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## **Hydro Power Projects and Rongkups of Sikkim Himalayas: An intricate issue**

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### Abstract

The only last strong holds of Rongkup “Lepchas – the primitive tribe of Sikkim Himalayas” is at a threat, these “children of snowy peak” were living worshipping the nature along the mighty river Teesta valley at North Sikkim. The need of renewal source of energy and State Government intention towards harvest the same has resulted numerous hydro-electric power plants in Sikkim viz. HEP at different stages along the perennial river Teesta has been a matter of concerned for Lepchas. The Rong has been living harmoniously with nature since time immemorial they are nature worshipers and this love and passion of them towards their nature has led to birth of several movements against hydro power developments especially along the stretch of the river Teesta in Dzongu. The CLOS (Concern Lepchas of Sikkim) and ACT (Affected Citizens of Teesta) are some of the major Non-Government Organisation which has been playing the leading role in such anti-HEP protests, and acting as an important pressure group for the protection of Rong and their native land Dzongu. In this paper researcher has attempted to study the upcoming HEP along the river belt of Teesta especially at Dzongu, its impact on Rong and how the Rongkup are standing against every odd to save their last abode.

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**Keywords:** Lepcha, Rongkup, Dzongu, Sikkim Himalayas, HEP, CLOS, ACT

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### **Introduction**

The Lepcha or Rong people, also called Rongkup meaning the 'son of snowy peak' and "RongPa" meaning 'Ravine folk or the dwellers of the valley' are the Indigenous people of Sikkim, India. The word Lepcha is considered to be the anglicized version of the Nepalese word lapche meaning "vile speakers" or "unintelligent speaker" (Tulshiram Sharma, 1970).

Lepchas were the first inhabitants of the lands along the Himalayan Mountain seam that connects north-east India, Bhutan, Tibet and Nepal. They live in the hilly borderlands of Mt. Kanchenjunga including the Darjeeling district of West Bengal (which includes Kalimpong and Kurseong), the Ilam district of Nepal and pockets of west and south-west Bhutan and Dzongu, in north district of Sikkim.

The Lepchas, once original inhabitants of Sikkim were either pushed inside the riparian tracks of forests or were assimilated with the new settlers after the arrival of Bhutias and Nepalese

from the neighbouring countries later. The Lepchas, due to the influx of later tribes into their land not only slowly turned into an insignificant minority in their own land but also gradually lost their language, land, costumes, food habits, and even rites and rituals. The Lepchas, Bong by faith were started converting into Buddhist and then into Christianity during later 17 century AD. The protection of their culture and traditions was affected by a strong sense of divide within them between the so-called Buddhist Lepchas, who began to see themselves as the true bearers of Lepcha culture and tradition, and the Christian Lepchas. Therefore, the need to create a Lepcha reserve arose out of the fact that the Lepchas were in minority and were fast vanishing. The Lepcha people themselves firmly believe that they were the aboriginal inhabitant of Sikkim and did not want to cope with the cultural dilution and change in the land use pattern under the influence of large-scale immigrants. Concerning this threatening issue of marginalization of the indigenous Lepcha population by the new settlers the British rulers of pre-independent India urged the Chogyal (erstwhile king) of Sikkim to protect the Lepchas and their unique tradition from being extinction. Thus, the erstwhile rulers of Sikkim took the first step to safeguarded the right of the traditional community over their land in North Sikkim through a Royal Proclamation in 1956 and declared a sizeable land consisting of thirteen revenue blocks located on the western side of the river Teesta in North Sikkim called Dzongu as a Lepcha Reserve which was already inhabited by majority of Lepchas.

The Dzongu is a narrow strip of land located in the district of North Sikkim covers approximately 78 sq. km of geographical area. This tract is skirted by river Teesta in east and is extends from north to south with a long and narrow extension towards the west on either side of Rong young a tributary to Teesta. According to the Chogyal of Sikkim's pronouncement, no strangers were allowed to live in Dzongu, and only indigenous Lepchas had the right to inherit, sell, or mortgage their land, territory, and resources. However, things changed after the tiny Himalayan protectorate of Sikkim was merged with the Indian union in 1975, and the Lepchas of the Dzongu, who had enough farmland and forest resources to provide for their sustenance, are now

being threatened in the name of development, as the state of Sikkim plans to develop a hydropower project that will bring in much-needed infrastructure.

Sikkim, like any other Indian state with a developing economy, is on the road to modernization and growth, and with its steep terrain and swift-flowing rivers, it has a strong potential for hydropower production, with an estimated capacity of 8000MW. The government's desire to harvest the same assumes that the development of a hydropower project over Sikkim's largest river, the Teesta, will undoubtedly aid in the development of people living in remote and backward areas of North Sikkim in particular, and the state in general. So, under the auspices of Sikkim Power and Corporation Ltd., the state administration has approved 27 hydroelectric projects, eight of which are in Dzongu (North Sikkim) India. However, the rapid change brought about by the construction of hydroelectric projects in Dzongu, the sacred land of the Lepcha people is a menace as it is associated with displacement of people from their ancestral habitats. Thus, this has been opposed by the Lepchas residing in the Dzongu as they feel that it may drastically alter the land use pattern and also may cause socio-economic, demographic, environmental changes in catchment area of the project and eventually it may lead to their cultural extinction. The Concerned Lepchas of Sikkim (CLOS) and other various community organisations led by Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) are protesting with non-violent spirit against the arbitrary sanctioning of several mega hydel power projects in the protected area of Dzongu in North Sikkim by the State Government and NHPC.

## Objective

The present paper intends to highlight on

- i) The social and cultural accountability of the Rongkup tribe of Dzongu.
- ii) The paper also focuses the logical attachment of Rongkup people with their sacred land Dzongu where at present their cultural identity is in threat due to the encroachment of their land by the development of hydropower project. They feel that development of such projects will lead to the loss of their ancestral land, resources and may dilute their unique culture.
- iii) The paper evaluates the demands of Lepcha Community protesting against the Dzongu Hydel Power Projects and also evaluates the locational relevance of the project.
- iv) Role of CLOS, ACT and other organizations.
- v) The paper also seeks to examine whether there is scope of review of the projects.

## Methodology

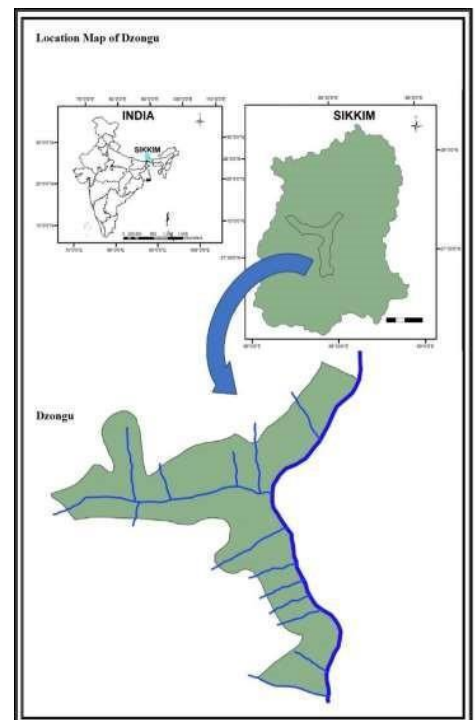
This study is based on the secondary sources, mainly depending on literature available in different print and electronic media and also in other publications.

However, primary sources have also been used to generate first-hand information through qualitative data collected via personal interview and close group discussions with the concerned stake holders. Personal observation has also valued in this study while examining for identifying the scope for review.

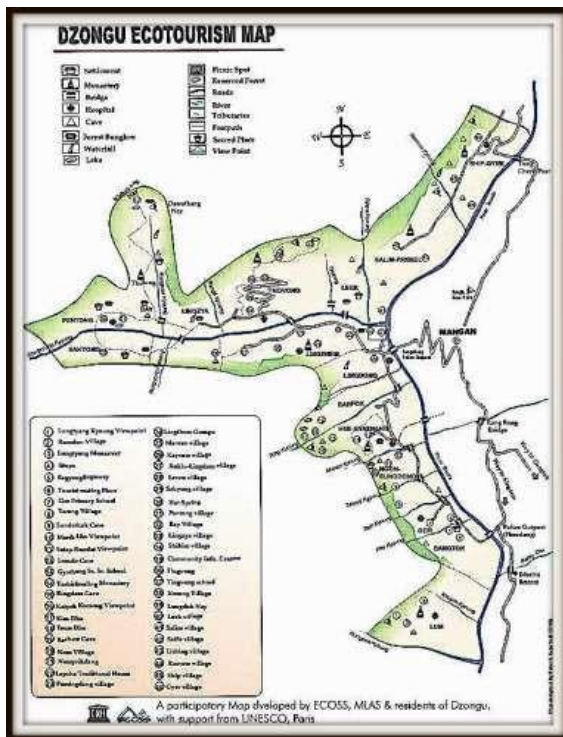
**Study Area:** The Dzongu is a narrow strip of territory in North Sikkim's district that stretches from 27°28' – 27°38' N latitude and 88°23' – 88°38' E longitude. Its altitude ranges from 700 m to 6000 m above mean sea level and is scattered throughout a mountainous terrain with dense woods. Dzongu, the Lepchas' unique restricted region, is roughly triangular in shape, limited on the south-east by the river Teesta, on the north-east by the Talung river, and on the west by the Himadri (larger Himalayan mountains), which includes Mt. Kanchenjunga (8,598 m, the world's third highest peak).

Dzongu also includes Sheep-Gyer in the east, Sakyong-Pentong village in the west, and Kishong Cho Lake in the north, as well as Lum village in the south. The region is known for its distinctive snowy mountainous terrain, which includes steep and narrow valleys and gorges, as well as well-drained surrounding slopes. Because of the dense forest cover, the area has showers virtually all year. Sub-tropical, temperate, and alpine climate zones are represented in the area. Further, the area can be divided into two parts: Upper Dzongu, which can be entered through a bridge at Sankalang over the Teesta on the western side, and Lower Dzongu, which can be entered through a bridge at Phodang near Dikchu bazaar (market) on the eastern side; and Lower Dzongu, which can be entered through a bridge at Sankalang on the eastern side and a road at Theng via Toong prior to reaching Chungthang.

The area has a unique picture- esque 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. It borders the Kanchenjunga Bio-reserve and has some of the ancient Buddhist monasteries and temples. The settlements and agricultural lands are located on a relatively narrow band above the two rivers between 1000 m. and 2300m above sea level. Beyond the cultivable land is the forest which extends to snow line. The geographical position of Dzongu zone has accentuated its isolation from the rest of Sikkim.



**A brief historical background of Lepcha people:** The origin of the Lepcha is unknown. They speak a Tibeto-Burman language which some classify as Himalayish. Based on this, some anthropologists suggest they emigrated directly from Tibet to the north, or from Eastern Mongolia. They were even said to be from Japan or Korea, while others suggest a more complex migration that started in southeast Tibet, a migration to Thailand, Burma, or



Japan, then a navigation of the Aeyarwady River and Chindwin rivers (both in Myanmar), a crossing of the Patkoi range coming back west, and finally entering ancient India. While migrating westward through India, they are thought to have crossed via southern Bhutan before arriving at their final destination near Kanchenjunga, although the Lepcha people are adamant that they did not move here from anyplace and are native to the area. Former colonial intellectuals and administrators such as Hooker, White, and Risley wrote about the Lepchas living in the remote forested ravines of the eastern Himalayas, which now encompass Sikkim, a portion of West Bengal's Darjeeling district, western Nepal, and eastern Bhutan.

According to 2001 Census, total Lepcha population in India was 50,459. The population strength of Lepcha in Sikkim is 35,728 according to 2001 Census and 14,731 in West Bengal according to 2001 census. [Ref: Census of India-2001 Paper-1 of 2007, language India, States and Union Territories, Table C-16. Office of the Registrar General of India, Govt. Of India, New Delhi 2008]. Lepchas are also settled in Bhutan (Samasti district) and in Nepal (Ilam district).

Originally Lepchas are nature worshippers (animist) and they worship different aspects of nature like mountain, hill, river, lake etc. of the region. Kanchanjunga is their divine deity and it is believed that they have originated from the virgin snow of the mountain. Bongthing and Mun, the Lepcha priest and priestess, act as mediator between the common Lepchas and the spirits, good and bad. Mun takes the soul of departed person to Poomju, the resting place to meet their ancestors. All rituals are simple; nature based and is performed by the Bongthing. But during the Tibetan rule, a large number of Lepchas were converted to Buddhist (Lamaism) and during British rule in 18th century, many of them converted to Christianity.

Now among Lepchas, pure nature worshipper is rare. Religion is closely connected with the culture and customs. Loss of religion automatically initiates the Lepchas to switch over from their original Mun/Bongthingism (Lepcha priestess and priest) culture to either monastery oriented Lama culture or Church oriented culture.

They are widely known for their deep knowledge of botany and ecology and describe themselves as Mutanchi Rong kup meaning 'Beloved Children of Mother Nature'. Lepcha culture is the yardstick of their rich civilisation and manifestation of their high mental and spiritual level of development. Lepcha tradition is religion based and is much close to nature. Acquisition of land and inflow of outsiders hit the Lepcha culture badly and they have adopted alien culture and custom. The Lepchas of Dzongu Valley, an isolated forest dweller who have lived in harmony with nature for ages, have amassed a wide knowledge of the area's varied wild items. This points to them being excellent ethnobotanical practitioners. During his botanical investigations of the Sikkim Himalaya (1847-1851), Sir J.D Hooker praised the Lepchas of Sikkim for their plant knowledge in his epic work, "Himalayan Journal (1855)." Since the Lepcha community's inception, the bamboo plant has been used extensively and elegantly by them. The Lepchas' gather diverse components of wild plants from their surrounds, including fruits, flowers, roots, tubers, stems, leaves, barks, and entire plants. Pradhan and Badola (2008) (Avasthe et al., 2005; Pradhan and Badola, 2008).

The Lepchas were traditionally hunters and gatherers who lived completely nomadic lives. The Land Settlement Act and the Forest Preservation Act, on the other hand, have drastically changed the Lepcha economy, forcing them to settle down in terrace-based agriculture. They began practising sedentary agriculture and animal husbandry in the mid-nineteenth century, owing to increased production of big cardamom as a cash crop. The Lepchas are of Mongoloid race and their distinct language known as "Rong" which belongs to Tibeto-Kanauri group, included in Tibeto-Burman family of languages, is distinguished by having its own script (supposed to be invented by the Lepcha scholar Thikung Men Salong sometimes during the 17th century) and literature.

'The sons of the soil', 'the sole inhabitants of the region' become minority in their own home land. Lepchas now comprise 2.0 per cent of total population of Darjeeling and 7.80 per cent of total population of Sikkim. The Tibetan colonial rule has outnumbered the Lepchas by the Tibetans in Sikkim while the British colonial rule is responsible for outnumbering the Lepchas by a mixed population in Darjeeling.

**Impacts of hydropower projects on the livelihood of Lepchas around Dzongu-** A fascinating Himalayan state, Sikkim is situated in the Eastern Himalayas blessed with the number of perennial snow faded rivers descending from the snow-capped mountain ranges. One of the rivers that almost flow right across the length of Sikkim is the Teesta. In the year 1974, committee was constituted in order to study the power potential in Sikkim. Sikkim during pre-merger period the use of power was very small as such privilege was confined only to the urban areas of the state. However, the increasing demand of power been the cause of establishment of some hydroelectric power plants over its major river viz. Teesta and Rangeet for the generation of the electricity.

As per the preliminary survey, the rivers of Sikkim have a huge potential for hydropower generation, calculated at about 8000 M.W. The snow faded swift flowing river such as Teesta, Rangit, Rangpo, Lachen etc. have high potential for the hydro power development. In river Teesta alone hydropower can be harnessed under a cascade form of six stages i.e. Teesta Stage I to Stage- VI. The present govt. policies of Sikkim envisage that hydropower development will eventually lead to overall infrastructural development of the state paving the way for the socio-economic development of the population living here. So, the state government invited. The National Hydroelectric Power Corporation Limited (NHPC) and the other private the Hydro power in Sikkim. Out of 3315 MW in its power system 1770 MW (53.39%) has already been commissioned. The Sikkim Power Development Corporation Limited has granted permission for more than 24 different hydropower projects, which will generate at least 5494 MW.

At present only about 600 MW (7.5%) of hydropower potential has been developed in the state by constructing mini and micro hydel projects and more than 5000 MW hydro power potential is under development in different stages. The Sikkim Power Development Corporation Limited has sanctioned 27 hydroelectric projects out of which 8 projects are located in the Dzongu, North Sikkim, India (shown in Table 1) which are directly or indirectly associated with the Dzongu area where 38 Lepcha villages are located. These villages are being directly affected by the stage III, IV, and V projects located in Panam, Rangyong, Rukel, Ringpi, Lingzya. This area has been assessed to have a capacity of around 2500 MW of electricity.

The Dzongu is an in – separable part of Lepcha identity and culture. They worship vegetation, mountains around them and mostly the holy river Teesta. They perform elaborate rituals in the Dzongu village. But the projects here are “run of the river” where the river water is diverted through long tunnels before the water is dropped back into the river at downstream location has not only destroyed the land but also the river water gets disappear from its original course. The Teesta hydro power projects in Sikkim promises development prospects for the people living in the remote and backward area of North Sikkim where the Dzongu the sacred land of the Lepchas. However, the proposed hydropower projects here are having a drastic effect on the unique culture of Lepchas as well as on the socio-economic pattern of this small community. The Teesta hydel project and its implementation may lead to the loss of the Dzongu (the ancient Lepcha reserve) which may result in ethnocide, the disappearance of the cultural heritage of the Lepchas that is rooted to their ancestral connections and performance of rituals connected to the land, forests, mountains, lakes, and nature, in general.

The Lepchas believe that they were created by mother nature in the Dzongu, hence development of dams will adversely affect the local population as it will redefine land use and take away their common property rights over the forests and water bodies.

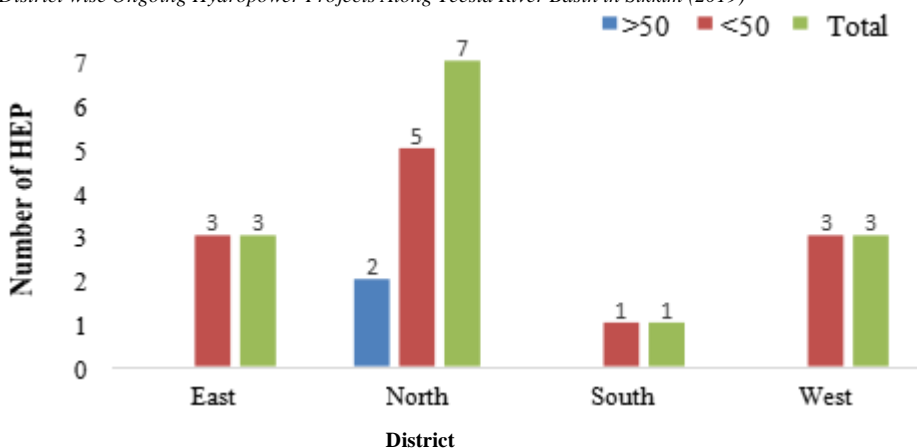


**Table 1**  
Ongoing Hydropower Projects Along Teesta River Basin in Sikkim (2019)

District	Number of HEP		
	> 50 MW	< 50 MW	Total
East	3	**	3
North	2	5	7
South	**	1	1
West	**	3	3
Total	5	9	14

Note. CEA (2016), EDPS (2019), NHPC (2019), NTPC (2019)  
>50, <50 – Install Capacity (MW)

**Figure 1**  
District wise Ongoing Hydropower Projects Along Teesta River Basin in Sikkim (2019)



Note. CEA (2016), EDPS (2019), NHPC (2019), NTPC (2019).  
>50, <50 – Install Capacity (MW)

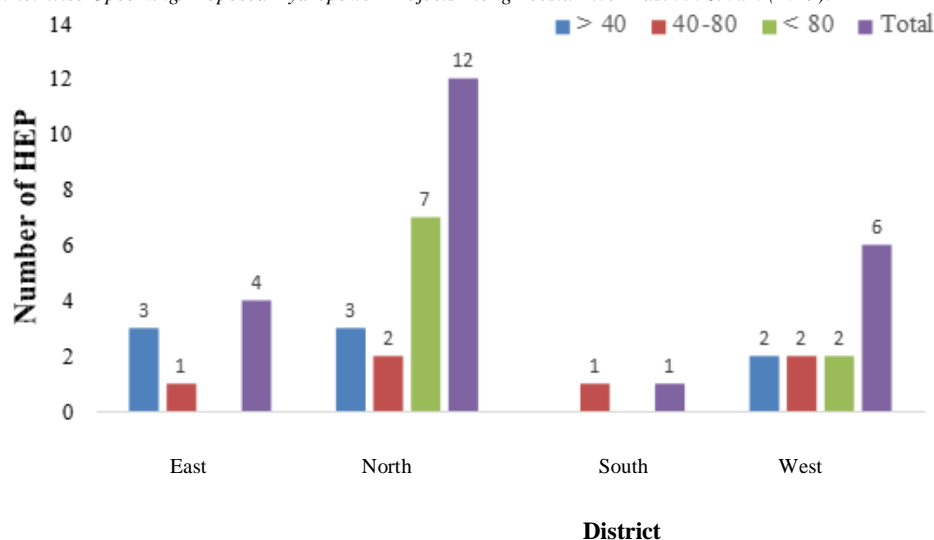
**Table 2**  
Upcoming/Proposed Hydropower Projects Along Teesta River Basin in Sikkim (2019).

District	Number of HEP			Total
	> 40 MW	40-80 MW	<80 MW	
East	3	1	**	4
North	3	2	7	12
South	**	1	**	1
West	2	2	2	6
Total	8	6	9	23

Note. CEA (2016), EDPS (2019), NHPC (2019)

**Figure 2**

District Wise Upcoming/Proposed Hydropower Projects Along Teesta River Basin in Sikkim (2019).



Note. CEA (2016), EDPS (2019), NHPC (2019)

>40, 40-80, <80 – Install Capacity (MW)

#### Economical vulnerability of Lepchas around the project area-

The Lepchas residing in Dzongu have already started feeling the heat on their livelihood due to the power projects built around the region. Due to the gas used in blasting has adversely affected the productivity of the Cardamom has been a fall by about 50% which is the main cash crop cultivated by the Lepchas. Besides, Cardamom, the Lepcha farmers are also experiencing a fall in the production of oranges (Subrata, Purkayastha, 2013). New landslide scars are appearing in the fragile hill slopes and some of houses in the small Lepcha villages are reporting development of cracks due to vibration caused by high power blasting associated with the projects, drying up of perennial streams, landslides etc. have been reported from this area – (Bhasin). The mountain slopes, which have been affected by constructions around the region, are making it difficult for the Lepcha farmers to practice sedentary agriculture. Dust pollution due to rampant structuring of the hydro power projects is affecting the flowering and productivity of fruits.

The development of landslides, cracks and changing of alignment of the land surface due to the vibration caused by high power blasting associated with the projects causing adverse effect on the pattern of cropping, animal husbandry, extinction of valuable medicinal plants and also affected on their regular hunting pattern as wild animals were forced to shifting their existing niche.

#### Protest of the local people

With the announcement of the projects on the Teesta River, the story shifted from New Delhi and Gangtok to the villages in Dzongu in North Sikkim where, in 2004, a group of Lepcha youth opposed to the dams formed a 17-member group called Affected Citizens of Teesta, known as ACT. (The Telegraph 2004)

The Lepchas are protesting the dams on many grounds: that as nature-worshippers their land is sacred and should not be destroyed by development; that Dzongu is recognised as a reserved, and since only Lepchas who are from 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 will bring several thousand workers from outside Sikkim into Dzongu for many years while work is completed who will outnumber the Lepcha population and, since the migrant workers have different customs and beliefs, their dominant presence will soon dilute and destroy Lepcha culture. The Rongkup residing in the area are aware of the threat associated with the development of hydro-power projects and at present are concerned for their future and their rights as an indigenous people to be protected by the Indian Constitution therefore, The Concerned Lepchas of Sikkim (CLOS) under the banner of Affected citizen of Teesta (ACT) are protesting to seek redressal for the problems faced by them in the Dzongu to protest against the arbitrary sanctioning of several mega hydel power projects in the

protected area of Dzongu in North Sikkim by the State Government and NHPC. The organisation has been staging a continuous relay hunger strike since 20<sup>th</sup> June, 2007 demanding that the heavy hydropower projects being set up in Dzongu, the place of origin of the Lepcha Community, the primitive tribe of India should be stopped.

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## Discussion

The projects have been an issue leading to dilemma between the welfare of the state and the welfare of the community. In the name of development of the state, the projects are being developed inside the land solely reserved for the Lepcha tribe in Sikkim leading to their sentimental hurt. The government may have initiated this project on the basis of a complete vulnerability and suitability survey however the agitation by the community indicates that the planners were not much concerned about this community's welfare. The main reason for the protest and agitation against the project is more on the compensation ground. The rehabilitation programme of this community has not been disclosed so far ensuring some assurances to the sufferers, they are 1. Shelter home 2. Livelihood security- lumbering, cultivation, 3. Access to their daily needs 4. Grazing options for their cattle (Animal husbandry) 5. Basic amenities- health, education, or transport etc.

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## Conclusion

From the geomorphological aspect the construction of hydroelectric project in the hilly areas of Sikkim is a menace to people living around the project area for it is done at the cost of alteration of the land use pattern, socio-economic, demographic as well as environmental changes in catchment area of the project. Nevertheless, it is a known fact that well planned infrastructure and cautious execution of projects has been the tool to forge the economic growth of a nation. Sikkim is a relatively backward state of India and needs to enhance its socioeconomic development. The source of income generation in Sikkim being mostly from the service sector the vertical growth of the income seems to be stagnating soon. Sikkim not having extensive agricultural field nor is the business hub to get flourished economically ought to develop tourism and hydroelectric power project here.

Sikkim is bestowed with the serene beauty of natural resources like lustrous vegetation and picturesque landscaping having the great potential of tourism development. Sikkim is also blessed with the number of perennial snow faded swift flowing rivers such as Teesta and Rangit descending from the snow-capped mountain ranges which can be harnessed for generation of hydroelectricity. The river Teesta alone has a huge potential for hydropower generation, calculated at about 8000 M.W. Power is considerably very important source for the overall development of a nation in general and the state and the project area in particular. The state plans to produce a whopping 5000MW of power annually whereas the domestic requirement of the state is only about 100MW of electricity. Hence the rest of the power will help in generating revenue for the state as the state will be in a position to sell energy to the neighbouring populous states of West Bengal, Bihar etc. Therefore, hydel project is the need of the state welfare but it requires further revisions considering the survival issue of the community concerned. Although, state welfare is always on priority as compared with the emotional or sentimental issues raised by the community but the survival of the community is equally important. And for survival they need a strategy for their sustainable rehabilitation.

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