine balance between man and nature in a blessed territory where survival is not difficult but death is. And when death comes falling from the trembling mountains above, it might well be time to realise that all is not well in a state whose people fear nature more than they would fear a man with an AK-47.

‘Devastation happened only in areas close to dam projects’

Dawa Lepcha, a 38-year-old anti-dam activist, points out that the secrecy surrounding government decisions leads to anti-people policies



Excerpts From The Interview:

When did you start your protests?

We came to know about these projects around 2003 - 04. We have been running this campaign since. We have approached the government, submitting memorandum, press releases. But to no avail.

Post-quake, do you think things will change?

It will be easier to convince people that there is something behind our protest. People are discussing it.

A number of projects were sanctioned in quick time. Was there no opposition?

It was all being done secretly. They came up with the list only when we asked for it. By then, they had already signed MOUs for 19 or 20 projects out of 30.

What impact did you fear?

There would be demographic changes, social and cultural issues. Also, if a project lies within 10 km of a national park, the law says you need permission. They haven't even applied for it. The seismic issue was never considered very seriously - environment impact assessments just make a mention of it. Of course, we can't say the earthquake was caused by these

projects, but they have definitely worsened the situation. Dynamite has been used carelessly for years. It's common sense: devastation has happened only in construction areas.

Do you oppose all projects?

When we realised there are many more projects coming up, we tried to widen the protest. Most project-affected people were very concerned, but unfortunately the government has a tight control here.

It is said almost 80 percent of the people work for the government.

Does it make entry of private companies easy?

On the finance side, in all the Independent Project Co-operatives, the government has 25 percent equity. If the State is a minority stakeholder, how will it have a say?

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Source: http://www.tehelka.com/story_main50.asp?filename=Ne081011PARADISE.asp