



As part of Negotiating Routes, we chose to look at the changing ecology of North Sikkim where 27 hydro-electric projects are ongoing or proposed in the Teesta River Basin. Our initial idea was to travel through eight-ten villages across the area, collecting narratives of ecology- conversations, experiences and anecdotes that spoke about the altering landscape of the area. The idea was to document the sense of imminent loss through personal stories of people. The idea was to also develop a Green Book that would contain vestiges of the present, in the form of vanishing plant species from the villages that we visited- a Book that was an ecological archive of the area. One of the few groups that had stood up against the dams was Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) and they became our key point of contact.

The largest hydro power project in Sikkim-the 1200 MW Teesta III project- is coming up in Chungthang, a wayside town in North Sikkim. Chungthang is situated on the confluence of two rivers, Lachen Chu and Lachung Chu, and is en route to the more popular tourist destinations of Yumthang and Gurudongmar Lake in the area. We were told it was once a beautiful place but has today become a typical ‘dam’ town- denuded mountain slopes, huge dam machinery, sounds of blasting tearing through the valley and a huge influx of labour from various parts of the country. Chungthang was a deliberate choice to start our work as we wanted to document the physical and social transformation that the town seemed to embody. We also worked in Dzongu, a 40 sq km protected area of the indigenous Lepchas, a tribe whose numbers are fast dwindling. Some projects are awaiting final clearance in

Dzongu. The imminent entry of projects into this area and the shades of opinion that existed around them were also interesting. As of now, Dzongu and Chungthang present contrasting images; in a sense, they hold up mirrors to each other- Chungthang was what Dzongu is and Dzongu will be what Chungthang is. For us, they became interesting points of contrast.

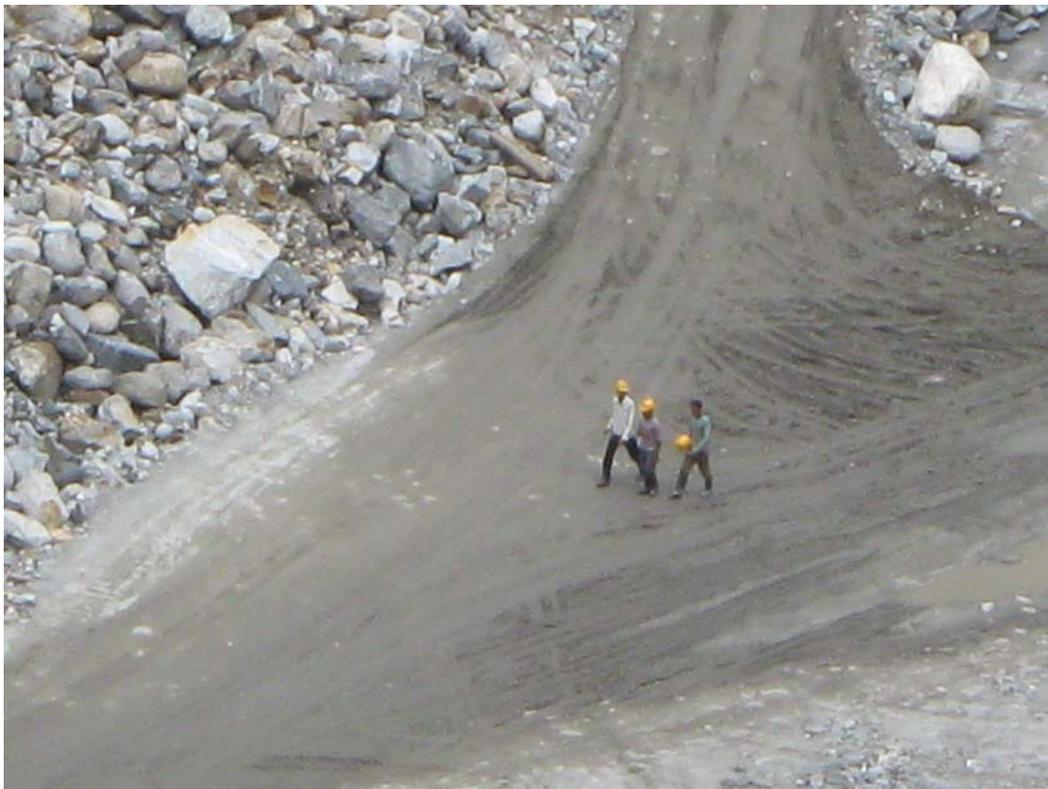
Our initial idea of collaboratively developing a Green Book also changed after our initial interactions with people in Chungthang. We realised that the dam had taken preeminence in people's lives and was seen as a lucrative opportunity by most people. The link between people and ecology was tenuous – we got the sense that either ecological awareness was not easily articulated or perhaps, it didn't exist at all. Looking for 'narratives of ecology', as we had originally intended, did not seem suitable for that context. Instead, we decided to try and capture the tangible and intangible changes that the place was undergoing as a consequence of these projects. There was a sense of unease and anxiety in the area, almost as if people were unsure of what exactly was happening while they went about with their lives. Understanding this sense of anxiety became key to our intervention in the area. In the context of what we saw around us, it seemed appropriate to try and capture narratives of the present, of what happens to the larger social ecology of a place when definitive processes of change are set in motion.

Through our conversations with people, we realised that ecological histories in the area have been corroded over time. Almost everyone we met was involved in dam work in some way or the other. Young men did petty contractual work for the Company; women became labour contractors for the site, old settlers of the town watched from the peripheries having been given monetary compensation in lieu of their land. Despite the general spirit of acceptance towards the Dam, we also sensed a degree of unease and anxiety regarding the transformation that the town was undergoing. Questions would be thrown at us - wasn't the dam good for the town? If the wall of the reservoir broke, would their town get submerged? But won't tourists come once the dam is complete? It was almost as if a feeling of restlessness was growing in the town as the physical landscape was being altered. Despite being complicit, no one seemed to be sure of what was happening around them. Being in Chungthang and interacting with people there led us to interrogate the very notion of ecology. Simply 'collecting' narratives of ecology was perhaps not enough. Ecology began to denote the network of lived realities and interdependencies, the web of unease and anxiety that hung over this town. The place, in a sense, set the tone, gave us a frame and a huge number of confounding questions for our exploration of the changing ecology of the entire area.

In Chungthang, we met several old families who had been given compensation for their land, shop-owners in the town who were hugely benefited because of the population influx, people who were doing contract work for the Dam, as well as a few activists who had spoken out against the dam. There was an uneasy calm in the town - people no longer spoke outright against the dam, yet there was an undercurrent of trepidation in their conversations. For instance, D – an ex-Zila Parishad member who now did contract work for the Dam, was always riddled with ambiguity and self doubt when she was asked about the developments in her town. Her conversations concealed a sense of helplessness, an inability to prevent the change that was taking place around her, while being aware of her implicit participation in the whole process.

T, an influential person in Chungthang was one of the few people who had resisted the coming of the dam. He had been active in the Affected Citizens' of Teesta (ACT) movement against hydro-power projects in Sikkim. Currently, he is part of a Steering Committee that has been formed in Chungthang, to ensure that most dam-related contract work is allotted to local people. Although critical of such projects, T had begun to take a pragmatic position on the current situation – that if the dam was meant to stay, then one had to learn to make the best of it and take advantage of the work and opportunities it presented. T was a good example of the schism that manifested itself within most individuals in the town; in a sense, he typified the quandary that the town was faced with. This was also evident in P, a young man from the neighbouring village of Theng and also the publicity manager of the Steering Committee. Although he condemned the dam, he was also an active part of it. Besides working as a contractor for a part of the dam site, he also owned a vehicle which he had leased out to the Company on a monthly basis. And all the while unperturbed about his other role as an 'activist'.

The dilemma of Chungthang is visible in the way that the town has come to be in the last few years. From being a small wayside stoppage for visitors on their way to more popular tourist spots, to a town which is now dotted with huge multi-storey buildings and people who talk business. Most of these houses have been rented out to Company officials and workers. Real estate prices have shot up and today, the town is driven by money. Some people are keen to capitalise on the boom while it lasts. Others wonder what will happen after the work is completed and the non-locals leave.



Our second site of work was Dzongu, where the 300 MW Panan Hydel Project is soon going to be underway. Dzongu borders the Kanchenjunga Biosphere Reserve & National Park and is an area of extraordinary biodiversity. It has been a Lepcha reserve since the time of the Monarchy¹ and has been given special status under the Indian Constitution where no outsiders are allowed entry without special permits. Outsiders (even Lepchas from outside) are not allowed to buy land, build houses, and run businesses, to safeguard the interests of the dwindling Lepcha population.² However, as of today, many rules have been flouted to facilitate the smooth entry of the dam project into the area. Land acquisition has been carried out by the Govt. by flouting its own norms. It is only a matter of time before Dzongu witnesses a huge transformation in its physical and social landscape, much like what Chungthang is currently experiencing.

The proposed dam will divert the Rangyong river – a river which is as sacred to the Lepchas as the Ganga is to the Hindus. A 9.2 km tunnel will carry the entire river to a powerhouse located at Panan. Some dam officials we met in Dzongu did not seem to think that such a project could have any long-term ecological repercussions. A young engineer from Passingdang village, who had been employed as part of the Project, felt that all rivers needed to be harnessed for their hydro-electric potential; otherwise it meant a huge wastage of such a precious resource. He was convinced that the dam would cause minimum ecological damage as all kinds of environmental considerations were being kept in mind in its execution. The river would not vanish entirely - 10% of the river would follow its original course so that aquatic life was not disturbed. An ex- Public Relations Officer of the Project spoke candidly about how he was assigned to persuade the local people in favor of the dam. On the one hand, the people working on the dam were merely doing their job. But it was disconcerting to see how opinions had gradually been bought over, perspectives had altered and alien processes had begun to pervade the place.

We also met some families in Passingdang. A few seemed convinced about the profits that the dam would generate and the ‘development’ it would create in their area, others were tentative and unwilling to talk about the issue. We met a young anti-dam activist, G. He had also been active in the anti-dam movement with ACT. During one such peaceful protest in Dzongu, G and 41 other young people were arbitrarily arrested and put into prison for 42 days. All kinds of charges were slapped against them. Conversations with him and other activists revealed how the State had systematically silenced all opposition against the dam projects. G’s family had been heavily victimized for supporting their son and the anti-dam movement. Not surprisingly, many people we met in Dzongu, refused to speak on record about the coming Project. G’s family felt that it was very important for people from outside the State to talk about the situation in Sikkim as all channels of dissent and opposition had been silenced.

Apart from the ‘Green Book’, we had also planned to collect saplings from some villages around the dam area. We wanted to plant these saplings in Gangtok, as a kind of testimony to the changing ecology of North Sikkim, as a memorial to these places which were losing their ways of life and living. We wanted these saplings to be gifts from people we would meet in the course of our work- individuals who felt strongly about the alteration taking

¹ Sikkim was under the Namgyal dynasty till it was annexed by India in 1975

² Estimated population of Lepchas in Sikkim is only about 7000

place in their area. In Chungthang, we met an eco-tour operator/guide, TL whose love for the mountains was in sync with his profession. During his trekking tours, TL visually documents and catalogues the various flora & fauna that is found at different altitudes. He is trying to create an informal archive of various plant, butterfly and bird species. Although he does not publicly voice his disagreement against the dam, his way of contributing is by creating awareness about the mountains and the treasures that they hold. TL gave us a Silver Fir sapling when we told him what we wished to do with plants from the dam areas in Gangtok. G's family in Passingdang, Dzongu also gave us two saplings – an orange tree and a local species called Khanbi. They felt that the gesture of planting trees in Gangtok, however tokenistic, would at least draw attention to what was happening in North Sikkim. All the saplings were planted in the Chorten Monastery, a popular tourist spot in Gangtok. We also shared T's archive of plant species with a school in Gangtok, hoping it would create awareness and generate discussions among the students. We also gave a copy of the same to the Research Wing of the State Forest Dept. in Gangtok.

Our initial idea of a Green Book has also readapted itself - our own sense impressions of the places we visited and the phenomena we experienced are informing the logic of the Book in a central way. Perhaps, the sense of anxiety and unease that characterize the places lie in the experience of the 'outsider' or the 'visitor', and not so much in people who inhabit the places. They are experiencing a moment in history that does not lend itself to easy articulation. Perhaps, that is why we have decided to use ourselves as significant points of departure, as significant presences in the book. Ambivalence, restlessness, unease, anxiety – these are some of the underlying themes of this book, a reflection of the place and people as we experienced it.

