

LEPCHAS AND THEIR HYDEL PROTEST¹

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If making history is to do the unlikely, then history is being made in Sikkim even as you read this. Equally, if history, as Karl Marx put it, is made by people in circumstances beyond their choosing, then people also are making history in Sikkim. A section of the Lepchas of Sikkim completed one year of a relay hunger strike on June 20, 2008, interspersed with two extended sessions of indefinite fasting by the more resilient among them, to protest against hydro-electric projects proposed for the Lepcha reserve of Dzongu in North Sikkim. Stereotyped as a docile tribe, the community has turned this notion on its head and claimed credentials as having groomed youth who can stay the course even in a protracted confrontation hemmed by mounting odds. At the same time, a government in power with 31 of the possible 32 elected members of the Legislative Assembly wearing its colours and enjoying majority support on the hydel debate among the affected people, is showing signs of 'listening' to the voices of protest even if they speak in minority and has already scrapped four of the five hydel projects initially announced for Dzongu.

When the first doubts were expressed against the hydel plans, the protestors had probably not schemed for their observations to snowball into a movement of such intense attrition. Similarly, when the government in power introduced hydel as an option to pull Sikkim out of its economic dependence on grants and loans, there had been no voices suggesting otherwise. Plans, however, rarely stay true to projections, and the situation has disintegrated to a level where the protestors have shored up their arguments too strongly to pull out and the Government has invested too much into hydel development to roll back. On a positive note though, what appeared to have stagnated into an irresolvable confrontation six months back, is now showing signs of discovering middle ground through negotiations.

All this in the year 2008, four years since a clutch of concerned citizens of areas to be affected by hydel projects proposed on the Teesta

¹ The dates and incidents mentioned in the essay have been taken from reportage carried in NOW!, a Gangtok-based daily. The opinions and inferences, of course, are the writer's own.

river came together to form an ad hoc committee under the banner of Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) on July 18, 2004. At that time, the ‘affected citizens’ were concerned with hydel projects already announced - the Stage III [at Chungthang in North Sikkim] and Stage IV [further downstream at Singhik, near the North district headquarters of Mangan] Teesta Hydro-Electric Projects (HEP). ACT itself was a progression of the Joint Action Committee formed by the same group to protest Teesta Stage V HEP in the year 2002. Stage V was commissioned in May 2008 and temporarily shut down within a month when flash floods on the Teesta and its tributaries sliced away the protection walls of the reservoir and deposited more silt into the reservoir than was safe for it to contain.

Developmental debates, especially when both sides are convinced about and committed to the righteousness of their analysis, have a history of disintegrating into aggressive confrontations. The Teesta hydel protest is no different. The movement has ebbed and risen from periods of extended lulls to frenetic activity to considerable time lost to stubborn posturing. The protest, however, is finding its balance now and what had started as a consolidation of people opposed to the very concept of harnessing the Teesta for hydro-electric generation, has shifted focus and is now concentrated as a movement of the Lepchas of Dzongu and their bid to keep Teesta’s tributaries, Tholung Chu and Rongyong Chu, snaking through Dzongu, free of hydel projects and their attendant perils.

Testing the Waters

To start at the beginning though, shortly after its formation in July 2004, ACT started collecting documents and researching hydel prospects and threats. Its members remained active behind the scenes and made their presence felt publicly for the first time during the Public Hearing for Teesta Stage III held at Chungthang in North Sikkim on June 8, 2006. ACT office bearers spoke at the public hearing, but their protest was a minority voice with 80% of those present speaking in favour of the project. ACT had questioned the very findings and recommendations of the ‘Environment Impact Assessment’ report and the ‘Environment Management Plan’ prepared for Stage III. Its members also protested the manner in which the public hearing was hosted by the State Pollution Control Board (SPCB), Sikkim, involving a strong presence of elected leaders and government officials, a

presence ACT saw as engineered to intimidate dissent. On the day, the only complaint of consequence voiced by the majority was the one which also had backing of the Chungthang Panchayats—that the project be started only after a proper cadastral survey had established land ownership so that compensation could be handed over accordingly. The project got cleared and ACT moved the National Environmental Appellate Authority in New Delhi against the public hearing and its verdict. Deciding on the matter a year later, the appellate authority dismissed the ACT appeal. Although the verdict came as a setback, it was of only limited consequence because by then ACT had marshalled its arguments with only hydel projects proposed for inside the Lepcha reserve of Dzongu in its sights. Stage III was technically outside Dzongu.

ACT must have realised that it enjoyed the strongest support from inside Dzongu when it recorded its first major success as a pressure group while standing up against the 300 MW Panan Hydro-Electric Project proposed for construction on the confluence of the Tholung Chu and Rongyong Chu inside Dzongu. Until then, ACT's ideological distrust of hydel projects played second fiddle to remonstrations by affected people who were not opposed to the projects per se, but had specific demands and conditions they wanted met before green flagging the hydel projects. For Stage III, the major demand was for a cadastral re-survey and for Stage IV [which is being protested by ACT since part of it falls inside Dzongu], the negotiations were over land compensation rates. ACT's protest was not so easily quantifiable, based as it was on their fear that development that required such a massive influx of people [labourers] and machinery would impact the protected cultural reserve as well as the conserved biosphere that was Dzongu.

Until September 4, 2006, ACT was seen as an elitist group of educated Lepcha youth with a romanticised idea of development and culture which was out of sync with the more immediate aspirations for development of the people. On that day, ACT established that it also had support among the lay people when it managed to mobilise a 100-strong group of protesters to lay siege on the Sankalang bridge over Teesta, the only access to Dzongu from North Sikkim, and refuse access to a joint-inspection team of district officials from entering the Lepcha reserve to survey the lands which was needed for the Panan hydel project. The team made it through after 10 preventive detentions were made and police escort provided. Matters were coming to a head because the public hearing for Panan HEP was scheduled for September 18, later the same month. On September 11 again, residents

of Passindang in Upper Dzongu, where the power station for Panan HEP is scheduled to come up, refused to allow inspection of their lands. Apart from protesting the project itself, the residents were also demanding a resurvey of private and forest lands in the area to ensure no one was denied their rightful share of compensation when land was acquired. Official land records in Dzongu, the residents claim, are inaccurate but have not been a cause for worry because thus far no one from outside Dzongu could buy land there. As far as the residents are concerned, they are familiar with the traditional land holdings and thus never felt the need to get the official records 'adjusted.' Things changed with the arrival of project developers and their requirement for land through transactions that would require more official documentation than just social contracts. The protest gathered momentum and soon, ACT was questioning the credentials of the project developers, Himagiri Hydro Energy Pvt. Ltd. and even the validity of the Sikkim Power Development Corporation. Even as these arguments surfaced in the public domain, on September 13, 2006, the joint inspection team set up to survey the land required for the project completed its study stretching from Passingdang in lower Dzongu [the site for power generation unit] to Lingzya village in upper Dzongu [the site for the dam on the confluence of Tholung Chu and Rongyong Chu]. While doing so, they had also collected 'No Objection Certificates' from 74 of the 99 families whose lands would be acquired for the project.

ACT was not the only group uncomfortable with the development of hydel projects in Dzongu. The residents too had their fears since the Lepcha reserve had never seen a project of this magnitude commissioned in their midst. Even Sikkimese people not from Dzongu are required to obtain a permit to visit the reserve. Hydel projects are very ugly undertakings as works in progress and also very labour intensive. Further, Dzongu had a ringside view of these aspects with the Teesta Stage V HEP developed outside its southeast border at Dikchu in East Sikkim. A temperamental Teesta and engineering oversights had seen some villages on the Dzongu bank of the Teesta suffer because of the work on Stage V. One such group, not aligned with ACT, but made up of Lepchas of Dzongu called on the Chief Minister a few days ahead of the public hearing for Panan and submitted a memorandum detailing their concerns and tabling their demands. The demands sought resurvey of landholdings, better compensation rates and enhanced relief and rehabilitation considerations. Also included was a demand that the 'cultural

exclusivity' of Dzongu not be infringed in any way by the project developers or labourers on their payroll.

And then it was time for the public hearing. No one expected the public hearing to go smoothly; and it didn't.

A Protest Takes the Plunge

Despite the universally shared reservations about hydel projects, people at the public hearing were clearly divided among those who were willing to grant conditional approval and those who were unwilling to allow the project under any condition. More than 900 people, including officials and elected representatives, attended the public hearing. Dzongu has a population of little over 7,000. Intense arguments were presented for and against the Panan hydel project. The anti-project lobby assembled by ACT was in minority, but made up for their disadvantage in numbers by being the more vociferous group in the public hearing. So much so, that some of its younger members had to be taken away from the venue and kept under police watch on the sidelines. Interestingly, even though the Dzongu residents at the public hearing were divided on whether or not to allow the project, both sides harboured the same fears. The environmental impact of a hydel project commissioned on a budget of Rs. 1,730 crores (over 40.5 million dollars) was obvious, as was the socio-cultural impact of the massive labour force that the project would bring into Dzongu and keep there while work was underway. Even Lepchas from elsewhere in Sikkim are not allowed to settle in Dzongu. The proximity to the Khangchendzonga Biosphere Reserve and the historically significant Tholung Monastery above the dam site were the other concerns. ACT was also not convinced with the Environment Impact Assessment report prepared by Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies of Mountain & Hill Environment (CISMHE) and had thus also thumbed down the Environment Management Plan based on this report. Underlying these concerns is the reality of backwardness that sequestration as a Lepcha reserve has bequeathed Dzongu. Untouched by the tourism boom that has reached other parts of Sikkim, Dzongu has poor infrastructure and low literacy. Of late, its economy, sustained thus far by its large cardamom plantations, has taken a severe hit in the hands of reduced produce and declining market value. For many, the hydel project offered a chance to secure many times the going market rate for their lands while others saw opportunities and development riding in on the

improved infrastructure that would have to precede the project development. Then there would be those discomfited by the idea of opposing the Government, because that is how many saw any argument against hydel projects. It was obvious that a section inside Dzongu was willing to make some sacrifices. ACT supporters, on the other hand, remained convinced that hydel offered no development prospects. Also, the debate was not just about Panan; four more hydel projects had been proposed for the Lepcha reserve.

The public hearing ended with a majority willing to give the go-ahead to the project subject to their demands [tabled earlier with the Chief Minister] being granted. ACT and its supporters refused even conditional support, demanding instead that the entire process, starting from environmental impact assessment to hydrological studies, be undertaken afresh. Although the Panan hydel project managed to pass the public hearing muster, ACT had made its strongest presence yet. Although its involvement in protesting other hydel projects along the Teesta continued for some more time, the group, made up almost entirely of Lepchas with most of them from Dzongu itself, started focussing more on challenging the hydel projects proposed for the Lepcha reserve.

Strength in Homogeneity

Sikkim has developed on very cosmopolitan lines. Its small size and infrastructural limitations have led to a random mix of populations. Although pockets with stronger presence of individual communities, and thus common lifestyles, exist, larger territorial segments contain a mix of peoples and a range of social groupings. In such a situation, priorities differ and aspirations vary, leading to a scenario where demands and stands are prompted by different reasons even for localised events. This makes cohesion difficult to achieve even for protests against very obvious targets like a hydel project. Dzongu's segregated status of centuries gave it a homogeneity which helped tide over the melting-pot incoherence that ACT's interventions in other parts of North Sikkim suffered from.

Dzongu has traditionally been a Lepcha stronghold. Its steep ravines must have made it unappealing to the Bhutia community who were essentially herders and sought out pastures; its remoteness and harsh terrain made it unfavourable for agriculture which was the specialisation of the Nepalese community. The Limboos, recognised as

the autochthons of Sikkim alongside the Lepchas and Bhutias, were concentrated more towards south and west Sikkim, leaving Dzongu free through history for the Lepchas. In the nineteenth century, the king of Sikkim gave the Dzongu tract in dowry to his wife and this ensured even more exclusivity for the region. Eventually, in 1958, the exclusive claim of Dzongu Lepchas on this land was formalised by a royal proclamation. In the North district of Sikkim, of which Dzongu is a part, as per data reflected in the 'State Socio-Economic Census 2006' conducted by the Department of Economics, Statistics, Monitoring & Evaluation, Government of Sikkim, the Lepchas constitute the single-largest community, comprising 37.47% [14,370] of the 38,352-strong population of the district. More than half of the Lepchas of North Sikkim reside in Dzongu.

When the Panan hydel project came along, as already mentioned, the people of Dzongu harboured the same concerns—fears that the influx of imported manpower would not only leave behind a socio-cultural footprint, but also put the environment under stress. It was in how this situation could be resolved that the people differed. A majority commits in public that adequate checks and balances would suffice, but ACT and its supporters remain adamant that too much is being put at risk. The line dividing Dzongu on the hydel debate is very clear but on both sides are people voicing the same concerns, only offering varying solutions.

Following the public hearing on the Panan hydel project in September, ACT got busy with securing more information, networking with other protest groups and exploring legal options. Meanwhile, those who believed hydel projects would deliver development were getting restive when land acquisition and other matters took longer than anticipated. In fact, on December 3, 2006, a section of the affected land-owners of Teesta Stage III and Panan hydel projects, wrote to the Chief Minister complaining that the hydel developers were 'dragging their feet' on deciding about the demand for negotiated rates for land acquisition. The land had been identified and the landowners were willing, but the rates had not been decided yet, they wrote, demanding that this process be completed within the month. This deadline would be missed because the Dzongu hydel debate was moving into a higher gear. A day before the affected land-owners wrote the letter demanding that the hydel projects be expedited, on December 2, a new association was formed—the Concerned Lepchas of Sikkim (CLOS), an association that would play a major role in the hydel protests in the ensuing months. The organisation stated that it was formed after a

meeting of 'educated' members of the community realised that important issues faced the community. CLOS announced that it would 'fight against' all ongoing and proposed hydel projects in Lepcha-dominated areas, protest the delimitation decided for the Dzongu territorial constituency, 'purify' the 'pollution of the Lepchas from the socio-cultural existence that has been affected due to the wrong policies of the authorities and the so-called Lepcha associations/ organisations in Sikkim,' and 'make the people aware about the sanctity of the glorious Kabi-Lungstok Convention of the thirteenth century' [which marks the blood brotherhood treaty undertaken between the Lepchas and Bhutias in Sikkim].

The hydel protest was now coalescing into a Dzongu-specific, Lepcha-driven stand. Shortly after this, ACT announced its decision to stage a protest rally in Gangtok, scheduled for December 12, 2006. CLOS communicated support for the rally and decided to participate in it. The direct confrontation mode that the protest was now entering into sat uncomfortably on many shoulders and the All India Lepcha Students Development Organisation could not arrive at a consensus on what stand to take and decided to stay away. The date for the rally had been carefully picked; it coincided with the 12th anniversary of the present State Government. The obvious idea was to embarrass the government on this important date. On the eve, nearly 400 ACT supporters had arrived in Gangtok to participate in the rally scheduled for the next day. Eventually, the rally did not take place. An evening before the rally, the State Government offered talks and after ACT deferred its rally, a delegation was invited to meet with the Chief Minister. At the meeting, the Chief Minister agreed to review 'all aspects' of hydel projects in North Sikkim. ACT had already been petitioned by several Lepcha organisations to explore the option of talks before launching into confrontation mode.

Things slowed down for some months. At the end of February, the Ministry of Environment & Forests, Government of India, granted the environmental clearance for Panan hydel project with a rider that no labour colonies be allowed to come up inside Dzongu. Although ACT remained opposed to the hydel project, it welcomed this clause, stating that it attested Dzongu's status as an exclusively protected area for the Lepchas. There were political distractions also with the State preparing for rural body polls. In the meanwhile, the process of land acquisition began for Teesta Stage III HEP, and ACT got involved in protesting it. A series of petitions, press releases and memorandums followed. ACT demanded that a resurvey be conducted before land was acquired. It

argued that the land surveys conducted in 1958 and 1977-78 could not be relied on and that many private holdings had not been recorded as such at that time. While this demand moved from office to office, it was already May 2007, and no moves had been made officially by the State Government to deliver the complete reviewal of North Sikkim hydel projects. ACT was perhaps already planning to resume its public protests against the hydel projects. Just as CLOS was formed ahead of the rally proposed for December 12, on May 10, Buddhist monks representing monasteries in Dzongu gathered at Passingdang village in Upper Dzongu and formed the 'Sangha of Dzongu' (SOD) and announced their resolve to oppose hydel projects proposed for North Sikkim. A little over a month later, ACT again entered the capital of Sikkim, Gangtok, with its hydel protest.

The Protest Reaches the Capital

On June 20, 2007, ACT, supported by CLOS and SOD, began a hunger strike at Bhutia-Lepcha House on Tibet Road, a short walk above the town's main thoroughfare. ACT general secretary Dawa Lepcha and CLOS member Tenzing Lepcha sat on indefinite hunger strike while Dzongu resident OT Lepcha joined them on the first day to launch a parallel relay hunger strike. The hunger strikers announced that their protest would continue till all hydel projects proposed for Dzongu were scrapped and others in North Sikkim reviewed. What ACT lacked in planning - there was no advance notice even to media persons on the hunger strike - it tried to make up with timing. The December 12 rally was planned to coincide with the Government Formation Day anniversary, and the hunger strike began two days ahead of the Sampoorna Kranti Diwas ['Complete Revolution Day'] celebrated by the ruling party of Sikkim to mark events of June 22, 1993, the day when its supporters had taken to the streets of Sikkim to take on the then State Government which had become suffocatingly dictatorial. ACT began its latest round of protests in a non-violent and non-confrontational tone, and this found resonance with many. The 'Letters to the Editor' columns in local newspapers are thinly contributed to in Sikkim, but lengthy responses featured in newspapers here the following day. Affected people, even those supporting the hydel projects, visited the fasting ACT members. Non-Lepcha youth, uninitiated in either politics or protests, were so moved by the resolve of Dawa and Tenzing that they hosted and maintained a web-log

[www.weepingsikkim.blogspot.com] to keep a cyber-track of their protest. The blogspot became very popular, received several hits and documented extensive feedback from the world over. It was an embarrassing denouncement of the State's policies and even got branded as a weapon of 'cyber-war' at one time by the powers-that-be. It was even pulled off the net by the creators at one time, but was hosted again and continues 'blogging' to this day.

But such engagement from laypeople was scant and mostly cloaked in anonymity; the majority stayed away, remaining distant and uninvolved. This was unfortunate because even if people remained unconvinced about the validity of the demands, the protest still commanded respect, but not enough of it was expressed by the lay people in the public domain. The few who commented, however, wanted only one thing—talks between the protestors and the State Government. And talks were offered on the second day of the hunger strike itself when the Political Secretary to the Chief Minister called on ACT members at BL House and invited them to a meeting with senior State officials. Opposition political parties also visited the protestors and expressed support, and issued strong condemnations against the State Government. Social organisations fronted by political leaders also conveyed support and even offered to join the hunger strike. ACT excused itself away from these offers, insisting that it did not want any direct political involvement.

At the other end, back in Dzongu, a delegation of some 86 of the 90-odd Panan HEP-affected families called on the Dzongu representative in the State Legislative Assembly and submitted a memorandum marked for the Chief Minister clarifying that they were not part of the ACT protest and reiterating that the No Objection Certificates issued by them for the project still held good if their demands for better compensation rates and other safeguards were granted. They were careful not to pass any comments on ACT or its protest, at least not in statements released to the Press, and limited their communication to explaining their own stand. ACT's response to this development was uncharacteristically abrasive and was the beginning of a process, which, over the coming months would split Dzongu into camps that distrusted everything that the other side attempted or proposed. In a Press statement issued a day after the Dzongu landowners had distanced themselves from the ACT protest, ACT accused them of being 'encroachers' who had occupied government land and were now wishing to sell it to the power developers. The statement also alleged that the landowners had been 'coerced' into issuing the NOCs

by ‘subjugation and administrative intimidation.’ Thus far, the fears and concerns were shared by both the opposing and supporting groups. With ACT’s response, a line started being drawn to demarcate a stricter division that many were not comfortable with inside Dzongu.

Against this background, talks began between ACT and State Government representatives headed by the Acting Chief Minister and including the head of the executive, the Chief Secretary. The Chief Minister was away on a foreign tour at the time. A succession of talks were held and even though these remained inconclusive, both sides issued optimistic updates on the progress and exuded politeness. Things back in Dzongu were not going as well though, and the increasing number of visits and comments by Opposition leaders was being circulated as evidence that ACT was a political movement opposed to the developmental plans of the State Government. A process born out of socio-environmental concerns was now being pushed on political lines and choices were being forced on the people for reasons that had very little to do with the issue at hand. Affected land-owners even convened a meet-the-press event in Dzongu to underline that their support for the hydel project was not made under duress.

A fortnight into the hunger strike, the initial euphoria over the talks started ebbing. The State Government team at the talks remained insistent that for the talks to progress to the next level, ACT would have to withdraw its hunger strike and create an ‘amiable environment’ for negotiations to continue; ACT remained insistent on the demand that hydel projects in Dzongu would have to be scrapped before it stepped back. With the hydel protest being powered by Lepcha youth from Dzongu, it started getting identified as a Lepcha and Dzongu issue more and more. This impression gained credence once expressions of support started coming in from outside Sikkim; the support was almost all from Lepcha associations from the neighbouring parts of West Bengal. In Sikkim, with ACT consciously keeping political outfits at an arm’s length, social organisations headed by political leaders came together to form an umbrella organisation by the name of SAFE (Sikkim Associations for Environment) to support the ACT-led protest. Talks between ACT and the State Government were not heading anywhere and in the stalemate transpired incidents which created even more ill-will and distrust.

On July 11, 2007, Lepcha youth from the Darjeeling district of West Bengal, led by the Rong Ong Prongzom (Lepcha Youth Organisation) descended on Sikkim’s sole lifeline to the rest of the country—National Highway 31A—and staged a protest there which

held up traffic for nearly two hours. The protest was staged on the West Bengal side of the national highway just beyond the South Sikkim border. The only traffic that was affected was to and from Sikkim. The protestors from Darjeeling were clear that their support was only for the hydel projects proposed for Dzongu, which they saw as the last bastion of Lepcha culture. For Sikkim, connectivity with the rest of the nation has always been at mercy of the weather of the neighbouring state's hill politics with landslides and strikes forcing frequent disruptions. The blockading of the highway, even if it was only for a few hours, offended many lay Sikkimese and even the State Government did not take very well to what it saw as non-Sikkimese involvement and pressure on State matters. ACT also started focussing more on invoking Lepcha sentiments by highlighting that while some members of the community remained detached from the protest in Sikkim, others were putting their lives on the line. The reference was obviously to Dawa and Tenzing Lepcha who had already made many rounds to the hospital, their health failing as they continued their hunger strike.

Talks Peak and Collapse

The Dzongu hydel debate has been hounded by mood swings throughout and sure enough, just when the attrition levels were getting abrasive, cordiality returned with the Chief Minister, who was now back in Sikkim. He convened a high-level meeting with his officials, stressing that Dzongu's sanctity had to be maintained 'at all costs.' He sympathised with the concerns expressed by ACT and directed a 'High Powered Committee on Power' to open fresh negotiations with ACT which welcomed the gesture. But even as ACT members were conferring with the high-powered committee, CLOS opened a new front. They brought down 21 affected land-owners, most of them from Sakyong village where the dam is proposed to come up. A series of allegations were levelled and CLOS even challenged the moral authority of the older generation to sign away lands which would have been inherited by their children. Addressing the press conference on July 18, CLOS hinted that the situation in Dzongu was so tense that even blood could spill. Meanwhile, the State Government offered ACT a time-bound assurance to address all its concerns and fears within one month of it calling off its hunger strike. Dawa and Tenzing Lepcha's health was now on the brink. Lepcha Associations and bodies also

exerted pressure on ACT to withdraw its protest. In another development, on July 21, 2007, a 500-strong delegation of Lepchas from Dzongu drove into Gangtok to call on the Chief Minister to reiterate their support for the Panan hydel project. Representatives who addressed the meeting, spoke affectionately of Dawa and Tenzing Lepcha, but breathed fire on others whom they saw as exploiting the situation and obstructing resolution. At the meeting, the Chief Minister announced that no labour camps would be allowed inside Dzongu for Panan HEP, promised a higher compensation and the assurance that unused land acquired for the project would be returned to the original landowners after 35 years.

The moral pressure exerted by the continuing hunger strike by Dawa and Tenzing was fraying nerves to desperation levels in both camps. The displays of strength and public proclamations aside, concern over the deteriorating health of the two hunger strikers was palpable. This time, the State Government blinked first. Early on July 25, the 36th day of Dawa and Tenzing on hunger strike, a letter reached ACT at Bhutia-Lepcha House, signed by the Chief Secretary of Sikkim. The letter communicated that the State Government, as per ACT's demand, would form a review committee to look into its demands. This review committee's recommendations, the letter added, would be binding on the Government and would be submitted within one month of its formation. The understanding was that ACT would withdraw its hunger strike on receipt of the letter and then sit down with representatives from the State Government and decide on the composition of this review committee.

That, however, was not to be.

Just when observers felt that the protest and the negotiations that followed would enter the next level, everything collapsed after having come so close to resolution. ACT replied to the offer with a fresh set of conditions. It demanded that the Review Committee be headed by an independent person well versed in social, religious, environmental and technical aspects of hydel projects; that 50% of the Review Committee be nominated by ACT and that the Review Committee be notified 'immediately' to 'enable' ACT to lift its hunger strike. This communication was issued after office-hours and caught the other side off-guard; they were led to believe that this part of the negotiations would take place after the hunger strike had been called off. There must have been some confusion in the ACT camp too, since the letter listing its new demands issued to the State Government was under a letter head that read 'Affected Citizens of Sikkim.' A meeting late in the

evening between members of the High Powered Committee and a strong ACT-led delegation ended inconclusively. The State's representatives argued that the Review Committee should be representative of all affected people and not balanced unduly in favour of ACT. They also stressed that Government Notifications were important documents and could not be issued on such short notice. A day that had begun on the most optimistic note since the ACT protest was launched closed on the sourest note. As things stood at that time, the bridges had been burnt.

The next day, the Chief Secretary issued a letter to ACT stressing that the State Government was now convinced that ACT 'was not interested' in resolving the issue. The letter also alleged that ACT had been 'infiltrated' by forces 'inimical' to Sikkim. It did not help calm the situation that on that day even political outfits from outside Sikkim had conveyed support for ACT. The letter added that if ACT did not wind up its hunger strike within 24 hours, the 'State Government would be left with no alternative but to take necessary action as per law.' Even as Dawa and Tenzing had weakened to an extent that they could not even speak coherently anymore, the negotiations had collapsed to a degree from where it appeared there was no hope of resolution. When the 24-hour deadline expired, rumours started making rounds that the hunger strikers would be forcibly evicted. Extra police presence at the police station below the venue of the hunger strike only lent further credence to the rumours. The use of force was however not deployed, but that was small comfort given that the only hope for resolution—talks—had collapsed.

ACT responded to the last missive by expressing surprise over the tone of finality. The letter conveyed that ACT was still willing to continue with the talks, but the tone had changed. Both the government representatives and the ACT members were now exchanging allegations. Politics joined the fray too. Opposition parties in the State formed a Joint Action Committee to address issues pertaining to the ACT-led protest. Lepcha organisations from outside Sikkim progressed from expressions of support to proactive action in the form of rallies and relay hunger strikes in Kalimpong and Darjeeling towns in the neighbouring state of West Bengal. Although ACT distanced itself from other organisations and political parties by maintaining that it could not control how others reacted to the shared issue, such clarifications did little to ease suspicions that too many politically motivated voices were joining the chorus. With politics came rhetoric and strong allegations issued from all sides. On August 4, matters came

to a head when supporters aligned with the Congress [I] party burnt an effigy of the Governor, condemning what they saw as the non-involvement of the Constitutional head in resolving the issue. Soon, even politicians from outside Sikkim were passing judgement on Sikkim's handling of the affair, and the protest against hydel projects was teetering on the brink of getting swamped by political one-upmanship. Although still not explicitly announced as such, the ACT-led protest had now become an almost exclusively Lepcha protest. But just as was the case with Dzongu, opinions even among the Lepcha associations from outside Sikkim were split. The Darjeeling and Kalimpong Lepcha associations had already sided with the protest but the All India Lepcha Association, the Gyakar Jumbuling Rong Shezum, in a statement issued on August 7, 2007, while upholding the right of ACT supporters to protest the hydel project, put on record that its two-day 'fact-finding visit' to Dzongu revealed that residents there 'did not appear too unduly worried about the impact of the project.' It advised the two sides—the pro and anti-hydel lobbies in Dzongu—to sit together and formalise a workable solution which 'ushered development while also ensuring preservation.' Unfortunately, a deadlock had set in and no advice was being taken at face value by either side, with each side suspicious of any comment that conflicted with their stand.

Interestingly, both, the State Government and ACT drew Dawa and Tenzing into their arguments, each blaming the other side of putting their lives at risk because of irrational stubbornness. Meanwhile, after 42 days of fasting, Dawa and Tenzing were on the brink of organ failure and government doctors attending to them put them on nasal feed. Since they were not feeding themselves, their protest continued.

By mid-August 2007, the impasse appeared entrenched, and in a flurry of activity, the State tried everything from appeals to challenges to appeasement to break the impasse. The festival of Tendong Lho Rum Faat is the only Lepcha festival that gets a state-level celebration in the capital. Addressing a big gathering of Lepchas on the day August 8, 2007], the Chief Minister offered to personally intervene and get all of ACT's concerns addressed should they withdraw their hunger strike. The hunger strike was not withdrawn, but ACT, which, after the collapse of talks on June 25 had announced that it would not talk with anyone anymore and would continue with its protest till all the hydel projects in North Sikkim were scrapped, communicated that it was willing to return to the negotiating table. In an almost parallel development, the State Government finalised the land acquisition rates

for the Panan hydel project. The rate offered was at par with the highest that the State had fixed for any project anywhere in the State. Where the land acquisition rate was being discussed at Rs. 4 to 5 per square feet at one time, it was fixed at Rs. 18 per square foot for cardamom and paddy fields and Rs. 16 per square foot for barren lands, plus a 30% solatium. The market rate for land in Dzongu hovers at as low as Rs. 2 per square foot. Panan HEP requires 35.8850 hectares. The quantum of the liquidity that the project would inject into Dzongu was difficult for the residents to ignore. And aggression returned with the Chief Minister's uncharacteristic outburst against the ACT-led protest in his Independence Day address to the State on August 15. With a section of landowners petitioning the State Government to expedite the land acquisition process, many suspected that the confrontation was now headed for a collision. Land acquisition for Panan hydel project had been put on hold the moment talks had begun first in June and the suspension was perhaps stretching for longer than anticipated. On August 16, the first round of land compensation for the project began inside Dzongu. In the first phase, Rs. 7.97 crores (1.86 million dollars) were to be disbursed. At the rates offered, a total of Rs. 9.97 crores (2.33 million dollars) was to be handed over to the 91 affected families.

With the State pushing ahead with the hydel project, the pressure was on ACT to devise a way out of the stalemate and keep the movement relevant. Just as the land acquisition move was sudden, the following days kept everyone even more confused. On the evening of the first day of compensation distribution, Rongyong Chu, the river in Dzongu over which the Panan HEP was to be commissioned, broke its banks. The flash flood caused extensive damage and claimed the lives of four labourers working on Panan HEP-related work. ACT saw this as proof of the inadvisability of developing a hydel project on such a temperamental river, and its support groups took the timing of the flash-flood further by presenting it as divine retribution. This allusion might have been innocent of any concealed comment, but many of the Dzongu residents were offended by what they saw as an implied hint that they were being 'punished' for their 'greed.' Already accused of being land-grabbers in the past, such statements pushed them further away. The tension was palpable and when, the next day in Gangtok, a vehicle hired by the project developers was targeted with arson, suspicion immediately fell on ACT supporters even though subsequent investigation discounted such aspersions.

This was perhaps the lowest ebb that the issue has dredged; divisions were strong and the sides entrenched in stubborn refusals to

notice that the equation had changed. After all work on the project was resuming and irrespective of which camp one belonged to, Dzongu still had concerns which had not been adequately addressed. Staying true to the unexpected swings that the issue has been prone to, a sudden change arrived within days of bare-teeth confrontation. In a communiqué conveyed from New Delhi where he was on an official visit, the Chief Minister reiterated his appeal to ACT to withdraw its hunger strike and return to the negotiating table. It was the 63rd day of the hunger strike for Dawa and Tenzing, now admitted to the Emergency Ward of the Gangtok hospital where they were under constant watch and surviving on a liquid diet distributed by nasal tubes. ACT decided to reciprocate the Chief Minister's appeal by withdrawing the duo from their indefinite hunger strike while continuing the relay hunger strike. The hope of talks and eventual resolution were however short-lived: the Government turning lukewarm again; it welcomed the withdrawal of Dawa and Tenzing but expressed hope that even the relay hunger strike would be withdrawn soon. And so the matter remained and the ACT-protest in the form of relay hunger strikes at Gangtok completed 100 days. 208 volunteers had taken turns to sustain the hunger strike. Talks did not materialise and ACT and its support groups from Sikkim and Darjeeling took their protest to New Delhi. It was here that the focus zeroed in completely on Dzongu. The rallies and meetings in New Delhi wore a completely Lepcha flavour and the memorandums spoke only of Dzongu, its importance and concerns. Soon, ACT came on record and explained that even though it was ideologically opposed to hydel projects, its protest was aimed only against hydel projects in Dzongu.

Dzongu's importance to Lepchas as a community has never been doubt, but it has never explicitly been presented as a holy land of the Lepchas. But a 'Holy Land' is how the support groups outside Sikkim had been presenting Dzongu, and once the protest in Sikkim narrowed its field of involvement to the Lepcha reserve, the Holy Land argument started getting circulated more aggressively here too. This claim has been contested by the State Government and the pro-hydel lobby as being inaccurate and criticised as an attempt to paint the issue as a communal confrontation. On the other side, ACT, its Lepcha support groups in Sikkim and Lepchas organisations from Kalimpong came together and formed a 'Dzongu Holy Land Protection Joint Action Committee' to protest hydel projects in Dzongu. This confrontation was to become acute later.

The Fabric Tears at the Wrong End

Meanwhile, on September 4, 2007, the State Government constituted the Review Committee promised on June 25. The Chief Secretary, Government of Sikkim, was nominated to head the Committee to review issues and demands raised by ACT and other project-affected people of Dzongu. The State Government proposed to include the Additional Chief Secretary, Secretaries of the Forest and Power Departments, the ACT president, a resident of Dzongu and an environmentalist. The State also decided to suspend all project-related activities in Dzongu until the review committee, which was given 100 days to complete its study, submitted its report. The decision was communicated to ACT, which dismissed it as an 'eyewash' and decided not to allow its president to be part of it. The Review Committee was not only headed by a State Government official, but also had the majority representation of government officials, who were seen by ACT as pro-hydel. It thumbed down the Review Committee and announced again that nothing short of scrapping of all projects proposed for Dzongu would be acceptable. ACT had already taken a stand on the composition of the Review Committee and was perhaps left with no option but to boycott it in its proposed form, but it should have probably not cut it away completely. Had a member from ACT been in the Committee, it would have been able to get more of its arguments included 'on record' in the report that was eventually tabled. ACT presence would have also given it a chance to direct the Committee to arguments it might have otherwise ignored. ACT could have still rejected the final recommendation of the Committee but by being part of the process, its objections would have to be officially recorded in the final document.

In the meanwhile, the environment of distrust and mutual suspicion thickened. It peaked on October 2, 2007, when a joint rally of CLOS and Sangha of Dzongu members attempted to arrive uninvited at the State-level observance of Gandhi Jayanti [the birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi] in Gangtok. Police detachments were on standby and met the CLOS-SOD wave a short distance from the venue of the Gandhi Jayanti celebrations and stopped them. The rallyists were instigated to break the police cordon, and they tried. The police cordon held. After some preventive detentions and shouting matches, the rallyists were allowed through in 'manageable' batches to walk to the Gandhi bust and offer prayers—but only after the official function had

ended. ACT had always professed commitment to non-confrontational, non-violent protest, but the protest had already stretched out for more than four months. Since it was made up of mostly young supporters, the mood was getting restive.

A fortnight later, there was another flicker of hope.

On October 16, 2007, an official delegation of the Dzongu Holy Land Protection Joint Action Committee met the Chief Minister of Sikkim with their demands. This was significant since the hydel protestors and the Chief Minister had not met since the hunger strike had begun. The meeting witnessed an honest exchange, and although nothing concrete emerged, the ice had been broken again. The delegation highlighted the cultural and emotional significance of Dzongu and the Chief Minister reiterated the Government's commitment to ensure that the proposed projects did not compromise these aspects. The representatives wanted the projects scrapped, and the Chief Minister invited ACT again to join the review committee and help find a way to fulfil the wishes of the Lepcha people without having to face legal and other complications later. For the Panan project, not only had a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) been signed with private developers, all the processes required by law also had been completed. In addition, there was a sizeable lobby inside Dzongu which actually desired the hydel project.

Priorities in Sikkim changed for some time with dates announced for rural body (panchayat) elections and the administration busy with preparations for this massive exercise. The ruling party announced that a final decision on the hydel projects in Dzongu would be taken in consultation with the village-level people's representatives elected in the polls scheduled for the end of October. This was a reiteration of the State's contention that ACT had no *locus standi* and that the right to negotiate on the people's behalf should rest with the representatives elected by the people. With this decision, the ruling party, at least as far as Dzongu was concerned, made hydel projects an election issue. On the day of voting, the North district, of which Dzongu is a part, recorded the highest voter turnout with an average of 95%. Five gram panchayat wards [the smallest units of rural bodies] in North Sikkim recorded 100% voter turnout. All five were in Dzongu. Part of the reason for the impressive turnout in North Sikkim was its small size - North Sikkim marks the largest geographical footprint, but holds the lowest in population of all districts in Sikkim. What cannot be ignored, however, is that only the North district had a real election issue—hydel projects. There were no burning political issues in the other districts to

draw the people out to the polling stations and record their stand. This must have been an important factor contributing to the near complete turnout of voters because the closest contests were seen in Dzongu. In fact, for the Laven gram panchayat ward, the victor was decided by the toss of a coin after both the contestants polled the same number of votes—27 each! In the case of two other panchayat wards, the margin of victory was a thin 3 votes. The results also reflected the position of each side on the hydel debate. Dzongu recorded the highest number of wins by Independent candidates [winning against ruling party candidates] in the North district. After the results, there were eight Independent candidates among the 41 gram panchayat wards in Dzongu. Ruling party candidates occupied the rest of the berths.

With the completion of the panchayat polls process, the Review Committee, formed on September 4, held its first meeting on November 28. It had been given 100 days to complete its study and with the halfway mark already crossed, it had only begun meeting. Its term would eventually be extended twice. In December the Dzongu Holy Land Protection Joint Action Committee was back in New Delhi with its protest. Although the protest had bouts of disorganisation in Sikkim, it had done well in networking with similar protest groups and organisations outside Sikkim, and a good number of environmental activists participated in the Delhi visit. There was a sit-in protest at Delhi's Jantar-Mantar and visits to Central Government ministers and leaders. Hydel development, however, remains a State matter in the increasing federal evolution of national politics, and a solution to the issue will have to be found inside Sikkim. The Delhi visit did however succeed in getting the protest noticed and bring it into the loop of similar protests stretching across the country. This networking proved helpful in getting the word out on the protest to a larger audience. In January the relay hunger strike completed 200 days, and the milestone was marked with a grand gathering of ACT, its support groups and Lepcha representatives from outside Sikkim. Strong anti-hydel stands were expressed and the need to protect Dzongu reiterated. ACT even released its official flag on the day, and meetings were held to decide on the future course of action. The invoking of Dzongu as a Holy Land must have been an earnest move on the part of Lepcha organisations from outside Sikkim, but the assertive involvement of these groups in the affairs of the Lepcha reserve was not received too well inside Dzongu. They saw it as a talking down which offended many sensibilities. The first signs of this attrition manifested immediately after the 200-day anniversary of the ACT-led protest. A group of 42

Lepchas from the neighbouring Darjeeling district of West Bengal were hounded out of Dzongu by the pro-hydel lobby. No one was injured, but the rupture between pro and anti-hydel lobbies inside Dzongu had split wider. Politics was dragged into the picture and probably had a role to play, but the principal characters were the Lepchas and their differing points of views on how development could be brought into the backward area. Interestingly, even though the protest was becoming Panan-centric, the first violence was recorded when four labourers engaged with Stage IV related work on the Dzongu bank of the Teesta were assaulted on January 18, 2008. Three Lepcha youth from Dzongu were booked for the assault and arrested. ACT claimed that they had been falsely implicated and feted them with khadas upon their release on bail. Ironically, the day that recorded the first case of direct violence also recorded the official scrapping of a Dzongu hydel project. The State Cabinet, on January 18, 2008, withdrew the Letter of Intent issued to SSNR Super Power Pvt. Ltd. to develop the 99 MW Lingzya hydel project on Tholung Chu in Dzongu.

On the 250th day of the hunger strike, ACT announced that Lepchas from Darjeeling and elsewhere would be undertaking a 'pilgrimage march' from Melli in West Bengal to Dzongu in North Sikkim. Next came the resumption of the indefinite hunger strike by Dawa and Tenzing Lepcha on March 10. They were joined by 19-year-old Gaybu Lepcha. The timing was significant again. Sikkim was expecting the Deputy Chairman, National Planning Commission, who arrived in Gangtok on March 14 to inaugurate the State's much-promoted International Florishow. The Planning Commission has been a major supporter of Sikkim's hydel aspirations. With the resumption of the indefinite hunger strike, ACT also started issuing a series of press releases explaining reasons why Dzongu had a rightful claim as Holy Land for the Lepchas. Significantly, the opposing arguments have not contested this claim on record, but have only highlighted that Dzongu has never been introduced as a Holy Land in the past. To this, ACT has argued that the need had never arisen since Dzongu had never been under 'threat' in the past. The debate continues.

As the 'pilgrimage to Dzongu', announced for mid-April approached, activities intensified on both sides. Pre-empting the march by those opposing the project, a 225-strong car rally of hydel supporters from Dzongu drove down to Gangtok to call on the Chief Minister again. The car rally flaunted banners and posters condemning ACT and demanding that the administration take 'appropriate action' to evict the protestors. In all appearances, the gloves had come off. A

memorandum submitted to the Chief Minister also urged that work on the hydel projects proposed for North Sikkim be expedited. A major announcement was made at this meeting of April 5 when the Chief Minister shared that only hydel projects for which MoUs had been signed would be taken up and the rest, including those for which only letters of intent (LoI) had been issued, would be scrapped. As far as Dzongu was concerned, an MoU had been signed only for Panan hydel project and of the remaining five, the LoI for Lingzya had already been withdrawn. With the announcement, only Panan HEP remained.

While this was definitely a major victory for ACT and provided an opportunity for it to change track and realign its movement, it ignored the chance. Perhaps, the opportunity was passed over because too much planning had already been invested into the 'pilgrimage' announced for Dzongu. The march began on April 14, 2008 and became embroiled in a disturbing series of confrontations from the moment it stepped into Sikkim at Rangpo that day. In a move to ensure that the march was not directly associated with the hydel protest, ACT members stayed away, but its support groups were at Rangpo to receive the 700-odd marchers. Although the marchers insisted that they had no intentions but a pilgrimage, some members of the support groups circulated handbills explaining the reasons why hydel projects in Dzongu should be opposed. It was becoming difficult to keep the politics away. At Singtam, about 14 kms from Rangpo where the marchers were scheduled to halt for the night, the situation turned ugly. The entire town downed shutters in an overtly hostile move and even the Dharamsala (a community hall) booked to house the marchers for their overnight halt, was locked out. The marchers were left stranded, and a tense evening fell on the town. Eventually, the host group broke the lock and brought the marchers in. But the hostility was far from over and peaked the next day when the marchers reached Dickhu from where they were scheduled to enter Dzongu. On the Dzongu side of the bridge there, a counter rally of about 500 Lepchas from Dzongu had gathered, intent on refusing access to the touring group claiming that the visitors were on a 'disruptive' mission intent on corrupting a developmental debate into an ethnic issue. The marchers decided against a confrontation, offered prayers from the far bank of the Teesta and turned back.

While this situation was playing out, the ACT protest at BL House received its most eminent visitor to date, Medha Patkar, the respected social activist of the Narmada Bachao Aandolan, who called on the hunger strikers and lashed out severely against the State Government

for what she saw as its continuing blindsiding of the protest and refusal to engage the protestors in negotiations. A major achievement of having secured the support of the country's most recognisable name in hydel protests was dampened to some extent by the unfortunate turn of events in Dzongu. The ensuing days were devoted to a string of allegations and counter allegations over what had transpired at Singtam and Dikchu and what Medha Patkar had said. So much so that when the 20-page Report of the Review Committee was tabled and accepted by the State Cabinet on April 24, 2008, it went largely ignored even though it had made some strong recommendations. Even the State Government did very little to publicise the recommendations of the Review Committee.

Hope Flickers

The issue continued in its uncommunicative trajectory for another month, until an attempt to break the deadlock was made by an unlikely agency, the Panchayats from Chungthang, who called on the Chief Minister and urged him to 'personally intervene' to resolve the issue, save the Lepcha society from fragmenting further and save the lives of Dawa and Tenzing who had started developing severe complications in their second bout with the indefinite hunger strike. Accordingly, on June 12, 2008, the Secretary, Power & Energy Department, wrote to the ACT president informing him that the State Government had decided to scrap four hydel projects proposed for Dzongu, leaving only Panan HEP inside Dzongu and Teesta Stage IV on its border. This was the first official admission of scrapping the hydel projects, and ACT reciprocated by withdrawing Dawa and Tenzing Lepcha from the hunger strike on the 93rd day. They had lost more than 10 kilos each, but still put up a brave, optimistic front, stating that they welcomed the latest development and looked forward to the re-initiation of talks.

Although the issue has seen many false starts towards reconciliation, the latest development holds the most hope. ACT has displayed a new resolve not to get distracted or fall for emotional reactions which might distract from the issue they pursue. It has been close to two months since Dawa and Tenzing withdrew from their indefinite hunger strike and the level of animosity scaled down. Since the State Government was approached on ACT's behalf by elected members of the ruling party itself, the political shades that the protest had attracted have also faded. What is more, ACT office bearers

explain that the delay in resuming talks is not because any side is dithering, but because ACT wants to first consult with the elected panchayat representatives of Dzongu and more people of the affected areas, take them into confidence, explain ACT's position and then arrive at the negotiating table. This is a well intentioned move which should, even if it does not build consensus on the hydel issue, go a long way in washing away the bad blood created between the pro and anti-hydel lobbies inside Dzongu. That alone should score as a major victory because irrespective of how the conflict plays out, should the differences remain unaddressed, it could end up wreaking more damage on the Lepcha social fabric of Dzongu than the hydel project itself. These deliberations should also help ACT moderate its stand and decide on the level of compromise it is willing to make. [The first round of preliminary talks were held between an ACT delegations and officials from the State Power & Energy Department on August 6, 2008]

As for which direction the talks should go, a good place to begin would be the recommendations of the Review Committee. Although ACT had dismissed the Committee as 'eye wash' and even though the Committee does not recommend the scrapping of Panan HEP, it is still a powerful collection of recommendations.

The Review Committee has endorsed the Panan HEP as 'feasible' for the 'sustainable development' of Dzongu, but recommended that no more hydel projects be taken up for the time being. What is more important though is that it has recommended the setting up of a Monitoring Committee with 'adequate enforcing power' to 'monitor the compliance effectiveness and initiate corrective action as may be needed' for Panan. What is even more significant is that it has recommended that the powers of this Monitoring Committee be kept dynamic in the sense that it be allowed to review the Environment Management Plan and its implementation, and suggest additional safeguards 'as may be required from time to time.'

On the composition of this Monitoring Committee, the study recommends that members include 'geologists, environmental experts, forest experts, sociocultural experts from representatives of local NGO and PCE cum Secretary, Energy & Power.' The Report emphasises the need to protect the socio-cultural uniqueness of the area and warns that if the safeguards are not implemented and monitored, the project may lead to major economic and environmental impact. Stressing that the Environmental Management Plan (EMP) approved by the Ministry of Environment & Forests be 'implemented judiciously' and adequate

resources be committed towards this implementation, it recommends that the use of these funds be subjected to independent verification, periodical review and subjected to 'strengthening' based on ground experience.

The concerns highlighted are the same as those that have gripped Dzongu all along; what is new is that the recommendations provide for a stronger, more effective monitoring committee than has ever been attempted in the past. The recommendations, however, run the risk of getting handicapped by the same compromises that have undermined similar, if less powerful, monitoring committees constituted for other projects. What has to be accepted is that no matter how explicitly the powers and responsibilities of a monitoring committee are articulated, its effectiveness is decided by its composition. Given that the powers and involvement of the monitoring committee have been kept dynamic and open to expansion as work on the project progresses and unforeseen issues come up, if the project is to be undertaken at all, then the composition on this committee should be given the most importance. It would be advisable to prioritise experts and representatives from the affected people in it and keep government representation limited to administrative support. If the only remaining hydel project inside Dzongu is to get commissioned, ACT should also perhaps approach the talks keeping open an option of securing a berth in supervising the implementation process if it cannot stall the project. Even though its final aim has not been achieved yet, ACT has scored some major victories in the year since it has launched protests against hydel projects. Stumbles, too, have happened, from both sides, and there were many factors that played a role in it. What is important is that many policy decisions have been rolled back, some refined, others moderated, and as things stand, the biggest damage—that of cleaving the residents of Dzongu into enraged camps—is also being corrected. A conclusion is still awaited, but at least, the process has begun and after many false starts, appears to be heading in that direction.

