



FIXED BORDERS, FLUID BOUNDARIES

Identity, Resources and Mobility
in Northeast India

Edited by

Chandan Kumar Sharma

and Reshmi Banerjee

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1 The contemporary process of economic development, state power and Lepcha resistance in Sikkim

A macro view

*Binod Bhattarai**

This chapter highlights the contemporary process of economic development in the state of Sikkim (after its accession¹ to the Indian Union in 1975) and analyzes the impact of developmental initiatives undertaken by the Union Government as well as by the state government of Sikkim on ethnic minorities. The development planners in Sikkim identified “hydraulic gigantism” as a panacea for modernizing Sikkim’s economy. It was seen as a tool for generating employment for its youth, earning revenue to offset the fiscal deficit, servicing its debt, financing human development, along with meeting domestic and national energy needs. It has also been widely acclaimed by the state government as the saviour of Sikkim, the path to economic independence as Sikkim is heavily dependent on the central government for funding. However, available literature on the topic indicates that the developmental measures have raised widespread disillusionment among the various ethnic communities and could be beneficial for only a minuscule elite section of the people. The literature reveals that concomitant changes in the environment and society often had deleterious consequences for the majority of the people for whom development had been designed (Arora, 2006, 2009; Little, 2010). In this context, the recent agitation against the numerous mega hydroelectric projects is the burning example of disgruntlement among the ethnic communities in Sikkim. Ironically, the successive ruling parties in the state continue to project the ongoing hydropower construction works as an exemplary act of development for its vanishing tribes. Based on “thick description”,² the discussion in the chapter shows how the ethnic minorities in Sikkim, especially the Lepchas, have responded to the state-led development.

The chapter consists of three sections. The first section discusses the Lepcha minority in Sikkim and their relationship with the state and other ethnic groups/communities, focusing on the domain of “vanishing tribe discourse”. The second section deals with the developmental rhetoric of democratic Sikkim in general and the apprehension of the Lepcha community in particular. The final section draws the conclusion of the chapter by making certain suggestions, which will incorporate the interest of the minorities in general and the Lepchas in particular in the process of state-sponsored development.

Lepcha minority in Sikkim

The study of primitive tribes always suffers from the disadvantages of colonial biases inherent in the materials and authenticity of data. The Lepcha are also no exception. They are believed to be the aboriginal inhabitants of Sikkim; however, an exact account of their origin is still not known. The name "Lepcha" is supposed to be derived from the word *Lapcho*, or cairn, the original Lepcha place of worship (Basnet, 1974). The Nepalese changed the word into *Lapche*, a word still very much in use among both the Nepalese and the Lepchas themselves, and the British anglicized it into the modern form of Lepcha. The Lepchas called themselves *Rong-pa*, i.e. people living in ravines.

With regard to the origin of the Lepchas, various obscurities prevail. Who were the first Lepchas? Where did they come from? What were their traditions and history? These are some of the questions which have been asked often but have never had clear-cut answers. Regarding the origin of the Lepcha community, scholars have held two views. The first view is upheld mostly by the Lepcha scholars, who believe that the Lepchas originated from nowhere but from the soil of Sikkim, and they define themselves by their close association with the sacred mountain Kanchenjunga that is regarded as the source of their knowledge, culture, religion, wealth and resources, as well as the place of their origin (Foning, 1987; Tamsang, 1998). The second view is shared mostly by the European and Indian writers who believe that the Lepchas, once upon a time, migrated to Sikkim from the Kham province of Tibet and Northeastern part of India especially through Assam Valley (Basnet, 1974; Campbell, 1869; Subba, 1985; Thakur, 1988; Waddell, 1899).

Presently, the Lepchas live in Sikkim, Kalimpong and the Darjeeling District of West Bengal in India, in Samchi province of Bhutan and in Illam District of Nepal. They are concentrated in Dzongu, the Lepcha reserve in North Sikkim, which was officially created by the Maharaja of Sikkim in 1957. The spread of the Lepcha population throughout the surrounding areas of Sikkim is due not to their migratory character but to the political history of the region. The waves of migration from Tibet in the North, Bhutan in the East and Nepal in the West brought thousands of people to the land of the Lepchas over a millennium or so. Unable to cope with the changing land use and culture brought under the influence of immigrants, the Lepchas dispersed either deep inside the forest or assimilated with the new settlers. Political change and corresponding reshuffling of boundaries forced the Lepchas to be ruled by different authorities at different times or by different authorities at different places but at the same time.

The Lepchas are considered the earliest inhabitants not only of Sikkim but also of the Darjeeling District of West Bengal. They practised shifting cultivation and were hunter-gatherers, living in apparent isolation. Bhutia immigration from Tibet and Bhutan into Sikkim has taken place in various waves over several centuries. By 1642, a Tibetan theocracy was established

in Sikkim under the rule of the Chogyal,³ or King (Datta, 1992). Bhutia immigrants were lamas, traders, and livestock herders, the latter pushing the Lepcha into forests and lower valleys. All land in Sikkim was the property of the Chogyal who distributed this to landlords known as Kazi who were predominantly Bhutia in ethnicity; they were empowered to appoint headmen (mondals) who could rent land for cultivation or dwellings, leaving Lepchas economically and politically marginalized. Inter-marriage between Bhutia aristocrats and Lepcha chiefs, followed by conversion to Buddhism, meant integration in the upper levels of society and discrimination at other levels (Gorer, 1938).

After the 1891 Census, only the Lepchas, Bhutias and Limbus were taken as distinct ethnic groups, while all other groups mentioned in the Census were regarded as various castes of Nepali society. The ethnic composition of Sikkim changed rapidly as the Nepalese multiplied in number from 51 per cent of the total population in 1891 to 75 per cent of the total population in 1947 (Subba, 1989). With the modified lease system of land by J.C. White, the first political officer in Sikkim, a new lessee landlord class emerged among the Nepali's *Newar* caste origin called *Thekedars* (contractors). The Nepalese were considered to be better cultivators, industrious and hardworking labourers. They settled down in wastelands and by clearing unoccupied forests. This in turn developed into a new land settlement pattern and ultimately brought about a change in land ownership pattern (Sinha, 1975). On the whole, however, the Bhutias predominated as both *Kazis* and *Thekedars*.

By the turn of the twentieth century, after internal administration was handed back to the Chogyal, the Nepalis were the majority population of Sikkim, governed by a minority Bhutia ruling class. Under these circumstances, an administrative division was created between the so-called migrant Nepalis and non-migrant Bhutia and Lepcha populations of Sikkim. Revenue Order No.1 of 1917 prohibited the sale or transfer of Bhutia or Lepcha land to members of other ethnic groups. Further restrictions were placed on Nepali migrants serving as officers or headmen. These measures pushed the Bhutia and Lepcha ethnic groups into a "composite" ethnic group and, similarly, though with far less critical or scholarly recognition, pushed the various non-Bhutia and non-Lepcha people from different ethnic groups into the composite category "Nepali" (Shneiderman and Turin, 2006). The category Bhutia-Lepcha, or BL in everyday parlance in contemporary Sikkim, has persisted and is the basis for reserved seats in the state legislative assembly,⁴ government employment and educational institutions. This has left the Lepchas as the minority "partner" in the minority BL category.

It has been argued throughout the past century that both the BL category and the common Sikkimese identity has eroded into separate Lepcha identities, leading to claims that they are a "dying race" (Gorer, 1938) and a "vanishing tribe" (Foning, 1987). Plaiser claims that, according to the most recent statistical data estimates, there are slightly fewer than 30,000 Lepcha

speakers, though it is important to note that many people who are ethnically Lepcha may not be Lepcha speakers (Plaisier, 2005). The concept of the “vanishing tribe”, the term coined by the Lepcha civil servant turned author Arthur Foning and the title of his influential 1987 book *Lepcha: My Vanishing Tribe*, has been strongly internalized. Bentley writes that the “notion of a vanishing Lepcha culture or even of the entire Lepcha tribe is expressed by every member of Lepcha society: urban and rural, male and female, young and old, educated and uneducated”. She adds that “for all of them losing Lepcha culture has become an integral part of describing Lepcha culture” (Bentley, 2007).

In the last decade, the Government of Sikkim has responded by ensuring that Lepcha culture and identity are protected. Lepcha is one of the 11 official languages; it is taught in schools; there are Lepcha language textbooks and Lepcha editions of the government newspaper and certain documents, as well as Lepcha language radio broadcasts; and the prominent Lepcha Cultural Association promotes Lepcha literature, handicrafts, archery, and festivals. These official spaces for the expression of Lepcha culture do not exist among the Lepchas of the Darjeeling Hills or among Lepchas in the Ilam District of Nepal or those in the Samsi District of Bhutan (Plaisier, 2005). As a result, there is, at least at a certain official level, a more visible Lepcha identity in Sikkim than among Lepchas living in surrounding areas. Religion also plays a role in these differences, with most Lepcha in the Darjeeling Hills following Christianity, while those in Sikkim, particularly North Sikkim, being predominantly Buddhist with some following the traditional Lepcha Mun religion (Plaisier, 2005).

In recent years, the Government of Sikkim has undertaken further measures to differentiate between certain ethnic groups and subgroups within its population. One of these is the classification of Lepchas as the “most primitive tribal group” passed by the Sikkim Legislative Assembly in 2005. This measure was undertaken to protect and safeguard the vanishing tribe, to uplift their socio-economic, educational, and political status, to give them a distinct identity and special status. While the Bhutia-Lepcha category still exists, Lepchas have a further means of accessing state reservations. As Shneiderman and Turin have commented, “[T]he previously unassailable category of Scheduled Tribe had just been upstaged by the new category of Most Primitive Tribe” (Shneiderman and Turin, 2006). For the Lepcha community of Sikkim, the most primitive tribe status reinforced the vanishing tribe preoccupation, and official differentiation from the Bhutias set the stage for more vocal expressions of Lepcha ethnic identity. Of all the protective measures for Lepchas, none is more significant than the Dzongu reserve.

The questions of development in the Dzongu region

The question of development of the Dzongu region and especially of the Lepcha community has come from the Central Electricity Authority of the

Government of India after its 2001 preliminary ranking study of the hydroelectric potential of river basins in India. The Government of India has launched a hydropower initiative to produce 50,000 megawatts of electricity in remote corners of India.⁵ In the process, the Central Electricity Authority has identified 21 mega hydroelectric projects to be developed in Sikkim. Out of that, six projects have been envisioned on the Teesta River in the Lepcha reserve zone of the Dzongu region (Entecsol International, 2009).

Dzongu is a Lepcha reserve zone in North Sikkim. It has a population of approximately 7,745 people (Department of Economics, Statistics, 2006). Dzongu was declared a special protected area in 1957 by the last Chogyal of Sikkim in recognition that it is the sacred land of the Lepchas, through Notification Nos. 3069 of 1958, which prohibits the settlement of non-Lepcha people in the region. Entry restrictions are strict, with even Lepchas from other parts of Sikkim not being allowed to settle in Dzongu. Most outsiders can gain permits for only short visits. All land in Dzongu is Lepcha owned, and though it can be leased to non-Lepcha labourers, work permits are only given through the invitation of a Dzongu resident and has to be renewed every year. Dzongu is the lifeline to the Lepcha past.

As a consequence, Dzongu has long been a draw for anthropologists and ethnographers seeking access to Lepcha culture before it “disappears”. Perhaps the most famous colonial era account of the Lepchas is Geoffrey Gorer’s *Himalayan Village* (1938), based on fieldwork in Dzongu and still in print today. Gorer stated that “it is only in Zongu and in one or two villages outside the reserve that there is a homogenous [sic] Lepcha society, practically undisturbed by alien influence” (Gorer, 1938). He considered this “artificial”, arguing that, without the benevolence of the Chogyal in granting the reserve, “these Lepchas would, like their fellows, have been ousted from what little and poor land remains to them”. Foning writes of the time spent in Dzongu in the late 1940s, and in *My Vanishing Tribe*, he refers to it as “the dreamland of our modern Lepcha world” (Foning, 1987). Dzongu has significance beyond its size and population. For Lepchas outside Dzongu, it signifies the remains of all that has been “lost”, a source for reproducing ethnic identity at a time when changes to ethnic categories make identity particularly salient. With such significance, the proposal to build six large dams in Dzongu changed the political landscape in Sikkim and triggered new forms of collective agency among the Lepchas.

Developmental rhetoric of democratic Sikkim

Sikkim, where much of this story is set, is promoted as a green state of India. The Sikkim government has put forth a strong environmental rhetoric for the state. The slogans such as “Green Narratives for a Green State”, “Nirmal Gram”, and “Sikkim: Small but Green and Beautiful” are billboarded on the roadsides, especially on the highways that welcome visitors to the state. This sequence of measures is reinforced on government web portals, press

releases, and policy announcements to contextualize development projects in democratic Sikkim.

In 1999, the then Chief Minister of Sikkim, Shri Pawan Kumar Chamling, was awarded the “greenest” Chief Minister of India honour by the Delhi-based Centre for Science and Environment. *Down to Earth* magazine cited the government’s action to ban harmful chemical fertilizers in the state, the use of plastic bags, the implementation of overgrazing in the forest land pastures, smoking in public places and, most importantly, the scrapping of the Rathong- Chu hydroelectric project in 1997 in west Sikkim, as the major reasons for his greenest rating.

In the year 2002, the Government of Sikkim invited 26 power project companies to begin their projects in the state (McDuie-Ra, 2011). Accusations have since been levelled by opposition parties that the projects were improperly allotted; several of these selected companies have no background in hydroelectric or even general energy production. The Government’s intention to dam the River Teesta and its tributaries is clearly betting the odds with its “clean and green” reputation, largely built on the back of cancelling a major hydroelectric project some years earlier. On one hand, the Government is seen as promoting and adopting a range of green policies; on the other hand, it is allowing the implementation of developmental projects that will create severe environmental and socio-cultural problems. Meanwhile, the state Government is backing its “clean and green” reputation in communications to its people about the dams. It exhorts the pollution-free nature of hydropower, 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 hydroelectric power.

Contentious dams in Dzongu

Sikkim has long been targeted for hydropower investment, but it was not until the 1980s that major dam projects were commissioned. There are currently 26 hydropower projects at various stages of implementation in Sikkim.⁶ The most contentious hydel project, Teesta Stage IV, is slated to be built in the Dzongu Lepcha Reserve at Hee-Gathang village. It consists of six projects (plus one other on the border of Dzongu at Dikchu, which is about to be completed). While there have been protests against other dam projects in Sikkim, the most notable has been the Rathongchu project in West Sikkim in the 1990s.

The Lepchas who are fighting against the construction of these hydropower projects in the Dzongu take heart from a battle fought two decades earlier in West Sikkim by a group called the Concerned Citizens of Sikkim. It was this fight over the sacred landscape at Yoksom in West Sikkim (which was also identified as being a biodiversity hotspot by the World Wide Fund for Nature [WWF] in 1992–1993) that brought the Lepchas and the Bhutias together as activists to fight the building of the Rathong Chu hydroelectric

project. The outcome of a defiled landscape was the chief argument used by the activists protesting against the implementation of the Rathong Chu hydroelectric project. They argued that the project impinged on their indigenous rights in land and violated Article 371f of the Indian Constitution. The battle was fought partly in the monasteries around Sikkim, with lamas conducting major pujas to stop the project, which included Lama Sonam P. Denzongpa, a founding member of the Concerned Citizens of Sikkim, undertaking a 28-day hunger strike.

This chapter focuses only on the Dzongu dams as they allow examination of the dimensions of development in state – ethnic minority relations and the collective agency of ethnic minorities participating in contentious politics. Proposals for dams on the Teesta River (which flows from the high Himalayas through Sikkim into West Bengal) go back to the 1970s, but it was not until the late 1990s that feasibility studies and impact assessments started to take place. As the Indian power sector opened up to private investments in the early 1990s, the Government of Sikkim began trying to attract investors to the state, resulting in a comprehensive hydropower policy in 1998. Environmental clearance for the Teesta dams was granted in 1999, and in 2002, 26 companies were chosen to sign agreements with the Government of Sikkim to begin the projects (Soumik, 2007). In the following years, the Government of Sikkim and the relevant commissioned companies⁷ began to hold community consultations and started negotiating memorandums of understanding (MoUs) with affected communities. It was during these consultations that the projects were questioned and opposed.

The anti-dam movement

The Lepchas' feeling for nature and the reluctance of many Lepchas to accept change brought about by multiple mega power projects to their sacred Dzongu manifested first into a protest movement in the year 2003, when Lepchas opposing the Dzongu projects started holding small meetings in the villages. They formalized these meetings in July 2004 when they formed Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) (Little, 2010). Their aim at that time was to fight the large Teesta River hydroelectric projects slated for Dzongu and to bring awareness to the Lepcha community of what they considered to be the harmful effects of the projects.

The Lepchas are protesting against the dams for various reasons: as nature worshippers, their land is sacred and should not be destroyed in the name of development; Dzongu is recognized as a reserve;⁸ and since only Lepchas who reside there are allowed to enter the reserve without a special permit from the government, it should not be the site for the hydro projects. They also argue that the projects, which will take many years to complete, will bring several thousand workers from outside Sikkim into Dzongu, thus outnumbering the Lepcha population. Since the migrant workers have different customs and beliefs, their dominant presence will soon dilute and destroy

the Lepcha culture. The protest is also on environmental grounds, with the Lepcha activists claiming that the delicate ecology of Dzongu, which is partially inside Mount Kanchenjunga National Park and part of the Himalayan biodiversity hotspot,⁹ is, like the rest of Sikkim, prone to landslides and earthquakes¹⁰ and will not survive the development.

In the first three years (2003, 2004, 2005), much of the Lepcha protest was confined to Dzongu villages. It was a time for establishing, communicating and finding like-minded people who shared a vision for Dzongu that did not include major infrastructure development. It was during this period that the Lepcha activists' protest narrative – which encompassed culture, environment and faith – evolved. The detailed events surrounding opposition to the Dzongu dams have been extensively reported and documented in the local and national print media, through several websites, on blogs and in several articles in newspapers and journals.¹¹ In the period between 2004 and early 2009, the Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) mobilized residents to block inspection teams, organized marches to Dzongu, held rallies in Gangtok, maintained a vocal presence at public hearings, built linkages with anti-dam movements in other parts of India¹² and entered into talks with the state and Union governments.

Hurting the aspirations of the local people

Since the merger of Sikkim with the Indian union, the Government of India has provided many safeguards for the people of Sikkim. The Article 371 (F)¹³ of the Indian Constitution is the most important protection given to the people of Sikkim, which reflects the spirit of 8 May 1973, agreement whereby the old laws and traditions of Sikkim are protected. Likewise the North District of Sikkim, which is situated in the remote and inaccessible region and inhabited by the aborigines of the state, is further safeguarded by various provisions, the most prominent being Notification No. 3069¹⁴ (1958), which prohibits the settlement of non-indigenous people in the region. Further the Dzongu Area, which is inhabited primarily by the Lepchas, is a proscribed/Reserved area to safeguard the tribe there and the areas beyond Toong to Lachen and Lachung fall under the restricted area.

However, in spite of all these measures, the non-indigenous population has gradually migrated to the Dzongu area either to work or to serve matters of national interest and has almost outnumbered the local inhabitants. The increase in the population has caused serious damage to the environment, demography, culture and religion, thus hurting the sentiments of the poor and docile populace and also endangering their survival in their natural habitat. For instance, CMIS Report¹⁵ suggests that the people of Lachen, Lachung and Chungthang region have already sacrificed 40 per cent of their good cultivable land in the hilly terrain for the Army and the Border Roads Organisation. In fact, some of them are almost landless. The Armed Forces and Border Roads Organisation not only brought in large numbers

of labourers but also changed the names of lakes, ridges, villages, so much so that most holy Guru Dongmar Lake was renamed as the Guru Nanak Jeel. Further, the holy stone (*Leydo*) complex at Chungthang was encroached, and the name of Chungthang was changed into Changithang. All the history connected with Sikkim's Patron Saint Guru Padmasambhava, has been changed and attributed to Guru Nanak, thus erasing the factual history of the place.¹⁶ Whenever new mega projects come into Sikkim, there is a general tendency to proactively influence the local cultural identity through practices such as changing the names of the villages, streams, rivers, mountains to non-local names. Such practices hurt the sentiments of the locals and have resulted in resentment and tension, sometimes leading to law and order problems (Wangchuk, 2007).

Further, the most recent case of Teesta Stage V, the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC) depriving the locals of job opportunities with displaced persons not yet rehabilitated has kept the grievances alive. People are still knocking on the doors of the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC) for their legitimate rights, which are unfortunately being still denied through no fault of theirs. There have also been severe health impacts at the project site of Dikchu in East Sikkim. In spite of the conditions laid down by the Union government that labourers should be given work permits only after a full health screening and treatment for diseases, this requirement has not been followed at the state level.¹⁷ Therefore, it has resulted in the spread of new diseases in the project area.

Due to these instances and many more which have been brought about due to the carelessness of the implementing agencies of the various projects along with the inability of the regulatory bodies at the central and state levels to safeguard the interests of the people, apprehension and fear psychosis have been created in the minds of the people with a permanent dislike for large projects. In spite of all the concerns, the government of Sikkim has given its consent to build and operate 13 large hydroprojects in the ecologically fragile and demographically endangered region of North Sikkim. This is in total disregard of the sentiments of the people of Dzongu.

The anti-dam movement gained a new dimension and a broader following, when Dawa Lepcha of the Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) and Tenzing Lepcha from the Concerned Lepchas of Sikkim (CLOS) went on a hunger strike in June 2007. The hunger strike was extended to Dzongu too, and the *Weeping Sikkim* web blog, set up to monitor the hunger strike, drew attention from the rest of India and the world. Over the ensuing months, the Government of Sikkim reacted by suspending the Dzongu dams, constituting a review committee and initiating talks with the ACT and other opposition groups. The Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) and the government entered talks on several occasions, but government promises failed to materialize. The ACT and their supporters went to New Delhi where, as Wanchuk reports, "[T]he rallies and meetings . . . wore a completely Lepcha flavour and the memorandums spoke only of Dzongu" (Wangchuk, 2007).

Further actions took place, including the forming of the Lepcha Holy Land Protection Joint Action Committee with the angle of the protests shifting away from environmental concerns and even concerns over migration to contesting the dams as threats to the Lepcha holy land, sacred not only to the Lepchas in Dzongu but to all Lepchas in the Himalayas. In March 2008, a Lepcha flag was inaugurated by the Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) and used in public rallies in Gangtok. In the month of June 2008, the Chief Minister Pawan Kumar Chamling announced that four of the six dams in Dzongu would be cancelled,¹⁸ leaving two larger,¹⁹ more controversial projects, saying the “majority of the people want it” (Doma, 2008).

Conclusion

Opposition to the Dzongu dams became a catalyst for a nascent Lepcha identity movement. This gained momentum as Lepchas have rarely had a prominent political voice in Sikkim. During the past few years, the group of inexperienced, possibly idealistic Lepcha youth have become experienced campaigners. The battle for Dzongu has, for some young Lepchas, changed their perceptions of their homeland: it has brought the gift of clarity and confidence that they can improve the lives of Dzongu Lepchas. They view their motherland through a different lens, in many ways a more sophisticated lens. Their appreciation of village life – even for those who left the village many years earlier – is illuminated by the threat of losing it. They make plans for a Dzongu that will bring job opportunities for Lepcha youth in ecotourism and organic farming. They talk about providing schools in Dzongu that will provide a better education, currently available at government schools. Many of the Lepcha youth who work with Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) have received an environmental and cultural education during the protest. They know more about their history, their culture, their language. They talk about global issues like capitalism, globalization and climate change. Their move from the villages of Dzongu to the cities of Gangtok and New Delhi has served their protest well. It has given them a voice in the places where decisions are made. It has also toughened them. They do not fit the somewhat clichéd image of timid Lepchas – the “forest-dwelling fairy worshippers” as described by the British colonialists. They are warriors now – battle-worn, battle-hardened – and want to trust the motivations of a government which has asked them to talk.

The quiet villages of Dzongu, “Ney Mayel Lyang”, are now rich with modern stories – of courage and cowardice, politics and intrigue, naiveté and stubbornness, of families split apart because of differing views on the future of their Dzongu. This “land of hidden paradise” has been forever changed. If the dams are built, the landscape will be scarred with the concrete bones of large infrastructure, and the Teesta River’s journey will be hampered by a most unnatural force. If not, it is expected that the landowners will keep their compensation so that their loss will not be financial. But whether or

not the dams are built, relationships between some families, friends and neighbours have been destroyed by the battle, and people will need to find a common space that they can inhabit without alternative. If they can't, then there are no winners in the battle for Dzongu.

Not only did the opposition movement contest the authority of the state and resist the state's version of development, but the collective agency itself was the catalyst for a more strongly articulated Lepcha identity, articulating both its fragility and its emergent political strength. The collective agency of the Lepcha groups opposing the Dzongu dams captured the imagination of scholars, activists, and the regional media. The case of Dzongu also indicates that engagement itself can be an important end of collective agency for ethnic minorities who have rarely been afforded attention by the state. This may sound obvious, yet adversarial relationships between ethnic minorities and the state and oppositional positions to development are the default characteristics most attractive to analysis of ethnic minority agency. The case of Dzongu has also demonstrated that there is an urgent need to reconsider the people-place connections over voice, legitimacy and authenticity, and one needs to be cautious in reckoning the links over development needs, identity, indigeneity and the divisive impact of the "vanishing tribe" discourse.

Notes

- * The author has, where required, used pseudonyms for respondents instead of actual names.
- 1 In 1975, Sikkim became the 22nd state of the Indian Union with the 36th Constitutional Amendment Act.
- 2 Clifford Geertz (1973) used the concept of thick description in his selected essays on "Towards an Interpretive Theory of Culture", in which thick description explains not just the human behaviour, but its context as well, such that the behaviour becomes meaningful to an outsider.
- 3 Chogyal were the monarchs of the former kingdoms of Sikkim, which were ruled by separate branches of the Namgyal family.
- 4 Sikkim Legislative Assembly constituencies are divided into General, Bhutia-Lepcha (BL), Scheduled Caste (SC) and Sangha seats. Twelve seats are reserved for Bhutia-Lepcha (BL), two are Scheduled Caste (SC), one is for the Sangha constituency of the assembly, in which Sangha means monastic community, which is reserved for the monks and nuns of Sikkim's many monasteries. And the remaining seats are for general candidates.
- 5 The 50,000 MW Hydroelectric Initiative was launched by the Prime Minister of India in May, 2003. Some 162 hydroelectric schemes have been identified with an aggregate installed capacity of 50,560 megawatts. They are located in sixteen Indian states. Accessed from (www.powermin.nic.in) on 21 December 2014.
- 6 www.sikkimpower.org/power/hydel.aspx (accessed 17 January 2015).
- 7 Some of the important commissioned companies in Sikkim are Teesta Urja Limited, Lanco Energy Pvt. Ltd., NHPC Ltd (A Govt. of India Enterprise), Himagiri Hydro Energy Pvt. Ltd., Madhya Bharat Power Corporation Ltd., GATI Infrastructure Limited.
- 8 Dzongu was declared a Lepcha reserve in 1957 by the last Chogyal of Sikkim in recognition that it is the Lepcha's sacred land and should be preserved for Lepchas.

- 9 A biodiversity hotspot is a biogeographic region with a significant reservoir of biodiversity that is under threat from humans.
- 10 A recent earthquake of 18 September 2011 with a 6.9 magnitude has further created apprehension among the people of Sikkim and has raised questions on the future of India's hydropower development.
- 11 The newspapers like Sikkim Express, Sikkim NOW, Sikkim Mail, and blogs <http://weepingsikkim.blogspot.in/>, www.actsikkim.com/ were instrumental in the initial stages of protest movement of Affected Citizens of Teesta.
- 12 ACT built linkages with the anti-dam activists as well as with the leaders of the Narmada Bachao Andolan, South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers & People, Chipko movement.
- 13 Article 371F of the Indian Constitution allows for special provisions with respect to the State of Sikkim including privileges which are assured to the Lepcha-Bhutia groups 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.
- 14 The Proclamation of His Highness Sir Tashi Namgyal dated 30 August 1956, and the Notification No. 3069 of Home Department, Government of Sikkim (4 March 1958) protect the rights of the Lepchas and Bhutias over their lands by not allowing the sale of lands to non-Lepcha/Bhutia Sikkimese citizens.
- 15 Ethnographic Study: Impact of Teesta (Stage V) H.E. Project, Sikkim, on the tribal communities with special reference to Lepchas and Bhutias. Centre for Environment, Water and Power Consultancy Services (India) Ltd., New Delhi, July 1999.
- 16 www.weepingsikkim.blogspot.com (accessed 10 January 2014).
- 17 www.actsikkim.com/concerns.html (accessed 24 February 2014).
- 18 These were the Rangyong (141 megawatts), Lingza (120 megawatts), Ringpi (90 megawatts) and Rukel (33 megawatts) hydropower projects. The reason given by the Government was that they were taking into consideration the sentiment of the local people and the need to conserve the environment. In reality, the Government was under enormous pressure to cancel these projects as they were inside the biodiversity hotspot of Kanchenjunga National Park.
- 19 The two larger projects in Dzongu are 300-megawatt Panan project and the 510-megawatt Teesta IV project.

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