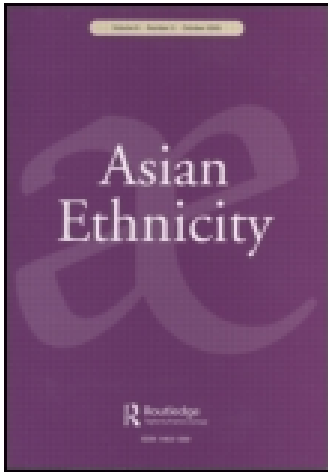


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Duncan McDuie-Ra <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Social Sciences and International Studies , University of New South Wales , Sydney, Australia

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## The dilemmas of pro-development actors: viewing state–ethnic minority relations and intra-ethnic dynamics through contentious development projects

Duncan McDuie-Ra\*

*School of Social Sciences and International Studies, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia*

Studies of ethnic minority peoples in Asia have long focussed on the relations between ethnic minority communities and the modern state and on the role of development in shaping these relations. This paper is concerned with how ethnic minorities respond to the state-led development. While there are numerous studies focussing on the collective agency of ethnic minorities opposing development projects, few studies consider the agency of pro-development actors. Pro-development actors are usually dismissed as co-opted, manipulated, inauthentic, or elite-driven, yet they can offer crucial insights into understanding state–ethnic minority relations and particularly intra-ethnic minority relations. This paper concentrates on pro-dam actors from the Lepcha minority in the Indian state of Sikkim to make four interlinked arguments. First, examining pro-development actors breaks the homogenous view of state–ethnic minority relations and shifts the focus to intra-ethnic relationships. Second, collective agency of ethnic minorities is not fixed in a particular relationship with the state nor does it have a particular position on development. Third, the long-term experience of development is vital in understanding how ethnic minorities manoeuvre and alter their position on contentious projects. Lastly, analysis of pro-development actors creates major dilemmas for researchers which are not easily overcome.

**Keywords:** state–minority relations; intra-ethnic relations; development protests; dam protests; Sikkim; Lepcha.

### Introduction

In February 2009, after 599 days of a peaceful hunger strike in the state of Sikkim in the Indian Himalayas, 43 members of the Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) were arrested on charges of trespassing, arson, theft, damage to property, and rioting after allegedly causing major damage to the construction site of the Panan Dam in the Dzongu reserve.<sup>1</sup> The incident was the climax of four and half years of action by the ACT and other organisations against dams on the Teesta River and its tributaries. The ACT has claimed the dams proposed for the Dzongu reserve would irreversibly damage the environment, culture, and sacred sites of the Lepcha ethnic minority. During this period the protest against the dams became associated with a resurgent

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\*Email: [d.mcdueie@unsw.edu.au](mailto:d.mcdueie@unsw.edu.au)

<sup>1</sup>'ACT Loses Cool on Landmark Day', 1; '40 ACT Members Sent to JC', 1.

expression of Lepcha identity. For many academics, journalists, and commentators, the protest demonstrated a familiar narrative: a numerically small ethnic minority, classified as a ‘most primitive tribe’ by the Government of Sikkim and a ‘vanishing tribe’ in popular nomenclature, fighting against the development desires of the modern state in order to protect ancestral lands, the environment, sacred sites, and retain remnants of a ‘vanishing’ culture. It epitomised the clashes between modernity and tradition, materiality and spirituality, development and the environment, minority and majority, and people and state that have become familiar throughout Asia in recent decades. The protests brought attention to Sikkim and the Lepcha minority, raising further questions about the impacts of hydropower on communities and the direction of development in India. In 2008 the Government of Sikkim cancelled four of the five dam projects affecting Dzongu, making the anti-dam movement one of the most successful in recent decades. The remaining Panan dam has now become a major flashpoint between opponents and proponents from within the Lepcha community, providing insights into the dynamics of state–ethnic minority relations and intra-ethnic minority relations and the ways development shapes these relations.

Beyond this narrative, there has been little attention paid to individuals and organisations supporting the Panan dam. While the anti-dam movement has been very well documented, Lepchas supporting the dam have been dismissed as minions of the state who are either bought-off or naïve. However, there are three crucial elements of the pro-dam position that complicate such a hasty dismissal: (1) the majority of supporters emerged from the area most affected by the dam, the same area most closely associated with the ‘pure’ Lepcha identity threatened by the project, (2) supporters of the dam have made demands on the state to *accelerate* the Panan project and negotiated a favourable agreement for compensation, and (3) they have openly clashed with the opposition movement on a number of occasions over who has the right to speak on behalf of the Lepchas of Dzongu.

By examining the pro-dam network in Dzongu this paper makes four interlinked arguments transferable to other contexts. First, examining pro-development actors breaks the homogenous view of state–ethnic minority relations and shifts the focus to intra-ethnic relationships. Second, collective agency of ethnic minorities is not fixed in a particular relationship with the state nor does it have a particular position on development. Third, while attention is drawn to the crucial junctures when contentious development projects are planned and opposed, the long-term experience of development and the state is vital in understanding how ethnic minorities manoeuvre and alter their position. Last, the analysis of pro-development actors creates dilemmas for researchers and may explain why the familiar narrative is so attractive. No matter how difficult the dilemmas raised by pro-development actors are, in many cases it is even more difficult to dismiss these voices as spurious.

This article consists of five sections. The first section sets out the ways in which development shapes state–ethnic minority relations and continues to shape the ways ethnic minority identities are constructed and reproduced in much of Asia. A discussion of agency and contentious politics follows to address the question of how ethnic minorities respond to state-led development initiatives. The second section discusses the Lepcha minority in Sikkim and their relationship with the state and other ethnic groups, focussing on the centrality of the ‘vanishing tribe’ discourse. The third section discusses the anti-dam movement, the pro-dam network, and the

conflicts between the two groups. The fourth section offers a critical reading of the pro-dam network, demonstrating the insights it offers for further understanding of state–ethnic minority relations and intra-ethnic minority relations. The final section concludes by arguing that insights gained from examining pro-development actors can be extremely significant for understanding state–ethnic minority relations and the dynamics of collective agency, while at the same time raising dilemmas for researchers.

### Development and collective agency in the margins

Studies of ethnic minority peoples in Asia have long focussed on the relations between ethnic minority communities and the modern state. The creation of ethnic categories in colonial and postcolonial state-making have produced and reproduced identities that have been internalised, contested, rejected, and renegotiated throughout Asia.<sup>2</sup> As the study of identity has become ubiquitous across disciplines, ethnic identity has also become an indispensable feature of understanding relations between minority peoples and the state and between different ethnic communities in different locations. Central to the relations between the state and ethnic minority peoples is development. Regardless of how defined, development ideas and processes shape state–ethnic minority relations in a number of ways.

First, development is viewed as a form of control or coercion. From this perspective development is used as a way of controlling ethnic minority peoples through resettlement and/or permanent settlement, migration of members of other communities into ethnic minority areas, land privatisation and appropriation, reforms to customary land tenure, deforestation or denial of access to forests, the use of development funds to cultivate loyalty and patronage in ethnic minority areas, and ‘modernisation’ programs such as education, religious conversion or enforced secularisation, the formalisation of institutions and systems of rule into state structures, the extension of infrastructure to remote areas which is sometimes seen to increase state control and access to resources while also facilitating the extension of other development initiatives.<sup>3</sup>

Second, development is viewed as a process of bringing ethnic minorities deeper into the social and cultural realm of the state. While the actual measures involved in this process may be similar to those described immediately above, the outcome can be thought of as less intent on control and domination and more on integration and incorporation. Obviously this varies in different states and under different governments, yet it can also vary between different ethnic minority groups in the same polity; some undergoing greater pressure for integration while others are

<sup>2</sup>Debate over whether ethnicity is a wholly colonial construction or existed in various forms prior to colonisation is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the view of Proschan is useful here, namely ‘imaginings (of ethnicity) produced during and after the colonial era must... be seen as adoptions, transformations, modifications, or adaptations of *pre-existing* local conceptions’. Proschan, ‘Peoples of the Gourd’, 1000, emphasis in the original.

<sup>3</sup>The literature on the various points listed here is vast and spans a number of disciplines. For a small sample see Cao, *Ethnic Minorities and Regional Development*; Duncan, *Civilizing the Margins*, 2004; Guo, *State and Ethnicity*; Hardy, *Red Hills*; Jonsson, *Mien Relations*; Peluso and Vandergeest, ‘Genealogies of the Political Forest and Customary Rights’; Scott, *Art of Not Being Governed*; van Schendel, ‘The Invention of The “Jummas”’; Winzeler, *Indigenous Peoples and the State*.

granted more autonomy.<sup>4</sup> As Scott argues, this ‘enclosure’ has been characterised by resistant peoples moving to ‘non-state spaces’ to seek refuge from the power of states rather than simply being unreachable or isolated.<sup>5</sup> He adds that the accelerated enclosure of non-state spaces in the past 50 years has altered the prospects of such escape.<sup>6</sup>

Third, development is central to the ways ethnic minority identities are constructed by the state, by dominant ethnic groups, and by other ethnic minorities. Ethnic minorities are frequently viewed according to their level of ‘development’ vis-à-vis other groups within the state, and sometimes those beyond the state.<sup>7</sup> One of the most common ways that this is expressed is that particular ethnic minorities are ‘backward’ or at an earlier stage of development, frequently read as a continuum or modification of colonial categories such as ‘savage’ or ‘primitive’.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the ‘backward’ construction is often used to legitimise development intervention by the state and, increasingly, by non-state actors.<sup>9</sup> Ethnic minorities are viewed as being in the process of ‘catching up’ to dominant groups and development is the path that must be followed. This has become a major point of differentiation in the construction of ‘self’ and ‘other’ for minorities when viewing dominant groups and the state itself, and it has also become a crucial differentiation between different ethnic minority groups by the state, even when living in close proximity to each other.<sup>10</sup> In certain locations such constructions are reproduced by ethnic minorities as part of their own positioning in relation to the state, other ethnic groups, and resources.<sup>11</sup>

Fourth, development provides a set of opportunities and ‘goods’ that ethnic minority groups actively pursue. This is much less discussed than the previous three items, but empirical studies reveal the ways in which many ethnic minority groups or their political affiliates campaign for an increase in development activity in their localities, often as a response to both material need and internalised constructions of their relative underdevelopment or backwardness when compared to other communities.<sup>12</sup> Thus development shapes state–ethnic minority relations but it also underpins a set of demands that ethnic minorities make on the state.

It is important to note that given the large number of actors involved in development at the international, national, and local levels, state–ethnic minority relations can be moderated by other actors. Aid donors, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) both national and international, and international organisations (IOs) involved in development often deal directly with ethnic minorities and/or

<sup>4</sup>Baruah, *Durable Disorder*; Callahan, *Political Autonomy in Burma's Ethnic Minority States*; Eilenberg, ‘Negotiating Autonomy at the Margins of the State’.

<sup>5</sup>Scott, *Art of Not Being Governed*, 22–32.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>7</sup>Keyes, ‘Presidential Address: “The Peoples of Asia”’; Michaud, ‘Handling Mountain Minorities’.

<sup>8</sup>Kikon, ‘From Loincloth, Suits, to Battle Greens’, 83. It is important to stress that such categories often built on existing conceptions of marginal communities. For a discussion of this in the same empirical context as Kikon see Sakia, *Fragmented Memories*, 50–1.

<sup>9</sup>Barabantseva, ‘Development as Localization’; Sturgeon, *Border Landscapes*.

<sup>10</sup>Ibrahim, ‘Regional Development in Rural Malaysia’.

<sup>11</sup>Bal, ‘Becoming the Garos of Bangladesh’, 439–55; Friedman, ‘Embodying Civility’; Santasombat, ‘Karen Cultural Capital’.

<sup>12</sup>McDuie-Ra, ‘Vision 2020 or Re-vision 1958’.

advise governments on ethnic minority matters.<sup>13</sup> This does not necessarily alter or challenge the ways ethnic minorities are constructed or the practice of development being undertaken by the state, though it may in some cases. In Sikkim the role of donors, IOs, and NGOs working explicitly with ethnic minorities is limited and will be of little concern here.

Given the ways development shapes material and ideational relations between ethnic minorities and the state, and also between ethnic groups, scholars have become concerned with the ways that ethnic minorities respond to development. Responses take many forms, from resistance to contestation, from avoidance to adaptation.<sup>14</sup> The responses of ethnic minorities can be examined by focussing on two concepts: agency and contentious politics. Despite their different origins the concepts are now used across disciplines, though there are subtle differences in focus. Agency tends to be concerned with engagement that can take place between different groups and even individuals in response to opportunities afforded by different institutional and social structures. In other words, the state does not need to be present when considering agency. While recognising that the concept of agency is subject to contention, the definition posed by Emirbayer and Mische will be adopted here. They define agency as:

... a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment).<sup>15</sup>

Analytically important are changes in agential orientation revealing choices and manoeuvres in relation to the opportunities and constraints of context.<sup>16</sup> Agency is not simply the capacity to alter structures that order social life through rational decision making or normative compulsion towards a pre-determined end, rather the ends and means of human agency respond to ever-changing conditions and contexts.<sup>17</sup>

Contentious politics focuses on collective action directed at the government or the state – which can be temporally embedded social engagement as described above – but has certain other requirements. The definition of contentious politics outlined by McAdam et al. will be used here:

... episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when (a) at least one government is the claimant and (b) the claims would, if realized affect the interests of one of the claimants ... (or) collective political struggle.<sup>18</sup>

Thus while the differences between the concepts are no doubt arenas of scholarly debate, for the sake of clarity it will be argued that agency and contentious politics complement each other by drawing attention to the capacity and contextual nature

<sup>13</sup>See Hagen, *Creating a 'New Nepal'*.

<sup>14</sup>Duncan, 'Legislating Modernity among the Marginalized', 16. See also edited volume of responses in the Mekong region; Leepreecha, McCaskill, and Buadaeng, *Challenging the Limits*.

<sup>15</sup>Emirbayer and Mische, 'What is Agency?', 963. Parentheses in original.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 964.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 967.

<sup>18</sup>McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*, 5.

of engagement on the one hand, and the collective nature of interaction on the other, while also being cognisant of an overarching, though fluid, purpose. For the study of state–ethnic minority relations this draws us towards analysing collective agency of ethnic minority movements and networks vis-à-vis the state; in this case represented by the Government of Sikkim.

Concern with collective agency in the margins of the modern state raises the question: how, why, and to what ends do ethnic minorities respond to the state and its methods of developing them? This is generally analysed in two main contexts: (1) as part of long-term relations between the state, ethnic minorities and development and (2) at crucial junctures when contentious development projects are planned and opposed, particularly when visible protests take place. Often these contexts are deeply interrelated, however, it is the latter that draw the most interest, particularly when cast in the familiar narrative of ethnic minorities opposing contentious projects and by extension the state, and in some analyses the very notion of development itself. This has the effect of situating ethnic minorities in a permanently adversarial relationship with the state and development, setting up binaries that are difficult to break down analytically. Thus minority–majority, minority–state, and minority–development become embedded categories and there are few accounts of differentiated agency among ethnic minorities, particularly among more heavily marginalised groups. In many cases these binaries are evident empirically, yet such binaries cast ethnic minorities as homogenous wholes and lock our understanding of collective agency into predetermined roles. As Guo has argued in the case of relations between the state and ethnic minorities in southwest China, such thinking creates a ‘unified front’ view of both ethnic minorities and the state which needs to be challenged empirically.<sup>19</sup>

One obvious element left untouched by the ‘united front’ view is pro-development actors among ethnic minorities. Few scholars are drawn to examining them, yet they can provide crucial insights into the complexities of state–ethnic minority relations and intra-ethnic politics. Often their visibility is reduced as they complicate the familiar narrative of collective agency. Perhaps most significantly they create a set of dilemmas for researchers. First is the dilemma of authenticity. Pro-development groups are generally seen to represent an elite or privileged voice among ethnic minorities, especially one attributed to those who will profit from development projects. This is often the case but it should not necessarily be assumed and, even when it is clearly the case, the divisions engendered by this kind of patronage among ethnic minorities can provide important insights into state–ethnic minority relations and intra-ethnic dynamics. Furthermore, answers to the questions of who supports the development project, why, and if and how their perspective has altered are also crucial to understanding the ‘choices and manoeuvres’ of collective agency discussed above. The second is the dilemma of co-option. Many groups expressing pro-development positions are seen as variously co-opted, manipulated, or duped by the state or other agents of development. Again, members of ethnic minority communities are often co-opted, they are manipulated and bought off, and they are tricked and deceived; but not always. Furthermore, it is very difficult from a distance to distinguish between genuine expressions of support for development projects and the use of certain representatives of ethnic minority communities by the state to add legitimacy to their own designs. Thus this needs deeper empirical

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<sup>19</sup>Guo, *State and Ethnicity*, 314.



inquiry. The third is a moral dilemma. Development projects that rupture communities and threaten their livelihoods and identities are generally perceived to be against the interests of affected peoples. Examining pro-development actors gives exposure to voices that advocate such projects and puts many researchers on uncomfortable moral ground as such research may be used by proponents of the projects to lend further legitimacy and undermine opposition. These dilemmas are real and do not disappear by simply adopting a different viewpoint or rearranging the terminology used. These dilemmas were raised constantly during fieldwork for this article and staying true to the views expressed by respondents was a constant challenge. However, pursuing research among pro-development members of the Lepcha ethnic group also revealed a number of crucial insights into the relations between ethnic minorities, the state, and development, and also within ethnic minority communities at the centre of such projects. Before the contentious project and the various collective positions of different Lepcha groups are discussed, the following section will introduce ethnic relations in Sikkim.

### The Lepcha minority in Sikkim

Sikkim is a federal state in the Indian Union and is located in the Himalayas. Sikkim borders Bhutan, China (Tibet), Nepal, and the Darjeeling District of the Indian state of West Bengal. It is populated by three main ethnic groups; Bhutias, Lepchas, and Nepalis, officially classified as 'Sikkim subjects' since 1961.<sup>20</sup> When Sikkim merged with India in 1975, Sikkim subjects were made citizens of India and, theoretically, no new persons could be classified in this category except for descendants and spouses of existing subjects.<sup>21</sup> Ethnicity in Sikkim can be complex, but has been simplified by the state into the subcategories of Bhutia, Lepcha, and Nepali. This article concentrates on the Lepcha as they are at the centre of protests over dams in the Dzongu reserve in North Sikkim.

As can be expected, Sikkimese history is detailed and contested; however, the simplified view of the past used by the state to construct identities and ethnic categories will be used here as this informs the categories of ethnicity that have the most impact on everyday life. The Lepchas are considered the earliest inhabitants of today's Sikkim and the Darjeeling District of West Bengal, practising shifting cultivation and hunter-gathering in apparent isolation. Bhutia immigration from Tibet and Bhutan into Sikkim has taken place in various waves over several centuries and by 1642 a Tibetan theocracy was established in Sikkim under the rule of the Chogyal (or 'King').<sup>22</sup> Bhutia immigrants were lamas, traders, and livestock herders; the latter pushing the Lepcha into forests and lower valleys. All land in Sikkim was property of the Chogyal who distributed this to landlords known as *Kazi* who were predominantly Bhutia in ethnicity; they were empowered to appoint headmen (*mondals*) who could rent land for cultivation or dwellings, leaving Lepchas economically and politically marginalised. Inter-marriage between Bhutia aristocrats

<sup>20</sup>Datta. 'Ethnicity and Resource Management', 77.

<sup>21</sup>There is also a significant population of 'plains' people particularly from Bengal and Rajasthan running businesses and working for the central government, some of whom have been in Sikkim for several generations.

<sup>22</sup>Mullard argues the accuracy of this date is contentious and its acceptance owes to the later need to perpetuate a 'coronation myth' to maintain the power of the Chogyal. Mullard, 'The "Tibetan" formation', 43–4.

and Lepcha chiefs followed by conversion to Buddhism meant integration in the upper levels of society, and discrimination at other levels.<sup>23</sup>

After the British gained political control of Sikkim in 1888, the ethnic composition altered dramatically under the Political Officer J.C. White. White saw immigration, particularly from Nepal, as necessary to provide labour for agriculture and the newly established tea plantations, for building roads and other infrastructure, and for increasing taxation.<sup>24</sup> Nepalis migrated as labourers but were also willing to farm wastelands and clear forest for terraced agriculture, reducing the already scant amount of land for shifting cultivation, and further pushing Lepchas, who were neither landlords nor intensive cultivators, to the margins. By the turn of the twentieth century, after internal administration was handed back to the Chogyal, Nepalis were the majority population of Sikkim, governed by a minority Bhutia ruling class. Under these circumstances an administrative division was created between the 'migrant' Nepalis and 'non-migrant' Bhutia and Lepcha populations of Sikkim. Revenue Order No.1 of 1917 prohibited the sale or transfer of Bhutia or Lepcha land to members of other ethnic groups.<sup>25</sup> Further restrictions were placed on Nepali migrants serving as officers or headmen. These measures pushed the Bhutia and Lepcha ethnic groups into a 'composite' ethnic group,<sup>26</sup> and similarly, though with far less critical or scholarly recognition, pushed the various non-Bhutia and Lepcha people from different ethnic groups into the composite category 'Nepali'.<sup>27</sup> The category Bhutia-Lepcha, or 'BL' in everyday parlance in contemporary Sikkim, has persisted and is the basis for reserved seats in parliament, government employment, and educational institutions. This has left the Lepcha as the minority 'partner' in the minority BL category.

It has been argued throughout the past century that both the BL category and the common Sikkimese identity have eroded a separate Lepcha identity, leading to claims that they are a 'dying race'<sup>28</sup> and a 'vanishing tribe'.<sup>29</sup> Plaisier claims that the most recent statistical data estimates there to be slightly fewer than 30,000 Lepcha speakers,<sup>30</sup> though it is important to note that many people who are ethnically Lepcha are not Lepcha speakers. The concept of the 'vanishing tribe', the term coined by the Lepcha civil servant turned author Arthur Foning and the title of his influential 1987 book, has been strongly internalised. Bentley writes that the 'notion of a vanishing Lepcha culture or even of the entire Lepcha tribe is expressed by every member of Lepcha society: urban and rural, male and female, young and old, educated and uneducated'.<sup>31</sup> She adds that 'for all of them losing Lepcha culture has become an integral part of describing Lepcha culture'.<sup>32</sup>

In the last decade the Government of Sikkim has responded by ensuring that Lepcha culture and identity is protected. Lepcha is one of 11 official languages, it is

<sup>23</sup>Gorer, *Himalayan Village*, 36.

<sup>24</sup>McKay, 'The Indigenisation of Western Medicine', 25.

<sup>25</sup>Revenue Order No. 1 was enacted in 1917 and still forms the basis of land transfer laws in Sikkim, particularly the Sikkim Transfer of Land Regulation Bill of 1989.

<sup>26</sup>Hiltz, 'Constructing Sikkimese National Identity'; Nakane, 'A Plural Society'.

<sup>27</sup>Shneiderman and Turin, 'Seeking the Tribe', 54.

<sup>28</sup>Gorer, *Himalayan Village*, 37.

<sup>29</sup>Foning, *Lepcha My Vanishing Tribe*.

<sup>30</sup>Plaisier, 'Lepcha Orthography and Literature', 7.

<sup>31</sup>Bentley, 'Change and Culture Revival', 60.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 60.

taught in schools, there are Lepcha language textbooks, Lepcha editions of the government newspaper and certain documents, Lepcha language radio broadcasts, and the prominent Lepcha Cultural Association that promotes Lepcha literature, handicrafts, archery, and festivals. These official spaces for the expression of Lepcha culture do not exist among the Lepchas of the Darjeeling Hills, or among Lepchas in the Ilam district of Nepal, or those in the Samsi district of Bhutan.<sup>33</sup> As a result there is, at least at a certain 'official' level, a more visible Lepcha identity in Sikkim than among Lepchas living in surrounding areas. Religion also plays a role in these differences, with most Lepcha in the Darjeeling Hills following Christianity, while those in Sikkim, particularly North Sikkim, are predominantly Buddhist with some following the traditional Lepcha religion.<sup>34</sup>

In recent years the Government of Sikkim has undertaken further measures to differentiate between certain ethnic groups and sub-groups within its population. One of these is the classification of Lepchas as the 'most primitive tribal group' passed by the Sikkim Assembly in 2005 in order to 'protect and safeguard the vanishing tribe and to uplift their socio-economic, educational, and political status... and to give them a distinct identity and special status'.<sup>35</sup> While the Bhutia-Lepcha category still exists, Lepchas have a further means of accessing state reservations. As Shneiderman and Turin have commented, 'the previously unassailable category of Scheduled Tribe had just been upstaged by the new category of Most Primitive Tribe'.<sup>36</sup> For the Lepcha community of Sikkim, most primitive tribe status reinforced the vanishing tribe preoccupation, and official differentiation from the Bhutias set the stage for more vocal expressions of Lepcha ethnic identity. Contesting dams has occurred in this context.

Of all the protective measures for Lepchas, none is more significant than the Dzongu reserve. Dzongu (also spelt Jongu or Zongu) is a Lepcha reserve with a population of approximately 7000 people. Dzongu was declared a special protected area through Notification 3069 in 1956 and this was kept intact at the time of the merger with India in 1975. Entry restrictions are strict, even Lepchas from other parts of Sikkim are not allowed to settle in Dzongu, and most outsiders can only gain permits for short visits. All land in Dzongu is Lepcha owned and though it can be leased to non-Lepcha labourers, work permits are only given through the invitation of a Dzongu resident and these have to be renewed every year.<sup>37</sup> If the Lepcha are simultaneously dying, vanishing, and primitive, then Dzongu is the lifeline to the Lepcha past.

As a consequence, Dzongu has long been a drawcard for anthropologists and ethnographers seeking access to Lepcha culture before it 'disappears'.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps the most famous colonial era account of the Lepchas is Geoffrey Gorer's *Himalayan Village*, based on fieldwork in Dzongu and still in print today. Gorer states that 'it is only in Zongu and in one or two villages outside the reserve that there is a homogenous Lepcha society, practically undisturbed by alien influence'.<sup>39</sup> He considers this 'artificial', arguing that without the benevolence of the Chogyal in

<sup>33</sup>Plaisier, 'Lepcha Orthography and Literature', 8.

<sup>34</sup>Bentley, 'Change and Culture Revival', 64.

<sup>35</sup>'State Notification', 1

<sup>36</sup>Shneiderman and Turin, 'Seeking the Tribe', 58.

<sup>37</sup>Bentley, 'Change and Culture Revival', 67.

<sup>38</sup>Plaisier, 'In Awe of so Many *Múng*.'

<sup>39</sup>Gorer, *Himalayan Village*, 37.

granting the reserve ‘these Lepchas would, like their fellows, have been ousted from what little and poor land remains to them’.<sup>40</sup> Foning writes of time spent in Dzongu in the late 1940s and in *My Vanishing Tribe* he refers to it as ‘the dreamland of our modern Lepcha world’.<sup>41</sup> Dzongu has significance beyond its size and population. For Lepchas outside Dzongu it signifies the remains of all that has been ‘lost’, a resource for reproducing ethnic identity at a time when changes to ethnic categories make identity particularly salient. With such significance the proposal to build five large dams in Dzongu changed the political landscape in Sikkim, and triggered new forms of collective agency among the Lepcha.

### Contentious dams in Dzongu

Sikkim has long been targeted for hydropower investment, but it was not until the 1980s that major dam projects were commissioned. There are currently 29 hydropower projects at various stages of implementation in Sikkim. Five of these would have been built in the Dzongu reserve. While there have been protests against other dam projects in Sikkim, most notably the Rathongchu project in North Sikkim in the 1990s,<sup>42</sup> this article will focus on the Dzongu dams only as they allow examination of the dimensions of development in state–ethnic minority relations and the collective agency of ethnic minorities participating in contentious politics. Proposals for dams on the Teesta River, which flows from the high Himalayas through Sikkim into West Bengal, go back to the 1970s, but it was not until the late 1990s that feasibility studies and impact assessments started to take place. As the Indian power sector opened up to private investment in the early 1990s, the Government of Sikkim began trying to attract investors to the state, resulting in a comprehensive hydropower policy in 1998. Environmental clearance for the Teesta dams was granted in 1999, and in 2002 26 companies were chosen to sign agreements with the Government of Sikkim to begin the projects.<sup>43</sup> In the following years the Government of Sikkim and the relevant commissioned companies began to hold community consultations and negotiate memorandums of understanding (MoU) with affected communities. It was during these consultations that the projects began to be questioned and opposed. This section will first focus on the opposition movement to the Dzongu dams before turning attention to the pro-dam network.

### The anti-dam movement

The detailed events surrounding opposition to the Dzongu dams have been extensively reported and documented in the local and national print media, through several websites and weblogs, and in articles by Arora,<sup>44</sup> Little,<sup>45</sup> and Wangchuk.<sup>46</sup> While the number of arguments from the different groups involved, incidents, and changes of position are well beyond the scope of this article, there are several key actors and episodes that will be outlined. The main opposition group, the Affected

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Foning, *My Vanishing Tribe*, 268.

<sup>42</sup>Arora, ‘Text and Context’.

<sup>43</sup>Dutta, ‘Lepcha v Hydropower’.

<sup>44</sup>Arora, ‘Unheard Voices’; Arora, ‘Gandhigiri in Sikkim’.

<sup>45</sup>Little, ‘Deep Ecology, Dams’.

<sup>46</sup>Wangchuk, ‘Lepchas and Hydel Protest’.

Citizens of Teesta (ACT), emerged in 2004. The ACT worked publicly and behind the scenes to oppose all the dam projects in Sikkim, but soon focussed solely on the Dzongu dams. They called for all five Dzongu dams to be cancelled, four of which were cancelled in 2008.<sup>47</sup> They based their opposition on four main claims: (1) the dams would affect the cultural fabric of the Dzongu reserve and the threatened Lepcha minority, (2) the influx of labourers and other outsiders would have a negative impact on life in Dzongu, (3) the dams would destroy sacred landscapes intrinsic to Lepcha identity, and (4) the dams would damage the environment of Dzongu and threaten the Kanchenjunga Biosphere Reserve.<sup>48</sup> As Arora notes:

[f]or the Lepchas, the implementation of the Teesta hydel project and the loss of Dzongu (the ancient Lepcha reserve) may result in ethnocide, the disappearance of their cultural heritage that is rooted to their ancestral connections and performance of rituals connected to the land, forests, mountains, lakes, and nature, in general.<sup>49</sup>

In the period between 2004 and early 2009 the ACT mobilised residents to block inspection teams, organised marches to Dzongu and rallies in Gangtok, maintained a vocal presence at public hearings, built linkages with anti-dam movements in other parts of India, and entered into talks with the state and central governments.<sup>50</sup> Other organisations have become involved, most notably the Concerned Lepchas of Sikkim (CLOS) and the Rong Ong Prongzom (Lepcha Youth Organisation) from Darjeeling in neighbouring West Bengal.

The anti-dam movement gained a new dimension, and a broader following, when Dawa Lepcha of the ACT and Tenzing Lepcha from the CLOS went on a hunger strike in June 2007. The hunger strike was relayed in Dzongu too, and the *Weeping Sikkim* weblog<sup>51</sup> set up to monitor the hunger strike drew attention from the rest of India and the world. Over the ensuing months the Government of Sikkim reacted by suspending the Dzongu dams, constituting a review committee, and initiating talks with the ACT and other opposition groups. The ACT and the government entered talks on several occasions, but government promises failed to materialise. The ACT and supporters went to New Delhi where, as Wanchuk reports, 'the rallies and meetings ... wore a completely Lepcha flavour and the memorandums spoke only of Dzongu.'<sup>52</sup> Further actions took place, including the forming of the Lepcha Holy Land Protection Joint Action Committee, and the angle of the protests shifted away from environmental concerns, and even concerns over migration, to contesting the dams as threats to the Lepcha holy land, sacred not only to Lepchas in Dzongu but all Lepchas in the Himalayas. In March 2008 a Lepcha flag was inaugurated by the ACT and used in public rallies in Gangtok. In the same month the Chief Minister of Sikkim announced that four of the five dams in Dzongu would be cancelled, leaving only the Panan dam. The ACT vowed to continue their opposition until there were no dams in Dzongu, channelling all energy into opposing the Panan dam.

Opposition to the Dzongu dams became a catalyst for a nascent Lepcha identity movement. This gained momentum as Lepchas have rarely had a prominent political voice in Sikkim. The creation of a Lepcha flag, the naming of Dzongu as a holy land,

<sup>47</sup>These were the Lingza, Ringpi, Rangyong, and Rukel hydropower projects.

<sup>48</sup>Wanchuk, 'Lepchas and Hydel Protest', 35.

<sup>49</sup>Arora, 'Unheard Voices', 3453.

<sup>50</sup>Wanchuk, 'Lepchas and Hydel Protest', 39–41.

<sup>51</sup><http://www.weepingsikkim.blogspot.com>.

<sup>52</sup>Wanchuk, 'Lepchas and Hydel Protest', 49.

and the linking of the Dzongu dams to the ‘vanishing tribe’ were its key components. Not only did the opposition movement contest the authority of the state and resist the state’s version of development, but collective agency itself was the catalyst for a more strongly articulated Lepcha identity, articulating both its fragility and its emergent political strength. The collective agency of the Lepcha groups opposing the Dzongu dams captured the imagination of scholars, activists, and the regional media. For example, Little describes a meeting in December 2006 in Gangtok at a particularly tense time in negotiations between the ACT and the government and surmises that:

They are known for their shy, quiet persona but that day 500 or more Lepchas, from the remote North of Sikkim . . . discover their loud voices and they holler and clap and laugh and yell their support for the group who will lead them in this fight for their sacred land and culture.<sup>53</sup>

Significantly, Medha Patkar, a well known anti-dam activist and veteran of the Narmada Bachao Aandolan movement visited the hunger strikers in Gangtok in July 2007 and lambasted the Government of Sikkim, bringing the anti-dam movement into the fold of mainstream Indian environmental activism. Comparisons began to be drawn to other movements in the Indian past and present such as the Chipko movement against deforestation in Uttaranchal, the Narmada Bachao Aandolan anti-dam movement in central India, and even to the anti-colonial resistance of the Indian independence movement. The deeply symbolic hunger strike appealed to a national (and international) audience to whom the concept of *satyagraha*, or non-violent resistance, is deeply embedded and ‘remains the dominant . . . idiom of dissent’.<sup>54</sup> Indeed the idea of the Lepcha protest as *satyagraha* has gained currency. As Arora writes:

Sitting under a white-silken ‘khada’ covered picture of Mahatma Gandhi and listening to sacred Buddhist chants, surrounded by their supporters, the activists continue undaunted in their struggle . . . Concerned Lepcha men and women are participating in this indefinite relay *satyagraha* while Buddhist lamas and Lepcha shamans are performing rituals at the venue of the hunger strike.<sup>55</sup>

This added further legitimacy and impetus to the movement, particularly outside Sikkim, but at the local level the movement generated conflict, not only between this nascent Lepcha movement and the state but among the Lepcha population itself.

Evidence of the extent of divisions came in April 2008 when a pilgrimage to Dzongu by between 500 and 700 Lepchas organised by the anti-dam movement sparked hostile reactions from locals as they moved through parts of Sikkim. The confrontation came to head on the bridge over the Teesta entering Dzongu, where a counter rally of around 500 Lepchas held the pilgrimage group out of Dzongu claiming that they were disrupting the debate on the dam and turning it into an ethnic issue.<sup>56</sup> The confrontation and the arrest of ACT members and accusations of sabotage in February 2009 described at the start of this article furthered the tensions

<sup>53</sup>Little, ‘Lepcha Narratives’, 234. Similar scenes are recalled by Little in a later article emphasising the sacral ecological elements of the protest and its non-violent nature. Little, ‘Deep Ecology, Dams’, 41, 45, 51.

<sup>54</sup>Vajpeyi, ‘Resenting the Indian State’, 29.

<sup>55</sup>Arora, ‘Unheard Voices’, 3451. See also Little, ‘Deep Ecology, Dams’, 45–7.

<sup>56</sup>Wangchuk, ‘Lepchas and Hydel Protest’, 54.

between the anti-dam movement and the dam supporters. As a result the anti-dam movement came to be viewed as a movement of Lepchas from outside Dzongu (though indeed many of the opponents of the project including hunger strikers were originally from Dzongu) and the network of dam supporters came to be viewed as composed of Lepchas from inside Dzongu.

### **Pro-dam groups in Dzongu**

During this same period of 2004 a group of Lepchas supporting the dams in Dzongu emerged. The pro-dam groups are less of a movement and more of a network of NGOs, political leaders, and public servants with some ties with larger Lepcha organisations in Gangtok. They lack the coherence of the anti-dam movement which came into being by opposing the dams and rely instead upon a shared position among existing actors. This network is rarely mentioned in the accounts of the project and has attracted little interest from scholars, activists, or the media. However, there are several factors that warrant closer analysis. First, the pro-dam network is centred within Dzongu itself. As Dzongu will bear the brunt of the environmental degradation and demographic transformation from the dam, it is significant that there is support for the project from people living in the locations where this transformation will take place. Second, far from being passive spectators of the state's hydropower plans, the pro-dam network has pressured the state to accelerate the dam projects. Representatives of communities in upper-Dzongu negotiated and signed a comprehensive MoU with the Government of Sikkim and the private hydropower contractor in 2006 that gives major concessions to the community. Armed with this agreement a delegation of 500 Lepchas from Dzongu drove to Gangtok in July 2007 to 'reiterate their support' for the Panan dam and pressure the government to continue.<sup>57</sup> Third, the pro-dam network has clashed with the anti-dam movement in and near Dzongu and tensions between the groups have escalated. This is significant for members of an ethnic group constructed as peaceful and docile and also because inter-ethnic violence is rare in Sikkim and intra-ethnic violence almost unheard of. This begs the question: what are members of the pro-dam network fighting for, particularly when the project appears to be nothing short of a disaster for the people of Dzongu? There is a more complex narrative at play here and a focus only on collective agency in opposing the dams misses out on crucial aspects of this alternative narrative.

During two periods of field research in 2008 and 2009, interviews were conducted in Dzongu among Lepcha leaders involved in the pro-dam network to different degrees. The only remaining dam going ahead at this time was the Panan dam located in upper Dzongu near the village of Laven. The 11 respondents interviewed included members of the sole NGO in Dzongu, the president and former president of the same NGO, leaders from four of the five Gram Panchayat units of local government, the head of the community welfare department in Dzongu, representatives from Dzongu in the state government in Gangtok, a high-level local employee on the project, and members of other Lepcha organisations supporting the project in Gangtok. While the sample size appears small, for a community of 7000 people it represents the most significant figures in leadership positions and those most vocally supportive of the dams.

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<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 45.

The main organisation supporting the dams in Dzongu is the Mutanchi Lom Aal Shezum (MLAS). MLAS holds a prominent position in Dzongu and is considered as the sole NGO for the Lepcha of Dzongu. It combines cultural preservation projects with livelihood generation and more conventional social welfare. MLAS has a high level of legitimacy and authenticity within Dzongu, as Bentley writes, ‘the members of MLAS are regarded as culturally knowledgeable people... their authority in cultural matters runs parallel to that of elders and ritual specialists’.<sup>58</sup> This has brought the organisation respect but also criticism.<sup>59</sup> MLAS claims that over 90% of the population of Dzongu support the dam, though different figures were quoted by other members of the organisation. While it is impossible to verify these figures it is clear that the support and legitimacy MLAS has in Dzongu is a major factor in people in the area supporting the dam.

Other prominent supporters include the elected heads of the two most affected Gram Panchayats: Lingthem and Sakyong-Pentong, as well as leaders of the several other Gram Panchayats in Dzongu, including Tingvong. In October 2007 elections to the Gram Panchayats were cast by the Government of Sikkim as a referendum on hydropower.<sup>60</sup> Voter turnout in North Sikkim, of which Dzongu is a part and where the majority of dams in Sikkim are planned, was recorded at 95%.<sup>61</sup> The winning candidates in the Gram Panchayats of Dzongu thus declared that they had a mandate to pressure the government to accelerate the dams. Support has also come from the Renjyong Mutanchi Rong Tarjum, the main Lepcha organisation in Sikkim (not just Dzongu), and certain influential Lepchas in the government and the ruling Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) party. What became clear during field research was that a dense network underpinned these supporters; whether this network facilitated the emergence of the pro-dam network or whether it developed through shared support for the dam is unclear.

Members of the pro-dam network make three main claims in favour of the Panan dam: (1) the dam will provide economic and social development in Dzongu, (2) the dam will ‘open-up’ Dzongu, and (3) the dam will help to save, not destroy, Lepcha culture. These will be discussed briefly in turn.

### *(1) Economic and social development of Dzongu*

Supporters of the dam argue that the dam will bring development to a ‘backward’ area.<sup>62</sup> Initially there was opposition to the project in Dzongu as many feared an influx of labourers from outside Sikkim coming to work on the dam,<sup>63</sup> but after MLAS negotiated the MoU<sup>64</sup> with the government and the hydropower company it was stipulated that no labourers on the project could settle in Dzongu, none could

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<sup>58</sup> Bentley, ‘Change and Culture Revival’, 75.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>60</sup> Wangchuk, ‘Lepchas and Hydel Protest’, 51.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>62</sup> President of the Mutanchi Lom Aal Shezum, interview conducted by the author, November 25, 2008, Mangan, Sikkim, India.

<sup>63</sup> Former Head of the Renjyong Mutanchi Rong Tarjum, interview conducted by the author, November 19, 2008, Gangtok, Sikkim, India.

<sup>64</sup> All information on the MoU comes from the document ‘Memorandum of Understanding with Respect to Construction of Pananng [sic] Hydropower Project at Dzongu Constituency’, viewed and cited with permission November 26–7, 2008.



obtain voting rights, and executives of the hydropower company must be housed outside Dzongu. Furthermore, priority in employment should be given to people from Dzongu and one person from each household affected by the dam should be given a position in the company for the duration of the project. All provisions supplied to the contractors must come from Dzongu businesses and all associated contracting must first go through the Dzongu Contractors Association. Respondents argue that these agreements led to the largest shift in the popular opinion in Dzongu towards favouring the project.<sup>65</sup>

The MoU also makes provisions for 5% of profits from the dam to go back into the community, an additional 4% towards community welfare (which would by default be provided by MLAS as the only NGO), the company must re-forest the entire area after the project has been completed, provide free electricity to all residents of Dzongu for 50 years (though this has not been agreed to), and provide ongoing educational scholarships to Dzongu youth to study outside Dzongu for the next 35 years. Other aspects include setting up a bank in Dzongu, a new school with computer facilities in the town of Laven, and money for *gompas* (temples), road upgrades and new road construction.

Additionally, landowners in the area, all of whom are Lepcha by law, were offered up to nine times the market value for land required for the projects.<sup>66</sup> This has been the main basis for dismissing the pro-dam network as illegitimate or inauthentic.<sup>67</sup> Conversely it has allowed MLAS to argue that many areas claimed as government land were in fact owned by Lepchas but they did not have the legally recognised title. Thus as part of the MoU process land rights for many farmers in Dzongu were recognised legally for the first time and they were compensated accordingly, garnering further support for the project. Attempts were also made to control the extent of development. For example, no signboards are allowed in Dzongu, no further dams can be considered, and all existing traditional laws must be safeguarded (though this is not specified any further).

## (2) *Opening-up Dzongu*

Related to the above point is the desire expressed by MLAS and other respondents to 'open-up' Dzongu, particularly for tourism. Tourism in Sikkim is well established, particularly so-called 'eco-tourism' which is intensely promoted by the state government and the national tourism authorities. Given the restricted status of Dzongu very few benefits from tourism have reached the area, but the potential for the dam to bring tourism revenue to Dzongu is attractive to the pro-dam network. The MoU contains several provisions for tourist infrastructure to be provided including trekking routes, pony facilities, the upkeep of monasteries, and home stay facilities. Respondents also envisaged that the reservoir created by the dam could become a tourist lake with paddle boats and other facilities, much like those found in

<sup>65</sup>Head of Dzongu Gram Panchayat 1, interview conducted by the author, November 26, 2008, Tingvong, Sikkim, India.

<sup>66</sup>President of the Mutanchi Lom Aal Shezum, interview conducted by the author, November 25, 2008, Mangan, Sikkim, India.

<sup>67</sup>With a rare mention of the pro-dam position Little writes, 'the pro-dam supporters, 116 who have sold land for the Panan 280 MW project, see a more affluent Dzongu'. Little, 'Deep Ecology, Dams', 39.

other parts of the Himalayas.<sup>68</sup> The MoU also contains provisions for the construction of a community centre and museum at Namprickdang, which is a village close to the ‘border’ between Dzongu and the rest of Sikkim. Construction of this museum has been completed and the design is a traditional Lepcha house, much like the ones spotted in parts of Dzongu, but enlarged and made from concrete. The inside is filled with ‘traditional’ Lepcha farming tools and weavings. MLAs have big plans for this site, including a handicraft market and traditional dancing for tourists.<sup>69</sup>

The need for permits to enter Dzongu means that tourists will have to take part in guided tours of the area in order to gain permission, and MLAS is already facilitating these in small numbers and using village houses for home stays. Respondents pointed out that this was an excellent way to create local employment for villagers and also for educated but underemployed Lepchas who could act as tour guides. When asked about the ability to control the impacts of tourism, particularly in a region that is upheld as home to a ‘vanishing’ ethnic group with a fragile cultural and natural environment, one of the Gram Panchayat leaders said that a committee would be set up to regulate tourism and monitor the kinds of tourists that would be allowed into Dzongu.<sup>70</sup> He questioned what benefit anyone in the region has gained from being a protected area, a sentiment echoed by other respondents.<sup>71</sup>

### *(3) Saving Lepcha culture*

Pro-dam advocates argue that the dam would be a way to save Lepcha culture from vanishing by ensuring that Dzongu Lepchas had a future and did not all leave for the larger towns where they were more likely to lose their language and culture.<sup>72</sup> Tourism would also enable people in Dzongu to revalue their traditions and enable traditional practices to survive.<sup>73</sup> There was the belief among respondents that Lepchas outside Dzongu had lost much of their culture and were insecure about it, which led to their opposition to the dams, whereas traditions in Dzongu had persevered and were unlikely to disappear.<sup>74</sup> When questioned about this assurance they said that the MoU guarantees the economic future of Dzongu which is the best way to ensure that Lepcha culture remains intact.<sup>75</sup> As one member of MLAS argued, without the dam no one will stay in Dzongu. The young people who go out for education forget their culture and their language and in five to ten years there

<sup>68</sup>Employee of the Himagiri Hydropower Company 1, interview conducted by the author, November 27, 2008, Laven, Sikkim, India.

<sup>69</sup>Member of the Mutanchi Lom Aal Shezum 1, interview conducted by the author, November 25, 2008, Tingvong, Sikkim, India; President of the Mutanchi Lom Aal Shezum, interview conducted by the author, November 25, 2008, Mangan, Sikkim, India.

<sup>70</sup>Head of Dzongu Gram Panchayat 2, interview conducted by the author, November 26, 2008, Tingvong, Sikkim, India.

<sup>71</sup>Head of Dzongu Gram Panchayat 3, interview conducted by the author, November 26, 2008, Tingvong, Sikkim, India.

<sup>72</sup>Former President of the Mutanchi Lom Aal Shezum, interview conducted by the author, November 26, 2008, Passingdang, Sikkim, India.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid.

<sup>74</sup>Member of the Mutanchi Lom Aal Shezum 1, interview conducted by the author, November 25, 2008, Tingvong, Sikkim, India.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid.

would be no more knowledge of Lepcha ways in Dzongu.<sup>76</sup> Thus the dam becomes a way to codify aspects of Lepcha culture before they disappear forever. The embedded nature of the ‘vanishing tribe’ can be seen here. Ironically, the ‘vanishing tribe’ argument is one of the primary arguments of the anti-dam movement; both sides couching their argument around the same sense of vulnerability.

### Reading pro-development actors in Dzongu

Support for the dam comes from a mixture of support for Dzongu based organisations such as MLAS and elected local leaders, as a way of redressing state neglect, and as a result of resentment directed at Lepcha groups from outside Dzongu trying to speak on behalf of the people living in Dzongu itself. A breakdown of these facets reveals that while a level of elite manipulation has taken place, support for the dam is based on choices and manoeuvres in response to opportunities provided by the dam and as a response to the context in which people in Dzongu find themselves. This helps to construct an alternative narrative about state–ethnic minority relations and intra-ethnic relations among the Lepcha.

There are four main facets that warrant closer scrutiny. First, there is no doubt that MLAS, the Panchayati leaders (many of whom are members of the ruling SDF party), and the Lepcha organisations in Gangtok have a stake in the political status quo in Sikkim. Several of the respondents interviewed, particularly those of an older generation and from the more established Lepcha cultural associations, argued that it was a mistake to oppose the state as the Lepcha depended on the goodwill of the dominant ethnic groups and the government to survive.<sup>77</sup> Turning the dam into a Lepcha identity issue was exposing the group to a backlash from other communities and would threaten the survival of the ethnic group.<sup>78</sup> The promises of a high rate of compensation for land acquired for the dam is a major incentive for landowners to support the project, however land tenure in Dzongu is less stratified than in other parts of Sikkim and thus the perception of a wealthy landowning class articulating their interests and silencing the landless would be misleading. However, even given the incentives for elite support for the dam this does not fully explain why so many ordinary people in Dzongu support the project and have mobilised on a number of occasions to pressure the state into faster implementation of the project and to confront anti-dam protestors. It could be that these people are simply following the lead of trusted elites in supporting the project and/or the support that ordinary people have for the promises of development enshrined in the project. Though there appears more to it than this alone.

Interestingly both the anti- and pro-dam groups have been accused of being manipulated by party politics. One of the state’s opposition parties, the Sikkim Himali Rajya Parishad Party, publicly spoke out against the arrest and sabotage allegations against ACT members in February 2009 and pushed for their release.<sup>79</sup> The party argued that the actions of the ACT were justified as non-Sikkimese workers were residing in Dzongu. The party clearly wanted to capture support for

<sup>76</sup>Ibid.

<sup>77</sup>Former Head of the Renjyong Mutanchi Rong Tarjum, interview conducted by the author, November 19, 2008, Gangtok, Sikkim, India.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid.

<sup>79</sup>‘SHRPP Justifies Act of ACT’.

the anti-dam movement and use it against the ruling SDF party, though the Lepcha element was downplayed in favour of the generic rhetoric against non-Sikkimese migrants to broaden its appeal. Similar incidents, such as the burning of an effigy of the Governor of Sikkim in mid-2007 by people aligned with the Congress (I) Party, also in opposition, led pro-dam actors to accuse the anti-dam movement of being supported by forces that oppose the ruling SDF party and the Chief Minister<sup>80</sup> and of being captured by narrow political party interests. Conversely, the anti-dam movement has long accused the pro-dam networks of being puppets of the state and the ruling SDF party.

Second, support for the dam comes in response to state neglect and a perceived lack of development in Dzongu. The dam comes at a time when disillusionment with the advantages of scheduled tribe status and most primitive tribe status is growing, aspirations of young Dzongu Lepchas educated outside the area are changing, and livelihood prospects after the demise of the cardamom industry are diminishing. All respondents in Dzongu cited the decline of cardamom as a key reason to pursue the dam.<sup>81</sup> The lucrative large cardamom industry brought Dzongu into the mainstream cash economy in the second half of the twentieth century. Within a generation Lepchas in Dzongu went from shifting cultivators to landowners able to lease their land to migrant labourers. In recent decades the cardamom industry has been slowly dying from a combination of old bushes, fungal disease, and falling prices.<sup>82</sup> In the 1980s, yields began to decline and by the mid-1990s they were at 60% of 1975 levels despite more land under cultivation.<sup>83</sup> Bentley demonstrates that in Dzongu the average yield has declined to less than half of what it was five years previously and many houses no longer have any cardamom to farm.<sup>84</sup>

In this context support for the Panan dam has grown. Several respondents in Dzongu maintain that Lepchas were exploited by non-Lepchas in the cardamom boom years leaving them with little to show aside from better houses and educated children.<sup>85</sup> Many members of the younger generation of Dzongu Lepchas have been educated in urban areas and have little interest in returning to the land. With the main source of livelihoods gone the dam has been framed as a way to recreate livelihoods in a dead local economy.<sup>86</sup> This was summed up by one respondent who urged that the community should embrace the dam and

<sup>80</sup>Head of Dzongu Gram Panchayat 4, interview conducted by the author, November 26, 2008, Tingvong, Sikkim, India.

<sup>81</sup>Head of the Community Welfare Department in Dzongu, interview conducted by the author, November 26, 2008, Passingdang, Sikkim, India; Former President of the Mutanchi Lom Aal Shezum, interview conducted by the author, November 26, 2008, Passingdang, Sikkim, India; Member of the Mutanchi Lom Aal Shezum 2, interview conducted by the author, November 26, 2008, Mangan, Sikkim, India.

<sup>82</sup>Bentley cites Spices Board of India figures that show the price per kilogram of cardamom in 2001 to be 188 rupees per kilogram (approx 4.70 USD) in Sikkim and 202 rupees per kilogram (approx 5.05 USD) in Siliguri, the main trading town at the foot of the Himalayas. Only five years later in 2006 the market price was 86 rupees per kilogram (approx 2.16 USD) in Sikkim and 100 rupees per kilogram in Siliguri (approx 2.50 USD). Bentley, 'Change and Culture Revival', 69.

<sup>83</sup>Government of Sikkim and Lama, *Sikkim Human Development Report 2001*, 51.

<sup>84</sup>Bentley, 'Change and Culture Revival', 69.

<sup>85</sup>Head of the Community Welfare Department in Dzongu, interview conducted by the author, November 26, 2008, Passingdang, Sikkim, India.

<sup>86</sup>Head of Dzongu Gram Panchayat 1, interview conducted by the author, November 26, 2008, Tingvong, Sikkim, India.

gestured to the empty fields in the hills behind him and added ‘who else would want this land?’<sup>87</sup> It is unclear, however, how the dam will replace the income from cardamom. Respondents representing the hydropower company suggested that the majority of jobs on the dam will be for local people,<sup>88</sup> and this is also clearly stated in the MoU. Several high-level positions have gone to well-educated Lepchas. However, visits to the construction sites revealed a more mixed picture. Most of the construction workers, dynamiters, and engineers were people from outside Dzongu and in most cases outside Sikkim. There were some groups of local Lepchas employed to clear and level land, though they indicated that this work was sporadic. Rather than providing jobs on the dam itself it is more likely the appeal of the dam comes from the opportunities for income from tourism, new services such as the bank, better roads, increased business for local suppliers, and in the rents paid to landowners; which will be accessible to certain Dzongu residents and not others. Regardless, the dam has been framed by its supporters as a boon for Dzongu, a way of making up for what the state has failed to deliver in the past and for the decline of cardamom.

Third, pro-dam supporters are making claims over voice and legitimacy among the Lepcha population. Much of the resentment for the anti-dam movement developed from people in Dzongu feeling they were being spoken for by Lepchas from outside. One respondent complained that Lepchas from outside Dzongu view the area as a site of pure and traditional Lepcha culture and want Dzongu Lepchas to remain faithful to traditions while they lived comfortable lives elsewhere.<sup>89</sup> Some respondents were also very cynical about claims made by the anti-dam movement about the threat to sacred sites, arguing that this is a corruption of Lepcha sacral traditions to support their own politics.<sup>90</sup> Respondents argued that they should be able to decide whether they wanted development and how they would deal with its impacts. There was a strong sense that they felt patronised by other Lepcha groups who cast them as naïve and unable to see the long-term impact of the project.<sup>91</sup> As the anti-dam movement emerged and began making claims about the future of Dzongu it reinforced the construction of a passive and primitive Lepcha community that could not speak nor decide on its own future. This is a sensitive issue given the primacy of the ‘backward’ construction. Key to this is the notion of being ‘underdeveloped’. Lepchas in Dzongu are very aware of the ways they are represented. The Panan dam has been framed, perhaps intentionally and somewhat manipulatively, as a way to combat the backward stereotype and bring Dzongu on par with communities in other parts of Sikkim. Furthermore, many felt that Lepchas in Dzongu were facing the burden of preserving Lepcha identity for the entire

<sup>87</sup>Head of the Community Welfare Department in Dzongu, interview conducted by the author, November 26, 2008, Passingdang, Sikkim, India.

<sup>88</sup>Employee of the Himagiri Hydropower Company 1, interview conducted by the author, November 27, 2008, Laven, Sikkim, India.

<sup>89</sup>Head of Dzongu Gram Panchayat 3, interview conducted by the author, November 26, 2008, Tingvong, Sikkim, India.

<sup>90</sup>Former Head of the Renjyong Mutanchi Rong Tarjum, interview conducted by the author, November 19, 2008, Gangtok, Sikkim, India; Head of Dzongu Gram Panchayat 1, interview conducted by the author, November 26, 2008, Tingvong, Sikkim, India.

<sup>91</sup>Member of the Mutanchi Lom Aal Shezum 1, interview conducted by the author, November 25, 2008, Tingvong, Sikkim, India; Head of Dzongu Gram Panchayat 2, interview conducted by the author, November 26, 2008, Tingvong, Sikkim, India.

Lepcha population of the Himalayas.<sup>92</sup> There is clearly an intra-ethnic contest for legitimacy taking place.<sup>93</sup>

Fourth, supporters of the dam exercised collective agency in bargaining with the state. They have not simply taken what the state has offered, but have bargained for a deal they believe will benefit the people of Dzongu. The dam proponents have negotiated a strong MoU with the state and the hydropower company. The MoU is viewed as such a good deal that respondents claimed that it has fuelled resentment towards Dzongu residents.<sup>94</sup> The eight-point agenda of the MoU, with a further 61 sub-points and stipulations, is extensive. Local leaders involved in setting the conditions of the MoU insist the content was formulated with wide community consultation,<sup>95</sup> though details of this process were difficult to ascertain. Once the MoU was formulated it became easier for the pro-dam network to demonstrate the benefits of the project to members of the community.<sup>96</sup> As one respondent admitted, after the MoU was agreed it was far easier to gain support for the project as people were able to see that the fears they had about migration and degradation would be addressed and new opportunities for economic and social development would be provided.<sup>97</sup> Interestingly those involved in the negotiation of the MoU felt the anti-dam movement gave them a stronger bargaining position with the state and they were able to extract much more favourable conditions.<sup>98</sup> There is also a sense of empowerment among the pro-dam network that they were able to gain such favourable concessions from the state.<sup>99</sup> In accepting the dam the pro-dam network has attempted to assure the autonomy of Dzongu; both vis-à-vis the state and also vis-à-vis more politically vocal Lepcha groups.

It is the negotiation itself that is crucial and perhaps most transferable to other contexts in Asia and beyond. The MoU now acts as a precedent for negotiating directly with the state, which is significant for a community regarded externally and even internally as backward and subject to the protectionist whims of the Government of Sikkim. Members of this small community were able to negotiate directly with the state; they were able to be part of legitimate high-stakes politics. Whether it is sustained beyond negotiations over a high-stakes development project

<sup>92</sup>Member of the Mutanchi Lom Aal Shezum 1, interview conducted by the author, November 25, 2008, Tingvong, Sikkim, India.

<sup>93</sup>Interestingly, the pro-dam network itself, particularly MLAS is not beyond using the 'backward construction' to reinforce its own claims to speak on behalf of the Lepchas of Dzongu and to ensure the extent of the impacts of the dam are adequately compensated for. Respondents constantly referred to the people of area as 'simple' and the MoU itself contains references to the 'innocent' 'aborigines' that have made a 'sacrifice for the national cause'.

<sup>94</sup>Former Head of the Renjyong Mutanchi Rong Tarjum, interview conducted by the author, November 19, 2008, Gangtok, Sikkim, India; President of the Mutanchi Lom Aal Shezum, interview conducted by the author, November 25, 2008, Mangan, Sikkim, India; Head of Dzongu Gram Panchayat 1, interview conducted by the author, November 26, 2008, Tingvong, Sikkim, India.

<sup>95</sup>President of the Mutanchi Lom Aal Shezum, interview conducted by the author, November 25, 2008, Mangan, Sikkim, India; Former President of the Mutanchi Lom Aal Shezum, interview conducted by the author, November 26, 2008, Passingdang, Sikkim, India.

<sup>96</sup>Head of Dzongu Gram Panchayat 1, interview conducted by the author, November 26, 2008, Tingvong, Sikkim, India.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid.

<sup>99</sup>This was a view expressed by all respondents supporting the dam in both Dzongu and Gangtok.

remains to be seen. Indeed, the MoU may never be fully realised, as is typical for ethnic minority communities subject to guarantees from development projects. However, many of these communities are never consulted, never negotiate, never bargain, and never use the leverage of the MoU to push through their demands. The Lepchas of Dzongu did all of this, and the significance of this should not be understated for a 'vanishing tribe'. Whether the MoU reveals co-option, manipulation, window-dressing, lies, or genuine response to community demands is hard to fathom until the project moves along further. What is important is that it provides the *feeling* among those affected that they gained concessions from the state that are in the interests of all Lepchas in Dzongu. This has spread the idea that the future of Dzongu will be decided by the people within it, rather than outside it, regardless of their ethnicity.

### Conclusion

Examining the pro-dam network in Dzongu provides an alternative narrative of collective agency among the Lepcha ethnic minority. This alternative narrative has four main elements that call for further investigation of pro-development actors among ethnic minorities in other contexts. First, examining pro-development actors breaks the homogeneity of the 'united front' view of state-ethnic minority relations and shifts the focus to intra-ethnic relationships. Multiple agendas are commonly recognised in contentious politics, yet when it comes to ethnic minorities, particularly numerically small groups like the Lepcha, there is a tendency to homogenise. This is particularly evident when a visible movement among an ethnic minority already fits the familiar narrative of adversarial resistance, obscuring intra-ethnic dynamics. As the case of Dzongu has demonstrated, the claims of pro-development actors revealed key fissures among Lepchas over voice, legitimacy, and authenticity, and these fissures themselves reveal major material and ideational chasms over development needs, identity, and the divisive impact of the 'vanishing tribe' discourse. Second, collective agency of ethnic minorities is not fixed in a particular relationship with the state nor does it have a particular position on development. These are both fluid and responsive. This may sound obvious, yet adversarial relationships between ethnic minorities and the state and oppositional positions to development are the default characteristics most attractive to analysis of ethnic minority agency. The case of Dzongu also indicates that engagement itself can be an important end of collective agency for ethnic minorities who have rarely been afforded attention by the state, and in this case subject to paternalistic though infrequent development interventions. Third, while attention is drawn to the crucial junctures when contentious development projects are planned and opposed, the long-term experience of development and the state is crucial. To be sure, the experience of development in Dzongu has been far from positive. Long-term neglect by the state and the sudden decline of the cardamom crop has created widespread insecurity, yet in this context the dam provides an alternative at a time when no other options appear forthcoming. The fact that it takes a potentially hazardous hydropower project to address this causes consternation outside Dzongu, but for those living with the material realities of life in Dzongu it has become a way to address insecurity that experience has taught them will not be addressed otherwise, despite the conceivable ecological disasters that may ensue. Last, the analysis of pro-development actors creates dilemmas for researchers and may explain why the

familiar narrative is so attractive. The dilemma of giving a voice to proponents of potentially hazardous and environmentally destructive projects is not easily resolved and was a constant challenge throughout this research. However, in the case of Dzongu it is difficult to simply deny what appears to be a genuine support for the project and its associated promises. While support for the dam emanates strongly from influential status quo actors, it is insufficient to decry the support and mobilisation shown for the dam as wholly owing to manipulation, co-option, or a form of false consciousness. It is unlikely that hydropower will address the problems people in Dzongu face, but it is *perceived* to address some of them. Most people spoken to in Dzongu who support the dam know there are risks but also see development itself as a fundamentally risky process, and an inevitable process; at least with this dam they feel they have struck a bargain that enables some control over the course development takes. Even more important is that Lepchas in Dzongu are able to make claims regarding their own future, rather than people from outside Dzongu and outside Sikkim, including other Lepchas, telling them how they should live. No matter how difficult the dilemmas raised by pro-development actors it is even more difficult to dismiss these voices as spurious.

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### Notes on contributor

Duncan McDuie-Ra is a Senior Lecturer in Development Studies at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia. His research focuses on ethnicity and the politics of development in South Asia. He recently guest edited a special issue of the journal *Contemporary South Asia* on the Armed Forces Special Powers Act in Northeast India (Volume 17, Issue 3) and is the author of the monograph *Civil Society, Democratization and the Search for Human Security: The Politics of the Environment, Gender, and Identity in Northeast India* (New York: Nova Science). His research has been published in *Asian Ethnicity*, *Voluntas*, *Journal of South Asian Development*, and the *Journal of International Development*, as well as several edited volumes.

*Author's postal address:* School of Social Sciences and International Studies, University of New South Wales, 2052 Sydney, Australia.

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