

Envisioning the Save the River Teesta Movement and its Eco-Warriors (2007-10)

VIBHA ARORA

Abstract

Images, symbols, representations and narratives of protest have played a critical role in framing a picture and articulating an ideology of non-violent indigenous environmentalism along with organisation, strategic positioning and event management by a core group of activists and Lepcha leaders in Save the River Teesta movement in Northeast India during 2007-09. I highlight the intimate relation of Lepcha cosmology with their lived landscape and mention how they have invented sacred mountains as part of their identity politics. Some of these activists are even willing to sacrifice their life for safeguarding the fragile Himalayan ecology and are opposing greedy capitalism using Gandhian methods of non-violent protest and non-cooperation. The environmental wisdom and the ecologically rich messages of the Lepchas are encapsulated in texts, maps and other graphical content circulated in mass media, and profoundly in pictures and images of banners uploaded on weepingsikkim.blogspot.com.

This paper particularly focuses on those images and symbols that have galvanised support for the activists within Sikkim and India and idiomatically circulated a representation of them as young Gandhian eco-warriors.

The blog entry of November 2, 2010 on weepingsikkim.blogspot.com circulates several pictures of Dawa Lepcha representing the Affected Citizens of Teesta (henceforth ACT) and South Asia at the Third International Rivers Meet of dam affected communities that was organised by the International Rivers Network at Temacapulin in Mexico during October 1-7, 2010 [Picture 1]. On November 10, 2010, the blog uploads a picture of about 30 youth activists, including a lama, holding a banner written in the Spanish language. This picture is captioned, 'ACT members in solidarity with Temacapulin.'¹ These recent blog entries testify the distance traversed and encapsulate the journey negotiated by indigenous activists of 'Save the River Teesta movement' in Northeast India during June 2007 to September 2009.² The content and circulation of these two recent images indicate the powerful recognition of their non-violent resistance at the global level, affirms the support that they enjoy from the International Rivers Network, manifests their success in networking at regional and global level, and expresses their willingness to learn from the experience of other

dam-affected and indigenous communities. The blog enables this seamlessly. Other pictures on this blog visually communicate the sharing and learning transpiring between the local, regional and international spheres.³

I use the term 'Save the River Teesta movement' to refer to the formally organised opposition offered by the ethnic and civil society organisations to the 26 power projects proposed, planned and constructed on waters of Teesta river by the government in partnership with private capital to generate about 3635 mega watts [Picture 1A].⁴ Indigenous activists are opposing the hydropower projects located in Dzongu and Sikkim, and in North Bengal, as these will undermine the fragile ecology and legitimise the settlement of outsiders. Dzongu is a historic reserve located in the restricted access area of North Sikkim exclusively inhabited by the indigenous Lepchas and many Lepchas consider it to be the cradle of their culture. It is one of the principal contested sites and partially falling within the boundaries of the Kanchenjunga Biosphere reserve. Activists have

Former Fellow, IAS Shimla; Associate Professor, Sociology and Social Anthropology, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Delhi.

organised peaceful resistance and with minimal financial resources staged multi-sited protests in North Sikkim, Gangtok, Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Calcutta and Delhi. In Foucauldian terms, the activists' exhortation 'do not make us refugees in our homeland' challenges the governmentalisation of the state (Foucault 2000).

The ebb and flow of 'Save the River Teesta' movement displays the physical fractures not merely in the landscape but vertical and horizontal fissions in the diverse communities residing here, the multiple readings and meanings of nature circulating among and within these communities, the states, private companies and other actors. The rise of this particular movement has generated intense debate on the plural meaning(s) and path of development within Sikkim. The youthful leadership has retained a high moral ground and subscribed to Gandhian-Buddhist-indigenous imagery and organised a relay hunger strike to pressurise the government. Some of the youth leaders even declared a willingness to die for their espoused cause. Dawa Lepcha referred above hails from Dzongu and over the course of this movement has in partnership with Tenzing Gyatso Lepcha, Tshering Ongdup Lepcha and Ongchuk Lepcha undertaken two indefinite fasts in 2007-08 to generate awareness, express opposition and force the government to shelve these hydropower projects.⁵ The first indefinite hunger strike of Dawa and Tenzing continued for 63 days and the second one lasted for 96 days wherein both refused to take any food from their mouths.⁶ Life on their homeland is a preferred self-image, although many of the SRT leaders belong to the middle-class and neither are farmer's nor claim to be subsisting on forests and the fruits of their agricultural lands.⁷ Nonetheless these activists have firmly established themselves as indigenous eco-warriors who are fighting for their cultural homeland.

Many environmental activists campaigning and engaged in advocacy enlighten me that environmental movements organised for closure of dams have rarely succeeded in pressurising the government. Sikkim is an exception in that the state government had to shelve the Rathongchu project planned in West Sikkim in 1997 following the widespread protests of the indigenous Lepchas-Bhutias and Buddhist monasteries (Arora 2006a); however, this project was revived in 2010.⁸ More recently, on June 16, 2008, the government withdrew the letter of intent given to four hydropower projects planned in Dzongu⁹ and they cited local sentiments and need to conserve the environment as the motivations behind their decision (Arora 2009b: 108). The relay hunger strike of the activists was formally withdrawn on 27th September 2009 after lasting for a historic period of 915 days¹⁰ upon

receiving an official letter from the Chief Secretary inviting them for peaceful talks and meaningful negotiations.¹¹ The activists firmly declared that they want the government to abandon the Panang and Teesta Stage IV in Dzongu, since both are located in the heart of Dzongu and encroach into the Kanchenjunga biosphere reserve.

This paper focuses not on the Save the River Teesta movement *per se* but analyses the images and symbols that have galvanised support for these activists within Sikkim, India and the world, and epitomised them as young eco-warriors who are fighting to protect their motherland (nurturing sacred environment) from the destructive tentacles of greedy capitalism using Gandhian methods of non-violent protest.¹² The environmental wisdom and the ecologically rich messages of the Lepchas are encapsulated in texts, maps and other graphical content circulated in mass media and profoundly in pictures and images of banners uploaded on weepingsikkim.blogspot.com [Picture 2]. Cyberspace has allowed a plurality of voices to publicly express, articulate and debate nearly everything endlessly without constraints of space, time, social and national borders (Jordan 1999). The Internet is crystallising into a powerful medium for non-elites, marginalised, resource-poor groups to communicate, influence public opinion, network and support all forms and levels of political activism. weepingsikkim.blogspot.com functions as a virtual diary chronicling oppositional arguments and protest events, while enabling internet working with other social movements. It is multi-authored and the marriage of text and pictures on this blog invites virtual participation and creates a memory. What is striking is the ease with which the webmaster has followed the movement in different locations and posted reports here. It is not clear if these are official postings since the blogger officially claims independence from the activists and their organisation. Blog postings by the webmaster and other readers are supported and informed by media coverage on the Save the River Teesta movement and of other pertinent issues, such as global warming, climate change discussions, international lobbying against dams and hydropower projects and indigenous peoples rights and so on. Web activism can become a 'springboard for shaping perceptions' (Dartnell 2006: 17) and this is what the blog has achieved for the SRT movement.

The paper begins by describing the indigenous people (largely Lepchas) participating in the Save the River Teesta movement (henceforth SRT). I highlight the intimate relation of their cosmology with the landscape and mention how they have invented sacred mountains as part of their identity politics. River Teesta and Dzongu

are significant sacred landscapes and not merely elements of geography for them. The second section discusses the dominant representations of the movement and images that attest their indigenous environmentalism. I demonstrate the creative deployment of tribal symbols and the strategic use of the Gandhian *satyagraha* by them. *Gandhigiri* (Gandhian methods and values) has legitimised the movement in the eyes of the Indian public and elicited admiration and support for them regionally, nationally, and globally.

Worshippers of Mountains Become the Guardians of the 'Sacred' Landscape

Who are the Lepchas? The Tibeto-Burman Lepcha term themselves *Rong* (a Lepcha word meaning ravine-folk or the dwellers of the valley) and they define themselves by their association with the sacred mountain Kanchenjunga that is regarded as the source of their knowledge, culture, religion, wealth and resources and the place of their origin. *Rong-pa* identity is intimately connected with the mountains and hills, undulating valleys and the running streams and waters of River Teesta in Northeast India and their roots are affirmed in periodic rituals. They are indigenous in their self-perception (K.P. Tamsang 1983; Foning 1987; Gowloog 1995) and the government of Sikkim and India has formally acknowledged this. In 1972, they were accorded the Scheduled Tribe status and in 2005 were accorded the 'Most Primitive Tribe' status by the Government of Sikkim.

Presently, the Lepcha tribe lives in Sikkim, Kalimpong and the Darjeeling Hills of North Bengal in India. They also reside in some parts of west Bhutan and in the Illam district of Nepal. Within Sikkim, they constitute less than 8 per cent of the total population of 581,500 (Census 2006: 61, 64). The community is not regionally concentrated but quite scattered in its multi-ethnic villages, except Dzongu (where the number is about 7,000 persons) and in some parts of North Sikkim.¹³ By religious affiliation, they are sub-divided into followers of Buddhism, Shamanism and Christianity.¹⁴ They are primarily agriculturists and only a minority are engaged in government employment. In the contemporary period, they are not a homogenous community, but an internally differentiated group sub-divided by class, religion, location and political affiliation. Concurrently they are engaged in vertical conflict or competition (cf. Li 2008: 192) with other ethnic and religious communities in accessing resources reserved for the Scheduled Tribes and the people of Sikkim and the Northeast (Arora 2007). Hence, there is a strong evidence of vertical and horizon

conflict and these have significantly shaped the intensity and scale of their collective action.

The leadership core of the SRT comprises Lepchas hailing from Dzongu and other parts in North Sikkim and Lepcha leaders of Kalimpong and Darjeeling in West Bengal. Many of these youth leaders are the first generation among Lepchas who have benefited from studying in modern schools of Sikkim and Darjeeling and later attended colleges in Gangtok, Calcutta and Delhi [Picture 3]. The membership core is overwhelmingly drawn from the Lepcha group and their various associations although the indigenous Bhutias residing in Lachen and Lachung in North Sikkim and many members of the Buddhist monastic order are participating as well [Picture 4]. Other environmentally conscious people and local organisations, such as Sikkim Association for Safe Environment (SAFE), have also supported these agitations.

The youth leaders and activists are guided by indigenous ideologues such as Athup Lepcha, Namgyal Lepcha, Lyangsong Tamsang, P.T. Lepcha, based at Dzongu, Gangtok, Kalimpong and Darjeeling, who have actively fought for the indigenous rights of the Lepchas and consistently politicised their consciousness. These foresighted Lepcha ideologues had recognised the wisdom of affirming their identity as nature-worshippers and revived this in rituals. They have constantly highlighted how their indigenous knowledge is a repository of ecological wisdom on this part of the eastern Himalayas (see K.P. Tamsang 1983; L. Tamsang 1997, 1999). It is not surprising that increasingly the Lepchas define themselves as *Mutanchi rungkup* (which in Lepcha language means beloved children of Mother Nature).

River Teesta is a very important resource of drinking water, means of transportation, and tourism-revenue for the community. It originates from the snowy glaciers of the sacred mountain Kanchenjunga on the Indo-Nepal border. It is also a cultural resource and some of the tributaries of this river such as Talung on which the Panang project is situated in Dzongu are considered holy by them. The Teesta is constantly referred in Lepcha mythology and particularly associated with the famous myth of deluge wherein an angry Teesta submerged the entire region saving the peak of Mount Tendong¹⁵ (8675 feet) that gave refuge to humans and other beings. The central trope of indigenous environmentalism that defines Lepcha self-consciousness and identity today and currently guiding the SRT movement was circulated extensively during the 1990s. Arora (2004: 272-88) has argued in detail how this trope permitted the ideologues to subvert hegemonic practices that dehumanised and considered them to be socio-culturally inferior as a forest-

dwelling community. The paramount expression of this was evident in the invention of a new sacred mountain Tendong and institution of an annual ritual to worship it on August 8 in 1991. The leadership surmised the need to establish their distinctive cultural identity as Lepchas, since they worship Mount Kanchenjunga jointly with the Bhutias and other Buddhists of Sikkim (Arora 2004: 272) and the government of Sikkim recognised this as a Lepcha cultural festival.

The most important component of the worship of Mt. Tendong are prayers made for the well-being of all sentient beings and for peace and harmony with nature. Lyangsong Tamsang's writings clearly highlight this depiction:

The Lepchas are nature lovers and worship nature. They congregate and offer their prayers to God in the open, under the sky. The Lepchas are probably the only race in this part of the world that have a vision and thought to pray for the well-being of the animal, insect and vegetation world also. In the holy scriptures of the Lepchas the usefulness, value, weight, worthiness of the animal, insect and vegetation world for the human beings have repeatedly been mentioned, described and the need to protect them from being indiscriminately destroyed... the offerings of Mt. Tendong has a universal appeal and truth in it (1997: 23).

Undeniably the depiction of Lepchas as environmentalists and nature-worshippers is neither an invented one nor recent. There is substantive documentation of this in historical literature and in the photographic archives of colonial officers.¹⁶ In the *Gazetteer of Sikkim*, H.H. Risley describes the Lepchas as, 'above all woodsmen of the woods, knowing the ways of birds and beasts and possessing an extensive zoological and botanical nomenclature of their own' (1894: 1). The representation of Lepchas as a forest-dwelling community having a deep botanical and medical knowledge of the ecology and enjoying a symbiotic relationship with the landscape is richly documented in the eminent botanist Joseph Hooker's *Himalayan Journals* (1891). Contemporary anthropological writing and circulating discourses affirms their cultural roots in the forest by evoking their intimate connection with the (sacred) landscape as sites embodying their environmental knowledge and healing traditions (Arora 2006b: 71-72); reinvents them as guardians of the sacred landscape. What is recent is the wider recognition of the value of their indigenous knowledge, the politicisation of their indigeneity and the conscious incorporation of environmentalism as part of their self-consciousness.

'Cultural politics suggests how natural resources have a value within a larger economy of signification which crucially shapes their modes of appropriation' (Baviskar

2008: 6). River Teesta constitutes the lifeline of the region and its perennial course through the Himalayan landscape defines the topography and determines the livelihood of people residing here. At the very outset, the activists had declared that the state-proposed power projects posed a grave threat to their fragile Himalayan environment and would lead to the destruction of their forests and rivers [Picture 5] and, hence, the citizens had to show concern and oppose the projects. A prominent banner displayed at the site of the *satyagraha* proclaims the idea that the (government and project developers) damming of river waters would dam their environment, dam their culture and their future, and eventually dam(n) them [Picture 6]. The meaning and functioning of representative democracy and governmentality is being challenged here.

I know from my own fieldwork in the region that the government of Sikkim did not adequately inform and consult the Lepchas and other people while designing the project or deciding among the tenders received from private companies. Governmental rationality was explicitly *anti-political* (Li 2008: 195). It subverted public debate and has ended in politicising the projects and undermining its progressive human development project. In 2008 Tseten Lepcha, who has played a key organisational role and borne the responsibility of advocacy and networking with other movements and NGOs, sarcastically remarked to me:

the only law the government of Sikkim is now upholding is the draconian colonial Land Acquisition Act that allows them to forcibly acquire lands. What about other laws enshrined in the Indian Constitution? We do not want our movement to take a violent turn as is happening in neighbouring Darjeeling, but we want justice for our community.

The oppositional discourse of ACT began with a demand to scrap all 26 projects but was later reworked into a demand for the closure of all hydropower projects located in Dzongu and in North Sikkim. Exclusively inhabited by about 7,000 Lepchas, Dzongu is a reserve area comprising forests, cardamom plantations and agricultural farms interspersed with some homesteads and village settlements. Any large scale development activities are not permissible in this reserve as these would alter the character of this area. Even entry of outsiders in this reserve area is by special permission and even other Lepchas and residents of Sikkim require government clearance to travel and stay in this reserve area.

As a locality, Dzongu constitutes the locus of their cultural roots, materially signifies their indigeneity and expresses their belonging in the landscape. It is sacred

and holy in this wider sense. Located on the path leading to their *mayel-lyang* (paradise), Dzongu contains a number of important sacred sites such as caves where Guru Rinpoche meditated, the Keshong Lake, the Kongsa hot springs, 12 monasteries and importantly the Tholung temple that is revered not merely by the Lepchas, but by all Buddhists of Sikkim. The alienation and desecration of these places and other sacred sites used in worshipping local gods is unacceptable to the indigenous Lepchas. Anthropological literature acknowledges Dzongu to be a Lepcha reserve with sacred sites but it has never been regarded a religious landscape and centre of pilgrimage until now. Its cultural importance is adequately documented in myths and anthropological literature (Gorer 1938, Siiger 1967, Siiger and Rischel 1967, Kotturan 1976, Arora 2004, 2006b, 2007b, 2008), but activists lack explicit religious writings supporting their claim of Dzongu being a *holy land* or even a Lepcha utopia.

The SRT activists have instrumentally interwoven oral history, mythology and ritual practice to disseminate the idea of Dzongu as a significant landscape for preserving indigenous culture and sacred sites for Buddhists. The cry to protect its landscape and the cultural integrity of Lepchas which is threatened by projects and the possible settlement of migrants in Dzongu has united the entire community and transformed them into eco-warriors [Picture 7 and 8]. During an interview in December 2007 at Delhi, a very perturbed Tamsangmoo Lepcha belonging to the Kalimpong Lepcha association remarked, 'our souls travel to and rest in Dzongu. We will not tolerate any dislocation and threats to *our* holy place. The youth have a responsibility to safeguard their identity and cultural heritage. All will be lost if we lose Dzongu and allow hydropower projects to be constructed therein.'

In February 2008 Lyangsong Tamsang, the President of the Indigenous Tribal Association and Kalimpong based Lepcha ideologue, wrote to the Chief Minister seeking permission for about 1,000 Lepchas, including shamans to enter and perform rituals in Dzongu and stay there for 10 days in accordance with their constitutional rights to practice and profess their religious associations and culture.¹⁷ Dzongu was not historically a pilgrimage centre, but recently acquired this status with a long march that began from the Triveni bank in neighbouring state of West Bengal on April 14, 2008 with shaman's offering prayers. Approximately, 500 pilgrims¹⁸ dressed in traditional Lepcha attire carrying banners walked in rain and braved nature to journey into Sikkim where they were welcomed with traditional songs by the Lepchas of Sikkim. The Sikkim government allowed the pilgrims to cross the border and enter Sikkim but later forbade them

from travelling to Dzongu and imposed Section 144 at Gangtok that restricted assembly of more than five persons and outlawed organisations of any demonstrations. This pilgrimage got thoroughly enmeshed with the hydropower protests.¹⁹ The pilgrims tried to circumvent Gangtok but there were some clashes with pro-dam Lepcha and other supporters and the pilgrimage had to be finally abandoned. The leader of Save the Narmada movement (*Narmada Bachao Andolan* in the Hindi language), noted environmentalist Medha Patkar, also visited Gangtok for about 12 hours during this critical period in April 2008 [Picture 9]. She had planned to join these pilgrims, nonetheless could merely visit the *satyagrahi* duo Dawa and Tenzing in the hospital and others sitting at Bhutia-Lepcha house. She denounced the government at a media conference in Gangtok and extended her wholehearted support to these activists.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork, I confirm that not all the Lepchas of Dzongu are opposing the hydropower projects or strongly subscribe to any overt preservationist ethic. Livelihood needs and concerns hold their paramount attention. Many of the families living in Dzongu, who have suffered economic losses due to failure of cardamom plantations, are attracted by the promise of employment opportunities, development of infrastructure, education and health facilities. Hence, there is a pro-project lobby among the Lepchas and even in Dzongu. Some of the affected families who have received some cash compensation for land acquired by the project developers have not explicitly opposed these projects. The contested development issue here has never revolved around massive displacement and lack of rehabilitation, as in the case of many anti-dam movements in India. Here cultural heritage and indigenous society is at risk. The political representatives of this region belonging to the ruling SDF party, the member of the legislative assembly and local government are pro-project and have been actively facilitating the construction activities. The government has repeatedly denounced the activists for their anti-development stance and continually asserted that they are committed to preserving the sanctity of Dzongu.

It is difficult to quantify how many are supportive and how many households are opposing these project, partly because allegiances and perceptions are shifting over time and partially because residents were scared that their expression of dissent could result in their being deprived of resources available from government schemes, loans and credits. There was a general reluctance to express an opinion on this issue during my short-term fieldwork in 2006-07 and discussions in Gangtok in 2008. I have met many government officials who have quietly supported

these activists in various ways and encouraged them to fight for the good of all.

The fissions in the community and the April 2008 clashes between pro-project Lepcha supporters and anti-dam Lepcha activists and pilgrims overtly express what Tania Li defined to be horizontal conflict which is often a reaction to and response to government interventions in a community (Li 2008: 193-94). Vested and perceived interests fission communities which are not homogeneous to begin with. Community cohesion is threatened when cultural values are undermined by scientific rational development. Hence, the activists have made considerable effort to awaken members of their own community and others in order to convince them to raise pertinent questions about their future in public meetings and themselves assess the benefits of these hydropower projects. The acquisition of land from 2007 and the much-visible destructive impact of these projects on the landscape in Mangan, Chungthang and in other parts of Sikkim have shattered their blind trust in the government. Consequently, many more Lepchas became vocal and joined the social movement in 2008. The ethnic organisations of the Lepchas residing in North Bengal have also actively supported the activists in every manner and staged hunger strikes at Kalimpong.

The activists have admitted to me that don't have the financial resources to undertake a violent path nor are they interested in terrorising people and adopting methods of agitation that will cause discomfort to other people of Sikkim, antagonise their supporters and completely alienate the government. On the contrary, they have continually beseeched the government to pay heed to their reasoning and follow constitutional provisions of Article 371F to safeguard the rights of the indigenous people. Their 'protest' is not of sharp commanding timbre, but a classic supplicating undertone of a prayer. Their tactical politics follow a persuasive policy aiming at transforming people's attitude towards the environment and instil respect for all life.

The lone oppositional voice of the monasteries' representative, supporting the SRT in the State Legislative Assembly, has not been effective in countering or questioning the government. The government has never been forced to use repressive measures against the movement and on rare occasions needed to arrest any activist.²⁰ On their part, this movement has maintained a non-political stance even during the elections of 2009. Although the ruling government thrusting these hydropower projects was challenged, ultimately it was not voted out of power. The movement momentum could not be sustained due to paucity of resources and very few activities were organised in 2009; this was

communicated telephonically during an interview and there is not much reporting on the blog. I was informed in January 2011 that internal differences have fragmented the core leadership and some of the leaders have been besieged by personal problems.²¹ On the other hand, Athup Lepcha, an eminent Lepcha ideologue and also a lawyer by training, had filed cases in 2010 in the Sikkim High Court. The battles over River Teesta have reverted to the courts and, presently, talks are *sub-judice*.

Dominant Representation of Contested Sites and Images of Hydropower Activism

The activists have persistently depicted themselves as custodians of indigenous culture and environmentalists. Religious imagery was constantly embedded in this depiction and visible during their multi-sited passive resistance. Sikkim has been known as the land of Buddha who was one of the greatest apostles of *ahimsa* (peace and non-violence) and his followers are actively guarding a *sbas-yul* (sacred valley). From the outset, the *sangha* of Dzongu has been an active participant in the movement and been concerned about the future of several sacred sites in Dzongu and their possible desecration by hydropower projects [Picture 10]. Truly, the site of the indefinite relay hunger strike, the front porch of the Bhutia-Lepcha (B-L) house at Tibet Road of Gangtok over time acquired the moorings of a 24x7 shrine where activists sat and slept during the indefinite relay hunger strike, discussed and deliberated on cultural heritage, development and democracy and narrated the story of their struggle against hydropower projects as one to save their motherland and Dzongu, a struggle to protect the fragile Himalayan environment and River Teesta and ensure that their sacred landscape is not desecrated [Picture 7, 8, 11, 12, 13].

The ground floor of the B-L house functioned as a site-office of the Save the River Teesta movement for more than two years and developed into a gallery that visually represented their cultural and environmental struggle in material collages, collection of various objects, posters, banners and photographs. Silk scarves embossed with Buddhist symbols and mantras offered by supporters to the *satyagrahi*, who sat in the front porch on the ground floor under a plastic roof exposed to the harsh environment, added to this transformation (Pictures 4, 7). For the entire duration of the oppositional movement, lamas chanted prayers and read Buddhist scriptures on an altar on the first floor of B-L house. Here they prayed for peace in Sikkim and on this earth, protection from natural disasters, and health and well-being of all living beings and especially the activists participating in the

satyagraha. This was explicitly depicted in visual images circulated on the blog and confirmed by my own fieldwork during 2007-08. Strategically, Lepcha shamans also came periodically here to offer prayers and appease the place-gods who were angered at the desecration of sacred places in Dzongu and pray for the activists' health and success in thwarting the projects.²²

Truth and non-violence go hand in hand in the movement practice of the Teesta activists. Gandhiji converted an individualistic ethic of seeking the truth and *ahimsa* into a non-violent political weapon of assertion (Khoshoo 252). For Mahatma Gandhi, perfect non-violence was the highest form of bravery. He explained, 'non-violent conduct is never demoralizing, cowardice is...non-violent requires a double-faith, a faith in God and faith in man (cf. Khoshoo 251). In a press release, ACT leaders stated that their hunger strike symbolically recalled the sacrifices made by the freedom fighters, particularly Mahatma Gandhi to achieve democracy and *swaraj* or self rule for ordinary Indians. As *satyagraha* is a non-violent and passive way of registering their protests, the activists would not respond to any personal attacks made through political speeches and pamphlets (cf. blog entry for August 17, 2007). The activists have consistently used the Right to Information act to seek truth and information about these projects. They hope that the poorest and least vocal sections of society should speak up for their rights without fear and not feel alienated or colonised.

Gandhiji struggled for democracy and home-rule against an imperial government. He effectively used hunger strikes as a political tool to morally exert pressure on the British government during India's struggle for independence. He fought for freedom from a domineering greedy imperial government that was unconcerned about the suffering of masses living in villages and trampled their rights to a dignified good life (Gandhi 1909). Ironically, these Teesta activists are opposing a government that is elected by them and has the official mandate to plan for their human development.

Mahatma Gandhi's views on participatory village eco-development have inspired several environmental movements in India and he has gradually become the patron saint of environmental movements in India, such as the Chipko movement, to protect forests and Save the Narmada movement against big dams (Guha 1998). This explains why at the outset, Mahatma Gandhi's *khada* garlanded picture was placed in the front porch of B-L house where the *satyagrahi* sat on their hunger strike in full public view from June 20 to September 27, 2009 [Picture 4, 14, 15]. This portrait was placed below the presiding poster of Buddhist deities, including Guru

Rinpoche (a reincarnate of Lord Buddha) who is believed to have blessed Sikkim and transformed it into a sacred landscape [Picture 16]. On October 2, 2007, activists carrying banners and shouting slogans were prevented from garlanding the statue of Mahatma Gandhi and 38 of them were arrested and detained for 24 hours. Activist exclaimed, 'what and where is democracy if we are not allowed to hold a peace rally on Mahatma Gandhi's birthday' (refer to blog entry of 4/10/2007). On June 20, 2008 someone wrote on the blog, 'no doubt this form of Gandhian protest has been tried through the pages of history here, but this time it seemed like a conviction like never before.'

Photographs are visual incisions through time and space and little narratives that are constituted by and are constitutive of larger narratives (Edwards 2001: 3). As objects, photographs acquire and loose value and meaning in contexts is well established by Appadurai (1986). Mahatma Gandhi's image has been extensively disseminated (deliberately or perhaps accidentally) in the images circulated on the blog that document the people participating in the indefinite hunger strike [Picture 4, 14, 15, 16]. Albums have performative qualities (Edwards and Hart 2004: 11) and this blog has become a virtual album where representations are framed-in and framed-out. Interestingly, in a large number of visual frames of this site, Gandhi's picture would get included while the poster of Guru Rinpoche located above it would usually be outside the frame [compare Picture 14, 15 with 16]. A function of this optimal size-framing is that anyone browsing this blog will immediately note and relate to the Gandhian portrait that is 'legitimising and guiding' the valiant struggle of these environmentalists and miss out the Guru Rinpoche 'blessing or protecting' the *satyagrahi*. Interestingly, several pictures uploaded on the website present Dawa Lepcha and Tenzing Lepcha's face when they sat right beneath Mahatma Gandhi's portrait [Picture 15]. It is very easy to picture the duo as a young Gandhians who have been willing to sacrifice their life in two historic fasts as part of the SRT campaign. I will cite the proclamation, 'Dams over Dzongu will be built over our dead bodies' that was printed on the banner, marking the 200th day of the *satyagraha* on January 6, 2008 [see Picture 8]. This non-violent battle-cry replicates the uncompromising stance adopted by other Gandhian environmentalists, like Medha Patkar, while opposing the Sardar Sarovar Dam and Sunderlal Bahugana while opposing the Tehri dam.

Gandhi emphasised, 'man has no power to create life, therefore, he has no right to destroy life' (cf. Khoshoo 252). This is the essential Gandhian and Buddhist principle subscribed by the SRT movement. They are

battling to protect their nurturing mother earth from rapacious capitalism. The Lepcha activists are angry at being marginalised and possibilities of losing Dzongu, but they are restrained and bound by the images and the symbols that their leaders have propagated. Ironically, sparing two or three persons, most SRT activists have not read any of Gandhi's writings and have obtained information about his teachings from popular mass media. With a twinkle in his eyes, one of them admitted to me that they were inspired by Attenborough's *Gandhi* and the Bollywood block-buster *Munna Bhai* (enacted by Sanjay Datt), the films depicting the contemporary relevance of Gandhi. Heroic Dawa Lepcha is one of the few persons who has earlier read Gandhi's autobiography and re-read it during his *satyagraha* in 2007!²³ Interestingly, this *lapse* has not prevented these activists from adopting Gandhian methods of *satyagraha* and *ahimsa*.

The construction of hydropower projects in Dzongu is repeatedly cited by the activists to be a violation of their indigenous rights which are guaranteed by the Indian Constitution and the United Nations on the blog [Picture 12]. The blog entry made on November 28, 2007 cites number of provisions made in the United Nations for protecting indigenous people and safeguarding their rights.²⁴ The Web has empowered and created a level field for the players. Web activism is a kind of soft-power politics based on convincing, appealing to and encouraging perception-based conflict (Dartnell 2006: 17). Drawing inspiration and connecting with other indigenous communities that reveal an environmental ethos of conservation and have successfully resisted the loss of their homelands, a Cree Indian prophecy was added on top of the right column of weepingsikkim in 2008:

Only after the last tree has been cut down, only after the last river has been poisoned, only after the last fish has been caught, only then will you find that money cannot be eaten. A Cree Prophecy.

The Lepchas have only recently become familiar with the struggle of the Canadian Indians. Arora (2006a, 2006b) had highlighted the similarities between the Rathongchu movement of Sikkim, India and the James Bay movement of Quebec, Canada. Among the many books available, Al Gedlicks' (1993) *The New Resource Wars* and James Waldram's (1993) *As Long as the River Run* elucidate the deep connections between communities and their landscape and the cultural politics around hydropower protests in North Canada. The Grand Cree Chief summed up the impact of the hydropower project in James Bay: 'we think of these projects as a form of [environmental]

racism... Our way of life, our communities and our people would all be sacrificed if these projects are allowed to go ahead (cf. Gedlicks 1993: 18). Northern Quebec in Canada is perceived as a vast powerful hydropower project hub by the government in Canada and Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh have similarly been perceived as hydropower giants of Northeast India. There are even substantive similarities in the narratives and justifications given to site hydropower projects in indigenous homelands of Cree Indians in Quebec in Canada and in Sikkim in India. The heavily financially dependent government of Sikkim espouses hydropower as the panacea for earning revenue and reducing its dependence on the Indian national government and supplying scarce energy to other states.

Conclusion

Images, symbols, representations, narratives of protest have played a critical role in framing a picture and articulating an ideology of non-violent indigenous environmentalism along with organisation, strategic positioning and event management by the core group of activists and Lepcha leaders in the SRT movement during 2007-09 and particularly representing it on weepingsikkim.blogspot.com. On June 20, 2010, as part of their small-scale celebration to mark the third anniversary of the *satyagraha* that they had commenced on the same day, some leaders and ACT activists offered garlanded the bust of Mahatma Gandhi that is placed on Mahatma Gandhi Marg at Gangtok in Sikkim.²⁵ This respectful gesture was followed by planting of tree saplings in the hilly slopes of Gangtok to affirm the group's ecological orientation [Picture 17 and 18]. The cheerful faces of the youth that we have often seen being circulated on this blog remind us that although their movement has subsided, these eco-warriors continue to be vigilant and firmly committed to the cause of protecting the life-giving sustaining earth whom they regard as their Mother: they are the *mutanchi rongkup*. Visually and textually, this sentiment was embossed in the words 'Save Teesta (A.C.T)' and 'Save Motherland (A.C.T)' on their white t-shirts (like a uniform) donned by these activists.²⁶ Although, many Lepcha men and women wore their traditional attire while sitting on the hunger strike, at other times, many youth displayed their 'eco-warrior' status by donning a 'Save Teesta' t-shirt [Picture 14, 17,18].

The young *satyagrahi* belonging to the so-called primitive Lepcha tribe have visually appropriated and in movement practice validated Gandhian environmental ethic that is critical of any profit-maximising and greed-based economy that strikes at the roots of society.

Protecting the integrity of their motherland, Dzongu is recognised to be vital for the social future of the Lepchas and the young leaders and lama activists of Save the Teesta movement have willingly practiced *ahimsa*. They have displayed an advanced ecological understanding in the idea of protecting their 'mother earth' and reminded us that we should not be guided by material greed or be seduced by violence. The image of a threatened Dzongu replicates concerns expressed by other indigenous communities who feel threatened by hydropower projects on River Barak in Manipur (Arora and Kipgen 2010) or industrial projects for mining scarce uranium (McDuaie-Ra 2007) and resisting settlement of other Indians in their delineated homelands. This explains the transformation of contests around affective localities of belonging into deeper and critical debates about the legitimate authority of governments to uproot indigenous communities.

The narratives and images circulated in space and cyberspace, the tactics and methods adopted and the symbols deployed by the SRT movement creatively combine indigenous cosmologies with global environmental discourses, demand the affirmation of indigenous rights in congruence with the recognised human rights and stipulate participatory planning in the practice of development. Even those who occupy positions of authority and have earlier formally opposed the SRT movement applaud these young indigenous environmentalists. The long march that took place in April 2008 was explicitly inspired by the Dandi March undertaken by Mahatma Gandhi during the freedom struggle and by activists during the Narmada protests in the 1980s. It is not surprising that the late Sunder Lal Bahugana and Medha Patkar, noted Gandhian environmentalists *par excellence*, have publicly admired these eco-warriors in space and cyberspace.²⁷ Temacapulin constitutes yet another milestone for these young eco-warriors in their unfinished journey to save River Teesta.

REFERENCES

- Arora, V. 2004. Just a Pile of Stones!: The Politicization of Identity, Indigenous Knowledge, and Sacred Landscapes among the Lepcha and the Bhutia tribes of contemporary Sikkim, India. Unpublished Doctoral thesis, University of Oxford.
- Arora, V. 2006a. Text and Context in Sikkim, India. In *Reading Religion in Texts and Context: Reflections of Faith and Practice in Religious Materials*, edited by Elisabeth Arweck and Peter J. Collins. Ashgate: Aldershot.
- Arora, V. 2006b. The Forest of Symbols embodied by the Tholung Sacred landscape of North Sikkim, India, *Conservation and Society*, 4(1): 55-83.
- Arora, V. 2007. Assertive Identities, Indigeneity and the Politics of Recognition as a Tribe: The Bhutias, the Lepchas and the Limbus of Sikkim. *Sociological Bulletin*. 56(2): 195-220.
- Arora, V. 2009a. Framing the Image of Sikkim. *Visual Studies*. 24(1): 54-64.
- Arora, V. 2009b 'They are all set to dam(n) our future': Contested Development through Hydel Power in Democratic Sikkim. *Sociological Bulletin*. 58(1): 94-114.
- Arora, V. Forthcoming. The Paradox of Democracy in the Northeast and the Eastern Himalayas in V. Arora and N. Jayaram edited *Routeing Democracy in the Himalayas: Experiments and Experiences*. Routledge: Delhi.
- Gandhi, M. K. 1909 *Hind Swaraj*.
- Baviskar, A. 1995. In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley. Oxford University Press: Delhi.
- Baviskar, A. 2008. Introduction in A. Baviskar edited *Contested Grounds: Essays on Nature, Culture, and Power*. Oxford University Press: Delhi, 1-12.
- Census 2006. State Socio Economic Census. Department of Economics, Statistics, Monitoring and Evaluation. Government of Sikkim: Gangtok.
- Dartnell, Michael Y. 2006. *Insurgency Online: Web Activism and Global Conflict*. University of Toronto Press: Toronto.
- Edwards, E. 2001. *Raw Histories: Photographs, Anthropology, and Museums*. Berg: Oxford.
- Edwards, Elizabeth and Janice Hart. 2004. Introduction: Photographs as Objects in Edwards and Hart edited *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images*. Routledge: London, 1-15.
- Foning, A. 1987. *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe*. Chyu-Pandi Farm: Kalimpong.
- Foucault, M. 2000. *Power*. The New Press: New York
- Gedlicks, Al. 1993. *The New Resource Wars: Native and Environmental Struggles Against Big Multinational Corporations*. South End Press: Boston.
- Gorer, G. 1938. *Himalayan village: An account of the Lepchas of Sikkim*. Michael Joseph: London.
- Guha, R. 1998. Mahatma Gandhi and the Environmental Movement in R. Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier edited *Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays, North and South*. Oxford University Press: Delhi.
- Gowloog, R.R. 1995. *Lingthem Revisited: Social Changes in a Lepcha Village of North Sikkim*. New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications.

- Hooker, J. 1891. *Himalayan Journals or Notes of a Naturalist*. Ward, Lock, Bowden and Co.: London, New York and Melbourne.
- Jordan, T. 2001. *Cyber Power: The Culture and Politics of Cyberspace and the Internet*. Routledge: London.
- Khoshoo, T.N. 1999. Gandhian Environmentalism in G.A. James edited *Ethical perspectives on environmental issues in India*. APH Publishing Corporation: New Delhi.
- Kotturan, G. 1976. *Folk Tales of Sikkim*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers.
- Li, Tania M. 2008. Situating Resource Struggles: Concepts for Empirical Analysis in A. Baviskar edited *Contested Grounds: Essays on Nature, Culture, and Power*. Oxford University Press: Delhi, 193-217.
- Planning Commission. 2008. *Sikkim Development Report*. New Delhi: Planning Commission, Government of India and Academic Foundation.
- Risley, H.H. 1894. *The Gazetteer of Sikkim*. Bengal Secretariat Press: Calcutta.
- Siiger, H. 1967. *The Lepchas: Culture and religion of a Himalayan people. Part I*. Copenhagen: National Museum of Denmark.
- Siiger, H., and J. Rischel. 1967. *The Lepchas: Culture and religion of a Himalayan people. Part II*. Copenhagen: National Museum of Denmark.
- Tamsang, K. P. 1983. *The unknown and untold reality about the Lepchas*. Kalimpong: Lyangsong Tamsang and Mani Printing Press.
- Tamsang, L. 1997. Offering to Mt. Tendong and Its Significance. *Aachuley* 1, 22-23.
- . 1999. Muk Zik Ding Rum Faat (Offering to Mother Nature). *Aachuley* 3, 18-19.
- Waldram, James B. 1993. *As long as the Rivers Run: Hydroelectric projects and Native Communities in Western Canada*. University of Manitoba Press, Winnipeg.
- modifying the slogan 'Save Teesta' in order to ensure instant recognition of Teesta as a river and highlight the movement aspects of their resistance (as evident in leadership core, organizational structure and formulation of strategy, articulation of narrative discourse/ideology combining environmentalism and indigeneity, and the creative deployment of images and symbols).
6. Ongdup Lepcha participated in the first hunger strike and Ongchuk Lepcha participated in the second one. However, due to medical complications, they had to withdraw while Dawa and Tenzing continued with their fasts.
 7. After a few days of their fast, following medical advice, a Ryle tube was inserted to give them nourishment.
 8. Dawa is a film-maker, Tseten Lepcha is a long time politician and civil contractor, Athup Lepchas is a lawyer and a former Minister, Sherap runs an environmental NGO and Tenzing had just completed his studies.
 9. Sadly, I have not been able to collect much visual content on this movement and the film made by has not been available for my viewing it.
 10. The 90MW Ringpi, 33MW Rukel, 120MW Lingza and 141MW Rangyong projects did not secure clearances.
 11. They were initiated on June 20, 2007.
 12. Refer to blog entry of October 14, 2009.
 13. A Gandhian method used widely for protest is that of the hunger strike—at the *satyagraha*; here it was transformed into an indefinite relay *satyagraha* where activists volunteered to undertake a fast and like a relay it was passed on to others indefinitely.
 14. Both Land Revenue Order No. 1 (issued by Charles Bell in May 1917) and Tashi Namgyal's proclamation on North Sikkim (August 30, 1937) safeguard Lepcha interests by placing restrictions on settlement of other ethnic communities (excepting Bhutias) in North Sikkim and the sale and purchase of land here (Arora 2004).
 15. Shamanism or *mun* (in Lepcha) is considered to be their original religion. In the 14th century, after the migration of the Bhutias to Sikkim, the majority were converted into Buddhism. With the arrival of the Christian missionaries in the 19th century, they converted to Christianity in large numbers in Darjeeling but only in small numbers in Sikkim [see Arora 2007a: 198].
 16. Tendong is regarded as a corruption of the Lepcha word *Tungrong* or *Tundong*, meaning the uplifted ladder or horn.
 17. Mythologically and historically, in colonial records, the Lepcha community has been perceived as a martial community, recognised to be brave Himalayan warriors and excellent archers that have protected the kingdom of Sikkim. Due to space constraints, I am not discussing the warrior image of Lepchas.
 18. I was told about this telephonically. However, this letter is also reproduced in the Lepcha magazine *Aachuley*, printed in April 2008.
 19. Blog entry cites the number to be 650 Lepchas, April 16, 2008.
 20. Refer to Himalayan beaconline, an online news site for a descriptive narrative.
 21. Some supporters of the movement burnt the effigy of the Governor of Sikkim and were arrested in August 2007 (refer to blog entry of 7/8/2007). About 41 activists, including women, were arrested on charges of unlawful assembly on

Notes

1. ACT or Affected Citizens of Teesta is one of principal organisations that have organised resistance to the state-sponsored cascade development of River Teesta in Northeast India.
2. For details of this movement refer to Arora (2009b).
3. To write this article, I draw upon place-based extended and short-term multi-sited fieldwork in Sikkim, North Bengal, and Delhi.
4. Ethnographic research is complemented and infused with analysis of relevant primary and secondary information available on the Internet, emails, messenger chatting and telephonic conversations with both the activists and government officials.
5. This term is not self-referential but coined by me after

- February 7, 2009 while protesting at the dam site in Lingza village in North Sikkim on the 600th day of their indefinite hunger strike (refer to blog entry of 11 March 2009). Some Lepcha men were arrested in Dzongu and wrongly accused of trespassing on project land (refer to blog entry of 18/8/2009).
22. Many of the youth leaders are struggling financially and finding it difficult to balance family commitments with the movement. For instance, Dawa Lepcha's wife had a kidney transplant in 2010-end at Delhi and this operation failed.
 23. On one occasion, a Christian priest went to the hospital to bless Dawa and Tenzing when they were hospitalised in 2007.
 24. Discussion with Dawa Lepcha in June 2007 at Gangtok.
 25. For instance, refer to blog entry circulating the text of letter written by Tseten Lepcha (working President of ACT) on 18/1/2010, and other entries posted on the blog on 11/12/2007, 20/7/2007, 6/3/2009, and 26/2/2008.
 26. Refer to posting made on June 20, 2010.
 27. This white t-shirt was often worn by activists and office-bearers when participating in rallies, organising mass meetings and so on during 2007-09 and has frequently been pictured on the blog.
 28. Refer to blog entries for 17/4/2009, 9/4/2008 and 13/11/2009.