
India: Lepchas arrested for opposing mega hydro project T

The old Lepcha tribe were isolated forest dwellers living harmoniously with nature over centuries. They were hunters and gatherers leading nomadic lives until mid-nineteenth century when they began practicing settled agriculture. They are known for their rich cultural heritage and for being sacred and restricted, especially to outsiders.

The Lepchas inhabit the Dzongu valley in the tiny Himalayan state of Sikkim, close to the Chinese border. The area, with dense forest cover, has been officially demarcated as a reserve for the community. It borders the Khangchendzonga Biosphere Reserve and is located about 70 km north to the State Capital, Gangtok, bounded to the south-east by the Teesta river which the Lepchas consider their holy river. The Teesta traverses a 414 km distance cutting across Sikkim, parts of Darjeeling hills and the plains of Jalpaiguri before submerging into the Brahmaputra in Bangladesh. With its dense forest cover and rich biodiversity, the Teesta river basin hosts one of the 25 biodiversity hotspots in the world and any obstacle in the natural flow of the turbulent river would eventually bring about disaster to the local communities.

In 2003, an initiative was launched to construct 162 massive hydroelectric schemes across 16 Indian states, nearly always located in the impoverished and tribal areas of the north. Seven projects are proposed within the Dzongu Reserve, in the river Teesta and its tributaries, such as the Rangyang river where the 280mw Panan Hydropower Project is being projected. The project has so far got environmental clearance but is yet to get forest clearance and clearance from the Central Electricity Authority (CEA). It is developed by Himagiri Hydro Energy Ltd promoted by the Nagarjuna Fertilisers.

The setting up of mega projects is being opposed by the Lepchas who consider them a threat not only to the environment but also to their traditions and culture. They fear that the river's disappearance into a series of tunnels will be accompanied by their own marginalisation. Two hydropower projects already built, coupled with other factors, have started taking their toll: landslips and landslides in the region have increased.

Lepchas have come together to create the Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) and launch a campaign in the classic form of *asatyagraha* (non-violence movement) that includes marches, fasts and suchlike. ACT has been spearheading the protests in Sikkim against mega hydro projects, especially in the Protected Lepcha Reserve of Dzongu. They have managed to stall four out of the six hydro projects located inside Dzongu and now they are in for the Panan Hydropower Project.

Recently, on last February 7, Sikkim police arrested 43 protestors including 7 women and two juveniles of the ACT based on a complaint filed by the general manager of the Himagiri Hydro Energy Private Limited, developers of the Panan Hydropower project. The arrested activists included Dawa Lepcha, General Secretary, Tenzing Lepcha and Gyatso Lepcha, the President of the Concerned Lepchas of Sikkim (CLOS) and the Vice President of the Sangha of Dzongu. Two juvenile protestors were, however, released. The rest was taken in to police custody where they were kept in prison on charges of arson and trespass at the project dam site.

This is the first time in the history of Dzongu that police went inside the Lepcha Reserve and arrested so many people.

ACT had been demanding unconditional release of the arrested members on grounds of arbitrary arrests. They finally applied for a bail petition and on March 9, the ACT activists were granted bail.

"Dzongu is all that is left to us, how can we let them destroy it?"

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