People’s Responses on Development issue: A Case Study on Lepcha Communities of Dzongu, North Sikkim, India

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Abstract

Sikkim is the least populated state in India. It is a multi-linguistic, multi-religious and multi-ethnic state. Dzongu region in North Sikkim is a protected area, reserved for the Lepcha community who are considered as the original inhabitants of Sikkim. For some year Dzongu is in news due to the dam and displacement issue. The present study is a review of the issue associated with the Lepcha people and their recent state of affairs.

Keywords: Multi-linguistic, multi-religious and multi-ethnic, dam, displacement.

Introduction

Sikkim is the least populated state in India. It is a multi-linguistic, multi-religious and multi-ethnic state. Historic events have played crucial role in creating such a mosaic. The Lepcha community is considered the original inhabitants of Sikkim (Rishley, 1894). Later they came in contact with the Tibetan Bhutias (17th century) and Nepali community (19th century). All these groups are characterised by specific ecological adaptations, as well as by social organisation of the region. Most groups are culturally adapted to certain altitudes where they live which have been a barrier to an overall population mixture. North Sikkim is more traditional than the rest of Sikkim. The inhabitants of the North Sikkim have been leading a sheltered life because of geographical isolation as well as official restriction of settling of outsiders in Dzongu reserve and Lachung and Lachen areas. The then rulers of Sikkim were conscious all through to protect the interests of the indigenous people and to see that they were not exploited by the outsiders. The first example of its kind is available from a notice published on 2nd January, 1897, where it was mentioned that “no Bhutia and Lepcha are to be allowed to sell or sublet any of the land without express sanction of the council” (Bhasin, 2011).

Introducing the Study Area

The Dzongu is located in the North district of Sikkim. It was created as Lepcha reserve in the erstwhile Chogyal era when monarchy prevailed over this small state to preserve the social homogeneity of this small community. The Dzongu covers approximately 78 sq km of geographical area and extends between 27°28’ – 27°38’ N latitude and 88°23’ – 88°38’ E longitude. Dzongu falls under Mangan sub-division. It lies at an elevation of 4572 feet above sea level. It is bound by river Teesta and Tholung Chu. Important villages are Passingdang, Hee-Gyathang, Pentong, Lingthem, Tinvong, Kusong and Lingzya. The 300 MW Panan hydro power project is under construction at Dzongu (Gazetteer, 2011).

The geographical position of Dzongu has accentuated its isolation from the rest of Sikkim. The area has a unique picturesque landscape boasting of diverse snow covered mountains intersected with steep and narrow valleys and gorges that are well drained by swift flowing mountainous streams rich in hydro-power potential. Owing to dense forest cover, the area experiences showers almost throughout the year. The area can be divided into three climatic zones viz. sub-tropical zone, temperate and alpine zones that is extremely rich in bio-diversity. It borders the Kanchenjunga Bio-Reserve and has some of the ancient Buddhist monasteries and temples. It has total households of approximately 5,000 spreading over 38 villages (Census, 2011; Field survey, 2014). As the river valleys are low, hot, and steamy, the settlements and agricultural lands are found to be located on a relatively narrow band above the two rivers to avoid flash floods and unhealthy environment.
The Context

The Sikkim Power Development Corporation Limited has granted permission for more than 24 different hydropower projects, which will generate at least 5494 MW. The total estimated cost of these projects is about Rs. 25,000 crores (US $ 62 billion). Out of the total hydro-power projects eight projects are directly or indirectly associated with the Dzongu area where 38 Lepcha villages (approximately, 5000 households) are located. This area has been assessed to have a capacity of around 2500 MW of electricity. The Teesta stage III, IV, and V projects located in Panam, Rangyong, Rukel, Ringpi, Lingzya are directly or indirectly going to affect the Dzongu-the holiest place of the Lepcha community. The Teesta Stage IV hydroelectric project is to be located in Mangan-Dzongu regions of North District of Sikkim and will acquire 320.07 hectares of land. The project proposes to tap the waters of Tholung Chu, one of the chief tributaries of the Teesta river in the Upper Dzongu in North Sikkim.

The Objective

The objective is to record local people’s responses regarding the proposed dam and displacement issues and their perception about development in Dzongu.

Materials and Methods

In the present study both primary and secondary data have been incorporated. It is mainly based on direct field observation. Case study method has been used here. To collect information open ended questionnaire and focused group discussion with the local Lepcha community of Hee-Gyathang village have been done.

Results and Discussion

The whole region of Dzongu consists of 38 villages. Present study area Hee-Gyathang is one of them. As per census, 2011, in Hee-Gyathang village, total households include 227 with a population of 1,180. Literacy rate is 77.22 percent. People are mostly categorised as marginal workers (45.42 percent) and non-workers (43.73 percent).

While interacting with the community members, it has been observed that people of the region were animists with some influence of Lamaism and Buddhism-their traditional religious practices are intricately related to the mountains, streams and vegetations found there. One of the senior members of the village narrated several mythical stories of the origin of the tribe. Their belief systems associated with the nature associated rituals. They believe that any harm to the nature will have adverse impact not only on the region but on the entire country as well.

According to them, boring of tunnels through the hills, which has now been stalled due to the local protest, has already impacted the micro climate of the region. The proposed hydropower projects will have drastic effect on the religious practices of Lepcha community leaving its impact on the socio-cultural setup, besides inducing environmental vulnerability in the fragile landscape of the Dzongu.

Many landowners have already agreed to transfer their lands. However, not all gave their land voluntarily. Our respondents claimed that landowners had been tricked into selling their land. However, our respondents were of the view that those who had been relocated had been repenting on their decision and were ready to return the compensation because they have moved away from their farm lands which restricts their access to their lands and in some cases the newly constructed houses are sinking.

The respondents also narrated about their long drawn battle to stop the hydro projects started in Dzongu villages in 2003 which was later relocated to the capital of Sikkim, Gangtok in June 2007. Bhutia-Lepcha House, a worn out building on Tibet Road in Gangtok became the site of their flagship protest, a relay hunger strike which ran for close to two and a half years. The protest also extended to the Lepcha enclave in neighbouring West Bengal and the city of New Delhi where the activists spread their protest narrative to the wider Lepcha community, NGOs and the Indian central government. The indigenous Lepcha people, affected by Teesta III project have been staging a series of protest to protect their livelihood and the biodiversity of the region from devastation by the project. The affected peoples association, Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) has been struggling for peoples’ livelihood and
to protect environmental sustainability. According to the local activists, Sikkim is seen as the future power-house of India at the cost of people of Sikkim (IPT, 2012).

In May, 1999, MoEF's has already stated that: "No other project in Sikkim will be considered for environmental clearance till the carrying capacity (CC) study is completed." However, Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) went against its own decision and granted environmental clearance to the project. The massive blasting of hills for tunnelling work involved in the construction of project at Chungtang village has already led to drying up of water sources and the impact of the project on villages such as Theng village lying in the Buffer Zone of Biosphere Reserve have not been addressed (Choudhury, 2007). The impacts of tunneling on areas located above and below these tunnels, including drying up of water sources, impacts of blasting on agricultural fields and on residential areas are also sidelined. As per the seismic zonation map of India, Sikkim, alongside with other north-eastern states located in seismic zone IV, one of the most seismically vulnerable regions. In fact, Chungthang village, the dam site of Teesta III, suffered a lot during 2011 earthquake. Construction of dams using heavy blasting for excavation in road building, construction and tunnels put heavy stress on this fragile environment.

For some Lepcha people, the protests against the proposed dam and the hydel power project have sharpened their perceptions of their homeland. Their appreciation of village life – even for those who left the village many years earlier – is illuminated by the threat of losing it. Presently, they are facing problems of loss of cardamom production and looking for alternatives. Therefore, they wish to increase job opportunities for Lepcha youth in eco-tourism and organic farming practices. They talked about providing schools in Dzongu that will provide a better education than that currently available at government schools.

The promise of local jobs seemed persuasive in a place where job opportunities are scarce and most educated people leave Dzongu to work elsewhere in Sikkim, often in government jobs. Once deprived of their livelihood, tribals will fall back on certain resources for survival but the process would make a transition from their traditional constructive to destructive dependence. While in the past most of the tribal communities had renewable resource surrounding that had come down from their ancestors that they had to use according to their needs and environmental imperatives and preserve it for the future.

The Lepcha community in Dzongu was divided in their views on the development and the gap between Lepcha people that do or don’t oppose the projects has widened over time. Relationships between friends and family members have in some villages fractured. Consequently the question arises whether such development which in one hand can bring prosperity to the population residing in far away cities and towns of mainland India will at the same time may lead to displacement and erosion of traditional culture of this vulnerable tribe beyond repair.

**Homestay tourism as a new development option**

The Sikkim government has already encouraged homestay as it helps to develop micro economic sector in the rural areas. It acts as to preserve the ecological sustainability. It has a great role to generate self employment and economic development among rural communities. It plays vital role to decentralize the national income and centralize the local resources in the national economy and to promote and improve local agricultural and other industries (Devkota, 2008).

Presently, Lepcha youths want alternate livelihood option for their economic development. They want their direct participation in the developmental process. According to them homestay tourism business could be a better option as through this they can directly interact with the tourists and at the same time can earn handful to live a decent life. At present approximately 12 homestays are operating in Dzongu by the local villagers. In Hee-Gyathang village, homestay tourism has been successfully operated by the local youths. They welcome the tourists as guests. Tourists include both domestic and foreigners. There are common toilet and kitchen facility for guests and family members. The guests are served the local foods and drinks. They believe this can help them to revive their rich
cultural heritage also as many cultural traits are already vanished. They mostly have forgotten their very own old religious practices. Only few priests are surviving and they feared that with them they will lose that forever as there is no written document on it.

The main purpose of homestay tourism is interaction with local and outside people along with their culture. Tourists are getting local cultural flavor, they have the chance to enter the kitchen and even to participate in making food and to feel the natural essence of environment. Homestay is a new initiative in whole Sikkim to promote the village tourism and it has the potentiality to become an important livelihood opportunity for the villagers.

**Conclusion**

The unique culture, tradition and way of life of the Lepcha people of Sikkim, are getting diluted. The Lepcha community of Dzongu region are mainly vulnerable as they still adhere to their old cultural practices. A holistic impact assessment ascertaining the impacts on ecology, wildlife, flora and fauna, other risk factor such as dam break analysis, seismic impacts, and impact of reduced flow based on the four seasons and in both upstream and downstream portion of Teesta river is needed to be carried out before any kind of new construction. Development is needed but not at the cost of mass displacement and destruction of a unique ecosystem.

Homestay tourism could be a better option for socio-economic development of the area if organized properly. Proper training is needed for this, specially, training of women as they are the most important person in the whole interaction process. The rural development authority of Sikkim need to take proper plan in terms of promoting homestay tourism as it helps to develop micro economic sector in the rural areas.

**References**


