

The sacred will be dammed. That's the fear in Sikkim

Scrapping of power projects by the Chamling government has been a farce in the past.

Sai Manish explains why



Power struggle

Hydro projects at Lethang (Photo: UB Photos)

Mounting public anger and unrelenting protests by monks have forced the Sikkim government to make an announcement that was eagerly awaited following the devastating September earthquake in the Himalayan state. On 25 January, it scrapped two power plants under construction on the Rathong Chu, a tributary of the heavily dammed Rangit river, which feeds the mighty Teesta river. The 97 MW Ting Ting project and the 96 MW Lethang project next to the Kanchenjunga reserve in west Sikkim — on a tributary considered holy — were cancelled by the Sikkim Cabinet after sustained pressure from all sides.

However, there is still fear that like in the past, the Pawan Kumar Chamling-led Sikkim Democratic Front government may try to strike a bargain with private power firms. The Cabinet hasn't put the announcement on record, choosing not to issue a gazette notification that officially declares the

scrapping of these projects. That has raised a stink about the intentions behind the move. Says Tashi Bhutia of the Sikkim Bhutia Lepcha Apex Committee, “The government has done somersaults in the past. We cannot breathe easy.”

Bhutia’s fears are justified, considering the duplicity of the Chamling government in the past. It scrapped a project at the same site on the Rathong Chu river in 1997. In 2009, it renamed the project as Lethang and gave the contract to Kalpan Hydro to avoid a public backlash.

The National Wildlife Board struck it down in October 2010 due to its proximity to the Kanchenjunga National Park. However, the state kept mum, citing lack of communication from the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests.

The cat was set among the pigeons last November when the Union home ministry intervened after persistent letters were sent to the PMO about the violation of the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991, and the ‘pollution’ of sacred places by greedy power developers. The ministry set up a high-powered committee that shook up the administration in Gangtok.

The Chamling government, ever careful not to rub the Centre the wrong way, had little option but to set up a committee headed by the state’s Chief Secretary Karma Gyatso. The result was the scrapping of the two projects (Ting Ting and Lethang), albeit reluctantly, and putting one (Tashiding) under review.

The Tashiding project is owned by Hyderabad-based Dans Energy, the same firm that won the now-cancelled Ting Ting project. Tension has been rising across Sikkim after seeing the destruction caused during the quake due to indiscriminate tunnelling work undertaken by power developers for diverting river water.



Power struggle ***Hydro projects at Rangit Valley***

If protests were orchestrated by faith healers and jhankris (shamans) over the Tashiding project, there have been spontaneous and angry outbursts by locals over what they call “hell-like night-time explosions” at the Tashiding power site. Three youths from nearby Sakyong village, angry at the sound of round-the-clock blasting, tunnelling and the consequent tremors, allegedly entered one of the tunnels and set heavy machinery on fire.

However, disregarding the unpopularity of such environmentally destructive development, Power Minister Sonam Gyatso Lepcha insists, "Sikkim is endowed with natural resources and hydro power is crucial for revenue generation for the state." He is tight-lipped about his government's reluctance to issue an official notification.

The logic with which the projects have been awarded have also left many activists fuming. Rather than choose strategic locations for a few high-capacity plants, Sikkim has been doling out contracts to Andhra Pradesh-based businessmen to dam every single tributary of the Teesta.

This 'carbon trade gold rush' has resulted in what concerned citizens call a total pilferage of resources. In fact, many of the hydro projects in Sikkim have been established with the motive of deriving benefits from the United Nations' Clean Development Mechanism and cornering a slice of the carbon trading pie.

"To have four different dams with four different power developers within a few kilometres of a tributary in west Sikkim defies common sense," avers Dawa Lepcha of the Affected Citizens of Teesta. "In the Rangit Valley, this has resulted in entire mountains being tunnelled by power companies, with each doing the same work and multiplying the damage to the fragile geology and the sensitive ecology."

Tension has been rising after the quake due to indiscriminate tunnelling work done by power developers



For instance, the Lethang project is being executed by a Noida-based firm called Kalpan Hydro. But Kalpan Hydro itself is the subsidiary of a carbon trading and consulting firm called Emergent Ventures, whose directors have served time with the Clinton Climate Initiative, known for its market-driven, business-minded approach to containing climate change.

Kalpan Hydro's small and numerous power projects in Sikkim represent carbon offsets for Emergent's clients, which include some of the world's biggest corporations such as Virgin Atlantic, agro behemoth Cargill, Unilever and PepsiCo.

The Chamling government has already been left red-faced after the CBI reached the chief minister's doorstep investigating the assets of Andhra Pradesh's prodigal son Jagan Mohan Reddy. The CBI is probing the source of the money, estimated to be close to Rs 500 crore, that was allegedly pumped in by Jagan into two

projects. One of them is the Teesta Stage-3 project being built by Andhra-based Teesta Urja Pvt Ltd, in Chungthang, close to the epicentre of the September earthquake.

And if the CBI manages to establish that Jagan has also pumped money into the Panan hydro project next to the Dzongu reserve, the Sikkim government will head towards its worst public image crisis during Chamling's unhindered four-term reign in the state since 1994.

Sikkim's civil society is going easy on the government after the informal announcement of scrapping the two projects. And that is why not many are raising the contentious issue of what obligations need to be met from public funds after the scrapping of the Lethang project in which the government holds 11 percent stake.

"There has to be a policy shift. The Sikkim government needs to think beyond revenue generation. At the end of the day, the world is washing its dirty linen in Sikkim's rivers and polluting the sacred land," says Tashi Thonpa, a Gangtok-based documentary maker.

The state has been doling out contracts to AP-based businessmen to dam every single tributary of the Teesta

The Chamling government, which considers the overwhelming mandate its power minister got in the anti-dam constituency of Dzongu in 2009 as a vindication of its hydro power policies, is not in the mood to completely back down despite the strong public outrage. Many are also surprised by the timing of the announcement, coming as it does just days after the Supreme Court asked Chamling to respond to massive corruption charges against him.

Chamling has avoided a gazette notification on the scrapping of the power project, choosing instead to make a casual mention of a crucial policy matter.

What looked like a step forward has ended up looking like a reluctant concession to the people of Sikkim who have borne the brunt of the government's love for hydro-electric power.

Sai Manish is a Correspondent with Tehelka. sai.manish@tehelka.com

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