

**Stories of the Lepcha
Narratives from a Contested Land**

By

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Certificate of Authorship/Originality

certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree and is not being submitted as part of candidature for any other degree.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Candidate

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Signature removed prior to publication.

Kerry Little / 01003831

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In 2006, when I travelled to Sikkim and West Bengal to record the stories of the Lepcha, I arrived with slim connections to generous people. I have made close friends who permitted me an insider's access and intimacy when recording their stories. They allowed me to prowl around with a recorder, a camera and a notepad, questioning, clarifying, and inserting my needs as a researcher into their lives. They invited me to live in their homes, to share their food and join their family life.

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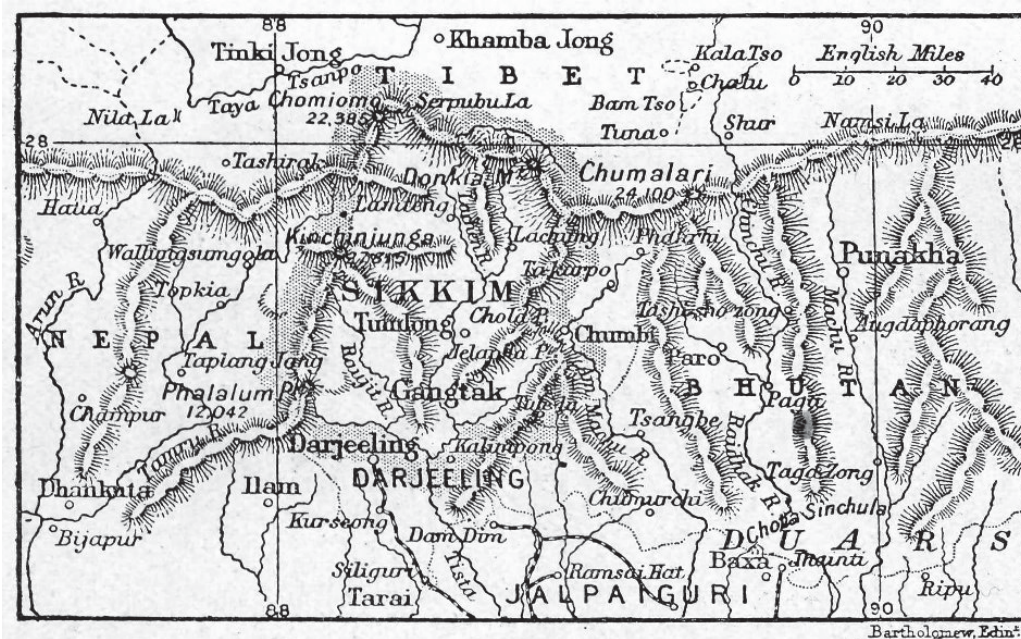
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Maps



Old map of north-east India and borderlands before the Darjeeling tract was annexed from Sikkim.



Sikkim showing Dzongu¹

¹ Map of north-east India sourced from <http://www.facebook.com/Vintage.Sikkim?fref=ts>
 Map of Sikkim including Dzongu sourced from www.weepingsikkim.blogspot.com

Sikkim's power projects²

² Nature magazine, vol 492, Issue 7492, 5 Dec 2012
<http://www.nature.com/news/flood-of-protest-hits-indian-dams-1.11932>

Abstract

In this thesis I explore the impact of modernity on the Lepchas, the Indigenous people of Sikkim, a small state in India's eastern Himalayan region. My focus is on youth from the Lepcha reserve Dzongú, in particular a group of Lepcha protestors, from Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) who opposed the development of mega hydroelectric dams on their land.

I wanted to learn how Lepcha youth absorbed education, global media, technology and global popular culture influences while participating in their culture. At the time I entered the world of Lepcha youth from Dzongú they had been at the tipping point of shifting away from their culture, but were disrupted by a crisis (the dams) that returned them there. I asked: Does their transition to modernity have to be a transition away from their culture?

The answer to this question from the Lepcha youth activists was no. However, without the threat of the dams, which were the catalyst for their protest, and their re-engagement with and reframing of Lepcha culture, it may easily have been yes.

To understand how the Lepchas navigate the changes brought to their society due to globalisation I have recorded Lepcha narratives from the past and the present and, through the lens of the young activists and their protest, (which included a long hunger strike) I examine the role of narrative and place in strengthening Lepchas' connection to their identity.

I have endeavoured to explore the young Lepchas' political and cultural awakening under the light of several fields of scholarship that explore identity, space, place and connections between each of these; and, through the friendships I made during my research period. As this is a non-traditional PhD I have asked and answered the questions in this thesis through the fragments of my traveller's narrative and also, most significantly, in the Lepchas' own stories related here.

Introduction

To imbue a landscape with moral and even redemptive significance is for most of us nothing more than romantic fantasy. But there are occasions when to travel through a landscape is to become empowered by raising its meaning. Carried along a line in space, the traveller travels a story, the line gathering the momentum of the power of fiction as the arrow of time moves across a motionless mosaic of space out of time, here primeval and divine.

Michael Taussig (1987, p.335)

We had walked for hours on the jungle path from Puntong back to the road, my laboured steps slowing our small group of four. The rain fell lightly at first, stirring the small creatures that lived in the jungle and bothering the monkeys who shrieked as they clamoured around the forest canopy, competing for food. Our jeep was waiting for us in the small village of Bey where the road ended or started depending on your journey. We arrived just as the rain thickened and the ground grew heavy and, as is usual in Dzongú, a vehicle meant to carry only a few soon filled with many. I had the spacious 'chief guest' seat in the front and when I turned around I saw that more travellers had joined my companions Dawa, Tenzing and Ongchuk. We were leaving later than planned and would have to drive much of the way back to the village in darkness, on slippery unsealed roads that hugged the mountains with a few feet and some scrubby trees the only barrier between the car and the edge of the ridge. This worried me a little as the jeep was old, the driver fond of dropping to 'angel gear' when going downhill, and we were possibly overloaded. We started off in the half-light of dusk and I automatically reached past my shoulder for a non-existent seatbelt. I looked down into the valley below at the river Teesta, which was surging around rocks, frothing and swirling, its wildness uninhibited and untamed. From the river up to the road the forest was disfigured by landslides that scratched the mountain leaving coarse scars on the rock face. The soundtrack was nature's – birdsong drowned out by the whistling of wind through heavy

rain. In the car everyone chattered and laughed about the water leaking inside. We passed around tea and biscuits and I curled my cold fingers around the warm cup. I closed my eyes and tried to capture an imprint of the moment. I wanted to store it in my memory, ready to retrieve in a future time of need, for I do not think I had ever felt such equanimity.

~

This is a traveller's narrative, an outsider's perspective of an insider's world. It is a journey of my head and my heart and like many journeys it started with small steps – a tentative exploration of the narrative landscape of the Lepcha people of Sikkim. And like many journeys it changed course when I took what I thought was a familiar path, which led me into unfamiliar territory.

I first travelled to Sikkim in 2005 as a tourist and returned a year later to write stories. Between those two journeys I had met a Lepcha man who had asked me to record the folktales of his people. He said: 'By the time the young people are interested it will be too late, as the old people who have the stories will be gone.'

From this slender thread I pondered the Lepcha stories and wondered about their currency in a globalised world. The thread spun me further into a consideration of globalisation and indigenous engagement. And then led me to this thesis, which explores the impact of modernity on the culture of the Lepchas viewed through the lens of a protest movement of which hunger strike was its main platform. My early research questions concerned Lepcha youth, who, unlike their parents, were educated, had been outside their village and in some cases had travelled outside Sikkim. I asked: How do the Lepcha youth straddle education, global media and homogenous popular culture? What is the role of Lepcha narratives when their culture is infused with Hindi movies, Nepali pop songs and *Baywatch*? Does their transition to modernity have to be a transition away from their culture?

I was initially interested in how modernity impacted Lepcha identity, particularly in how young, educated Lepchas navigated social influences away from their culture. Early in my research I met young Lepcha activists who had

formed a group called Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) and were opposed to the development of mega hydroelectric dams on their land.

After spending time with the Lepcha protesters my thesis question expanded and I asked: Is this group of Lepcha youth who were moving away from their culture now moving towards it in order to save their land?

To answer this question I have used narrative as a research framework drawing on a number of disciplines including cultural geography, anthropology, history, social movement theory and mythology. Exploring narrative enabled freedom of inquiry among the different communities and commentators that informed my research, while anchoring my exploration, which turned into many diverse areas as I tried to learn the impact of the Lepcha protest on Lepcha youth culture. For the anti-dam protestors, their identities as protectors of Dzongu were created via the stories they learnt and related. These stories were from history – myths, folktales and creation stories; and from the present – protest, environment and politics. My understanding of the significance of the stories to Lepcha identity was advanced by Spector-Mersel's conception of how identities are created via stories and her holistic model for interpreting narratives: 'If a sense of identity is attained through the stories we tell ourselves and others, not only is identity *expressed* in narrative, but also importantly, it is also *constructed* by it' (2011, 183). My exploration was inspired by Carr's work on the relationship between narrative and lived experience and as I looked deeper into the Lepcha protest, where narrative and lived experience were occurring concurrently, I was informed by the work of scholars of protest movements including; Polletta & Jasper, Gamson and Lofland, Doug McAdam and Fendrich & Lovoy. Massey and Tsing, and their perspectives on the connections between local and global spaces helped me to understand what was occurring in Lepcha society and how my own experience and perspective influenced my research process and analysis.

In my conversations with the protestors, I looked for a consistent 'end-point' (Spector-Mersel 2011, 177) to their stories. It was found in their relationship with Dzongu, where their identity was created and nourished. At various times

during the protest they told me that, in trying to save Dzongú, they had returned there, with renewed pride in their identity and interest in their heritage.

~

Travel and writing are passions that guide my learning. My pathway to knowledge has been and remains non-traditional, as this thesis is. I learn and write in fragments, collecting bits and pieces, examining the sentences and paragraphs looking for the heart of the story and once found, building on it, establishing it, and making sense of it. As a traveller, when faced with two roads I am, like the narrator in the poem by Robert Frost, most likely to 'take the road less travelled'.

For the past six years the road less travelled has been an unsealed road in the northeast Indian state of Sikkim leading to the Lepcha reserve, Dzongú. I have also travelled to a lesser extent, to Sikkim's capital Gangtok and the hill stations of Darjeeling and Kalimpong in neighbouring West Bengal. There I recorded stories and fragments of stories: tales from mythology, family history and contemporary politics. I met elders who lived high above the road and rarely left their village, and I spent time with the educated youth who were navigating modernity and tradition in their protest against the dams. They were negotiating their changing actual and social space and how, what Massey describes as 'is a product of our relations with each other, our connections with each other' (Massey 2013.)

My fragment collection is diverse. There are recordings, photographs and videos of the elder narrators who lived quietly in the village and had excavated their fading memories for the stories I asked of them. They spoke Lepcha (their young relatives translating) and they often referred to their role in the change in their society saying they were the 'last of our kind.' These fragments were juxtaposed with the narratives of the young, educated Lepcha activists. Their stories were told on protest banners, in newspaper articles, press releases, government announcements and court papers. I spoke to protesters, supporters and non-supporters, however the narratives are heavily weighted towards those against

the dams, for they were the group that struggled to have a voice against the dominant public narrative of the government, power companies and land owners.

I spent most of my time with the young activists and their families in Gangtok, where much of the protest took place, and in the villages in Dzungú, the region they were trying to protect.

In Dzungú I could examine the meaning of a sacred space in the context of the protest. It was the jungle that held the old stories from a past time; stories told by shamans and hunters, about a time when only Lepchas lived in Sikkim. I also heard contemporary stories, tales of conflict in the once-close community, political stories, environmental stories and secret stories. The sacred stories from the elders' time became protest narratives when the activists referenced their mythology to prove their ownership of the land. I wrote and recorded more fragments and was encouraged by Tsing who said 'fragments need not reduce analysis to simply noticing idiosyncrasy and happenstance ... fragments of varied schemes and travels and encounters do create a world of global connections ... made, and muddled, in friction' (2005, pp.271-272).

As I stitched these fragments together I became closer to those who contributed in my research. I moved from observer to participant, and from participant to observer, depending on where and with whom I was conducting my research. This both strengthened and weakened my authority as a researcher. My access to the protestors was largely uninhibited, resulting in deeply meaningful data collection. However, by my closeness to the protestors could impact my interpretation of their narratives. I also collected data from other sources; newspaper stories, government announcements, other researchers, scholars and through conversations with journalists and Sikkimese not involved in the protest. These fragments were added to my threads, broadening my limited perspective by deepening my outsider's understanding of the context in which I was working. Long periods in Australia between my several field trips to Sikkim also enabled a reflective examination of the data, an analysis strengthened by time and distance.

~

This Lepcha story offers insight into indigenous navigation of globalisation and the impact of globalisation on indigenous people. It explores the challenge many minority peoples face in relation to keeping strong connections to their culture. My learning journey was guided by the plea of Lepcha elder Lyangsong Tamsang to 'tell the truth' about the Lepchas; however, I was always aware that truth is mediated by who is telling it, to whom it is being told and for what purpose. Therefore, my aim – particularly in relation to my fieldwork – was to reflect the truth of that moment and to respect the Lepchas as the custodians of their own truth, recognising that the relating of history and stories changed between narrators. I was conscious of the problems of fieldwork identified by James Clifford who said, 'Fieldwork has become a problem because of its positivist and colonialist associations (the field as 'laboratory', the field as place of 'discovery') of privileged sojourners' (1997, pp.185–122). It was possible to be entranced by the differences in culture and so enamoured of the landscape that a robust and respectful examination of the field site would be compromised. I was conscious that I needed to be aware of the pros and cons – and complexities – of the events and challenges experienced by Lepcha communities.

Ramachandra Guha, in the epilogue of his acclaimed book *The Unquiet Woods*, gave me reason to pause when considering my findings. He quoted a passage from a Survival International booklet about the Indian Chipko protest movement: '1972: India: Tribal women in the Himalayas revive the ancient custom of hugging trees to protect them from the axe. This movement, known as Chipko, inspires similar protests around the world' (1999, p.198). The passage was derided by Guha who asked, 'How many errors can one make in a single sentence? The year the movement began was 1973, not 1972; Chipko's pioneers were caste Hindu men, not tribal women; their method was innovated on the spot rather than being a harking back to an 'ancient custom' (nor, it must be said, did they actually hug the trees)'.

Guha rightly despaired about the appropriation – or misappropriation– of the Chipko struggle: 'though the disregard for the truth can be irritating, the

attractions of a certain reading of Chipko in the West do not come as a surprise. Indian environmentalists also tend to be worshipful of Chipko, if slightly better informed of the facts' (1999, p.200).

Writings from proponents of the deep ecology movement, having been borne out of indigenous resistance to a hydroelectric dam in Norway in the 1970s, resonated with the anti-dam narratives in Sikkim. The deep ecologists accept that all living beings – and diversity and richness of life – have intrinsic value and that the extent and nature of human interference in the various ecosystems are not sustainable (Naess 2002, p.109).

While the philosophy behind deep ecology resonated with much of what I observed in Lepcha society, it tended to draw on what Amita Baviskar describes as 'the pre-capitalist village community as an idea of social and ecological harmony' (1997, p.43). Baviskar, like Arne Naess, the founder of the deep ecology movement, spent time with indigenous people protesting hydro projects. In her book, *In the Belly of the River*, she wrote about the Bhilala Adivasis³ in the Narmada Valley who fought against displacement caused by the Sardar Sarovar Dam in western India. Baviskar was sympathetic to the Adivasis and an active campaigner for their rights. However she was unimpressed by some conservationists' regard for indigenous knowledge. She notes:

Indigenous ways of knowing, which people are unable to articulate or even be conscious of, are expressed 'on their behalf' by intellectuals. This view of the Adivasis as ecologically noble savages is not unique to India and frequently voiced across the world among conservationists concerned about saving the forest (1997, p.45).

Baviskar singles out the deep ecologists for oversimplifying the tribes' relationship to nature:

The belief that Adivasis in forests everywhere are conservationist also recurs among north American Deep Ecologists, who see their philosophical principle of 'biocentrism; (as opposed to 'anthropocentrism') realised in

³ Adivasis is the collective name used to describe the ethnic and tribal people who are the indigenous peoples of India.

eastern religious traditions and, at a more popular level, by 'primal' indigenous people in non-western settings who, through their material and spiritual practices, subordinate themselves to the integrity of the biotic universe they inhabit (1997, p.46).

Baviskar's warning was a reminder that outsiders can idealise and therefore misrepresent indigenous issues. I was mindful of her view when recording Lepcha narratives that reference their connection to nature. It was easy to patronise, to attribute a kind of ecological purity to the 'brave young Lepcha protesters', but that would reduce their achievements. Their motivation to save their land and culture also came from their knowledge of how their society could survive, progress and thrive without compromising Lepcha identity.

Honouring Major Tamsang's plea to 'tell the truth about the Lepchas' involved accepting that 'truth' depended on perspective and I respected perspective as truth, agreeing with Nietzsche (2007) that there is 'only a perspective seeing, only a perspective knowing'. I considered that perspective was the truth of that moment and of that narrator. My approach was closer to that of a literary interpreter of Lepcha narratives rather than an anthropological or ethnographical approach. I was also guided by Carr's view that 'storytelling obeys rules that are imbedded in action itself, and narrative is at the root of human reality long before it gets explicitly told about' (2008, p.29). I sought to 'explain an action by telling a story about it' and accepted that there are different truths – or different perspectives – for the same story.

~

My first field trip in April 2006 became the template for further fieldwork. I quickly learnt not to pre-arrange anything, not to expect anything and not to try to manage the timing of meeting people to suit my schedule. An Indian friend warned me against trying to arrange things from Sydney, advising me that 'no one takes any notice before you come. But once you arrive, then things will happen.' I figured out – after some unsatisfying attempts to make arrangements ahead of time – the stories would come to me if I went to where the storytellers were. Often I would go somewhere to hear one story and be told another. I

travelled to Tingvong village in Upper Dzongú four times in three years to hear a hunter's story and each time was thwarted. The first time I met him walking up a hill as I was walking down. We arranged to meet later that day but he had drunk so much in the intervening time that he passed out. The second time his wife was ill and he stayed with her. The third time he was in hospital in Gangtok and the fourth time he was ill at home. Each time I travelled to Tingvong I hoped to record this hunter's stories but the absence of his narratives made room for others. I took my recorder and camera everywhere in Dzongú as hard-to-get stories could suddenly be accessible. During one visit I walked for hours to reach a Lepcha shaman (known as a *bóngthíng*) in Lingdem village in Upper Dzongú but upon reaching his house learnt he was performing rituals for his son who was sick. I returned the following year and interviewed him. This flexible approach to fieldwork led to many rewarding experiences that might not have come my way if I had been more rigid in my approach.

Staying with Lepcha families, who were often my translators, helped me to gain access to Lepcha elders – hunters, *bóngthíng* and *mun* (female shaman) – who shared rare stories. The elder relatives of my translators also had stories to tell: of their clan, of their childhood and sometimes, of supernatural happenings in their village.

As much as I could I observed and conducted my visits in a way that was consistent with local practices, taking groceries when I visited – mostly packaged goods like sugar, salt or the popular powdered malt drink, Horlicks. I travelled with my recorder but if the storyteller appeared reluctant to share a story, I would try to negotiate a future visit, or put the request aside and enjoy the hospitality of my host, always conscious that the story shared was also a gift of trust.

Because my guides were usually the Lepcha youth who were protesting the dams, I also heard their modern narratives of identity and politics. These stories were passed on to me in the land that inspired them: a river, a monastery, a section of forest pointed out as being in danger of disappearing should the dams go ahead. After speaking to the protesters my perspective of the Dzongú

landscape changed. A first impression of extraordinary scenery became a view of contested land. The mountains, rivers and forest were a political space redesigned to meet global energy needs; a geographically remote place that had been reached by global flows and connectivities, which Amin recognises constantly throw up new dilemmas of placement, possibly also new political challenges...(2004, p. 22) The Dzongu I visited between 2006 and 2011 was a place that, when they fought to keep it local, taught the young protesters about global issues. Ironically, the more they fought for the local with their anti-globalisation narratives, the more they drew on global knowledge and experience to mount their case. And as they formed their protest narratives they strengthened their Lepcha narratives of culture and identity. The intervention of the young protesters in my exploration of the impact of modernity on their culture brought an opportunity to learn alongside those I was learning from. Their stories were evolving as the movement evolved. They were, as David Carr says: 'being told in being lived and lived in being told' (1986, p.126).

My recording of the stories also evolved. I returned to Sikkim every year for six years, staying for five months on one visit. The activists' knowledge of global themes increased during this time. Their understanding of globalisation and how it reaches into local communities was an abstract concept that became a personal challenge for the ACT members. As the protest matured their knowledge strengthened around the themes of globalisation, democracy, environment and indigenous rights. The activists placed these global narratives in their local environment, framing contemporary themes in traditional knowledge. They were transitioning from what Ann Swidler identifies as the settled culture of consistency to an unsettled culture that competes with other cultural views. And they were responding to new cultural complexes that required new or reorganised strategies of action (1986, pp.282–283). Their complex journey is woven through this thesis.

~

This story is told in seven chapters, each building on what is previously revealed.

This **first chapter** of my thesis introduces the Lepcha, their lands and the social changes brought by modernity. My focus is on Lepchas who feel modernity has, in part, threatened Lepcha culture, its meaning and relevance. The chapter offers the first threads of a deeper discussion about culture and the role of narrative and place in strengthening Lepchas' connection to their identity. It reflects my early exploration of culture, identity, place and space, and how my research evolved. I raise questions that are answered in the subsequent chapters. Questions about the politics of space and the politics of identity - and the multidimensional phenomenon that is modernity.

In **chapter two** I present seven narratives that symbolise the Lepchas' journey from the ancient Lepcha lands known as *Mayel Lyang* to modern day Tibet Road. These are old stories, many narrated by Lepcha elders. They represent, in part, the mythology being 'mined' by the ACT protesters to prove their stewardship of Dzongú, and illustrate how the narratives from 'old Sikkim' continue to have social and political currency in 'new Sikkim', in particular the 'new Sikkim' narratives of Lepcha protest.

In **chapter three** I tell the stories of two Lepcha hunger strikes that occurred at Bhutia-Lepcha House (BL House) in Gangtok. In doing so I also tell a story about Lepcha culture and identity and how a space of loss became a space of transformation. I relate the stories through the words of the storytellers and their experiences; particularly the two highest profile hunger strikers, Dawa Lepcha and Tenzing Lepcha. Their stories reveal a new confidence in 'being Lepcha'. In protesting against the dams they are also defying the stereotype of being a 'backward and timid' people. The hunger strikes created a space of loss, where the destruction of Dzongú was contemplated, debated and prematurely mourned. It also became what Taussig describes as a 'space of transformation that nurtured a more vivid sense of life' (1987, p.335).

In **chapter four** I discuss the experiences of the Lepcha relay hunger strikers who sat outside BL House for 915 days. Many talked of their rising confidence because of the movement and their improved knowledge of social issues. They viewed themselves differently and others viewed them differently. The political

Lepcha landscapes of BL House and Dzongú at the time of the protest may have been a 'space for the politics of our times' imagined by Doreen Massey (1999, p.272). It was a space that was a product of interrelations, with the possibility of the existence of multiplicity – with distinct narratives that coexist. The way the protesters represented and inhabited Dzongú outside the reserve demonstrated its heterotopic importance to Lepcha culture.

In **chapter five** I explore how pilgrimage to Dzongú by the West Bengal Lepchas, connected them physically to their identity. I describe two pilgrimages to Dzongú (both of which I witnessed) by the West Bengal Lepchas. The first involved a group of around 40 young Lepchas who undertook a pilgrimage to Dzongú that ended in disarray, with the authorities declaring their motives to be political and revoking their permits. The second pilgrimage was spurred by the reaction to the first. It was a long march from West Bengal to Dzongú by hundreds of West Bengal Lepchas. The long march sparked political tensions and, like the first, ended badly without the pilgrims reaching their destination.

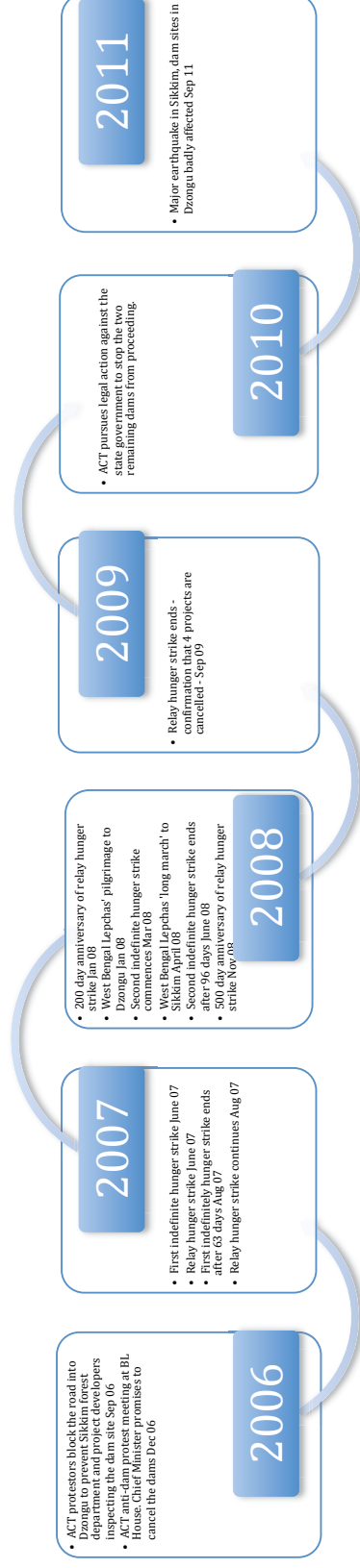
In **chapter six** I relate two journeys I made in Dzongú in the late autumn of 2010 where I observed the annual rituals of Lepcha female and male shamans – the Sakyong *Mun* and the Puntong *Bóngthíng*. I discuss the importance of deploying ritual – through *muns* and *bóngthíngs* – to the young members of Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) as both a reconnection to their indigenous beliefs and as an antidote to globalisation. I explore how the young protesters more readily sought out and participated in their shamanistic beliefs following the hunger strike; and how ritual narratives – and the intersection of religion and politics – played an important role in strengthening the protesters' connections to their Lepcha identity.

In **chapter seven** I look at life after the protest and the long-term effect of activism. Guha notes that social movements have a pre-history and also an after-life (2000, p.197), and that the activists who participate in social change are informed by their past and, when the protest winds down, have to shift their focus to their own future. Here, I explore Tenzing's pre- and post-activist life; and reflect on how he and fellow hunger striker Dawa (and their activist friends from

ACT) are transitioning from the intensity of the protest and adjusting to a 'normal' life. I discuss the impact of the movement on Tenzing's life, how it has influenced his work in farming and eco-tourism in his village and how his activism has shifted his aspirations away from a government job towards sustainable self-employment.

This thesis shares stories of some of the lives I was privileged to witness during several stays in Sikkim during six tumultuous years. My questions were similar to those Barry Lopez asked when he travelled in the Arctic. 'How do people imagine the landscapes they find themselves in? And, how does the land shape the imaginations of the people who dwell in it?' (1987, p.xxvii). I have endeavoured to understand the young Lepcha lives and their political and cultural awakening under the light of several fields of scholarship that explore identity, space, place and connections between each; and through the friendships that grew during my research period. As this is a non-traditional thesis I have asked and answered the question of how modernity is impacting the culture of the Lepchas through the fragments of my traveller's narrative, and also – most significantly – in the Lepchas' own stories related here.

TIMELINE OF MAJOR MILESTONES IN THE LEPCHA PROTEST AGAINST THE DAMS IN SIKKIM



There were concurrent hunger strikes between 2007 and 2009 – an indefinite hunger strike and a relay hunger strike. The relay hunger strike endured for 915 days and involved members of Affected Citizens of Teesta and supporters sitting on hunger strike for 24 hours or longer in a relay. The indefinite hunger strikes refer to the two unbroken hunger strikes. The first where Dawa and Tenzing Lepcha refused food for 63 days, the second Ongchuk Lepcha for 81 days and, Dawa and Tenzing Lepcha for 96 days.

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Chapter 1 – Journey to the Land of Hidden Paradise

July 1930: The earliest known inhabitants of the Darjeeling district and Sikkim were the Lepchas, or Rong, the 'ravine folk', as they style themselves. Their origin is obscure, but they are of pronounced Mongolian type, and some authorities state that they probably migrated in very early times from Assam or Burma.

At the present they number only some six or seven thousand and are gradually growing less, owing to their being ousted from their native forests by the more pushful Nepalese cultivator, who is immigrating from Nepal into Sikkim in ever increasing numbers ... A peculiar trait of the Nepalese is that he can never resist felling a tree, wherever it may be, if excuse offers.

The Lepchas are of a shy retiring nature, preferring to live in out of the way jungles and forts. They are improvident, and greatly addicted to strong liquor, which, like other hill-tribes, they brew from locally grown millet.

Every Lepcha is a born naturalist, and living as they do in the forests, they know the habits of every beast and bird, and make first-rate collectors. They have a name for every living thing, including plants, which is found in their country ... though outwardly professing Buddhism; they are at heart confirmed animists, worshipping the spirits of mountain, forest and river. Small in stature and seemingly not robust, yet they have immense powers of endurance and are tireless on the march.

David Macdonald, *Touring in Sikkim and Tibet*,
Kalimpong 1930 (1999, p.7)

My first journey to the land of the Lepchas was in March 2005 when I joined a group of writers on a tour to India's northeast. Our tour started in Sikkim's capital Gangtok and moved to the West Bengal hill stations of Kalimpong and Darjeeling. At the time, I didn't know that these were Lepcha lands. While in Darjeeling I looked for an old friend whom I knew had moved there from Papua New Guinea. Renu and I had met in Kathmandu in the early 1990s and stayed in touch in the haphazard way that people often did before Facebook. I knew she had married a man named Lue Tripp (an Australian of Indian origin) and moved

from Kathmandu to a coffee plantation in Papua New Guinea, which Lue managed. I had kept up with the threads of her life and had heard that they had moved back to Darjeeling taking an Australian cattle dog with them. I searched for the dog rather than for Renu, for a blue heeler should have been easy to spot in the Darjeeling hills where short, white Tibetan terriers and lean, brown street dogs were common in Chowrastra Bazaar, the main promenade and meeting place in Darjeeling.

I left Darjeeling – and India – not once hearing the word ‘Lepcha’ or knowingly meeting a Lepcha; and without finding Renu. I returned home to a message on my answering machine from her. ‘I am living in Brisbane,’ she said ‘but I heard you are looking for me in Darjeeling’ and from there we resumed our friendship and met soon after in Brisbane.

The suggestion to write Lepcha stories came from Lue. His mother was Lepcha and when he talked about his people I was embarrassed that I had recently spent a month in his homeland without any awareness of his culture. Lue explained that centuries of colonisation and immigration by the British, Tibetans, Nepalese and Indians had diminished the Lepcha to a minority tribe in north-east India where they are now less than 10 per cent of the population. After meeting Lue I googled the word Lepcha and found two entries, both small – and neither told me anything other than that Lepchas existed, that they had their own language and that their land was called Mayel Lyang, meaning ‘land of hidden paradise’.

When early British officers first encountered the Lepchas, they called them forest-dwelling fairy worshippers (Plasier, nd), yet Lue looked anything but that. He was a strong, broad man, at least six foot tall. His height was a gift from his father, who had Welsh heritage; his features inherited from his Lepcha mother. Lue’s boyhood home was in Kalimpong in West Bengal, near the tea plantation where his father worked. He attended school in Darjeeling where, under the close eyes of the Jesuit fathers, he recited morning and evening prayers and put his faith in God. As a Christian living in Kalimpong Lue never learnt his mother tongue for the Nepalese migration had left its mark and Nepali was, and remains,

the lingua franca of the Darjeeling district of West Bengal and of Sikkim. Lue's family spoke mainly Nepalese and English.

Lue confessed to knowing only a few Lepcha phrases and told me that as he grew older he thought more about his Lepcha origin, in particular the old stories. 'By the time the young people are interested, it will be too late, as the old people who have the stories will be gone.'

Lue had lived in many places: India, England, Papua New Guinea and Australia. Perhaps his desire late in life to connect with his Lepcha origin comes from a lifetime of living away. Although he didn't know the Lepcha language, or the stories, or the rituals that are part of understanding Lepcha culture, he wanted the stories passed on to those who would come after him. 'Go to Kalimpong,' Lue urged. 'Go to Kalimpong and visit Uncle Lawrence; he knows all the stories. You will find them there.' He turned to Renu and they shared an insider's smile. 'Yes, go to Kalimpong,' Renu added, 'Uncle Lawrence, will tell you everything. He knows so much, and he loves to talk.'

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Kalimpong, West Bengal

For most of the tours, Kalimpong affords the most suitable starting point. In this town, transport servants, stores and all to do with touring, may be arranged much cheaper than in Darjeeling, and most important of all mules can be readily obtained for the carriage of kit. They are more satisfactory than coolies or ponies.

David Macdonald, 1930 (1999, p.32)

In 2006, a year after meeting Lue, I returned to India and made my way to Kalimpong. The town is known for its large Christian Lepcha community, a legacy of Scottish missionary schools that opened in the 19th century. It is also the setting for Kiran Desai's Man Booker Prize-winning novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, set in the 1980s when the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) mounted an intense and often violent campaign throughout the Darjeeling hills

for a free 'Gorkhaland' state. The book travelled with me to Kalimpong, providing a 'factional' context to its recent history. The book ends soon after 27 July 1986 – known by Gorkhaland supporters as *Shahid Diwas*, or Martyrs' Day – the day police fired on a GNLF procession in Kalimpong that had been organised to burn copies of the Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty. Police killed 13 Gorkhaland protesters; their deaths prompting increased violence and rampage in Kalimpong and surrounding villages.

Almost twenty years on, in April 2006, the Indian-Nepali movement for Gorkhaland appeared no closer to statehood however the GNLF held three seats in the West Bengal Assembly. To a visitor there were few outward signs of unrest; the desire for Gorkha identity remained strong but it's narrative was faintly heard back then, like a soft breeze gently lifting leaves in the nearby woodlands; it's warmth forewarning of the advancing storm.

During this first field trip to Kalimpong I looked for traditional Lepcha narratives and insights into how young Lepchas connected with the stories and the traditions of the elders. I wondered: Do they know the stories? Do they think they are important? Do they care whether the stories are passed through families? I hoped the Lepcha community's traditional and contemporary stories would reveal connections and threats to their culture, and provide insight into the stories that live between, what Carr refers to, as narrative that is interpreted between the two temporal poles of origin and their destiny (1986, p.128).

I had found few books and journals written by or about Lepchas. The three most widely known, contemporary books written in English about Lepchas at that time were *Himalayan Village: An Account of the Lepchas of Sikkim*, by the English author Geoffrey Gorer, who, in 1937, lived in Lingthem village for three months (1996); *Living with Lepchas*, written by the English adventurer Colonel John Morris, who travelled with Gorer to Lingthem village in Dzongú and wrote his own account of the experience (1938); and *Lepcha My Vanishing Tribe*, by Lue's great-uncle, Arthur Foning, a Lepcha from Kalimpong, which was first published in 1987 (2003).

Other books written about early Lepcha life were by the British explorers, trade agents and political officers who lived and travelled through India's north-east Himalayan region in the 19th and early 20th centuries. A notable (but not yet published in book form) anthropological account of Lepcha village life was written by Danish anthropologist Halfdan Siiger who spent five months in Tingvong village in Dzongú in 1949 and published the results of his research in 1967.⁴

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I stayed at the Himalayan Hotel, the former family home of David MacDonald, the British Trade Agent and Sikkim Political Officer who accompanied Francis Younghusband on his 1904 mission to Lhasa and had helped the 13th Dalai Lama escape from Tibet in 1910. The hotel was run by his grandson, Tim MacDonald and his wife Neelum, who were friends of Lue and Renu and well connected in the Kalimpong community.

The hotel was once a meeting point for the 18th century European traders and British adventurers. The first Everest summiteers, Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay, stayed there, as did adventurers George Mallory, Francis Younghusband, Heinrich Harrer and Alexandra David-Néel. The sitting room of the main building was the place where expeditions were planned and, down the hill at the Kalimpong Bazaar, was where provisions were bought. Standing on the upstairs terrace and looking across the extensive grounds towards Sikkim and Mount Kangchendzönga's peak, I could easily imagine the 18th century world of the colonists: a world of transport servants (cooks, bearers, tiffin coolies and sweepers); a world of exploration, romanticised and glorified in accounts of former East India Company trade agents and British Government political officers. David Macdonald's Kalimpong was the trading post for Tibetan wool merchants whose mule caravans lumbered into town in winter. His Kalimpong was an important geographical hub for commerce, trade and politics of the time, the 'most important town on the Indo-Tibetan frontier, the gateway to Central Asia and the starting point of the busy trade road to the [then] three closed

⁴ Dr Heleen Plasier's website www.lepcha.info has a comprehensive and up-to-date bibliography of Lepcha literature.

kingdoms of the Himalayas – Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan’ (Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1956 p.65).

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We remember our soil. We remember our story. We remember our river. We remember our trees and plants, everything. And we salute them.

Major Lyangsong Tamsang, Kalimpong 2006

Neelum Macdonald arranged for me to meet Lyangsong Tamsang, a former officer in the British Gurkha regiment and current president of the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association (ILTA).

Major Tamsang was tall and easy to find in the busy Kalimpong Bazaar. His height was boosted by his Lepcha hat, which was round and flat, made from brightly coloured Chinese silk and trimmed with black felt. We sat in a hotel restaurant overlooking the street and after I had explained the purpose of my visit, and the ideas for my research, he described the work of ILTA, in particular its work in fostering cultural awareness among the Lepcha community and its advocacy for the teaching of Lepcha language in schools in the Darjeeling district. ‘Rabindranath Tagore has said, mother language, mother’s milk,’ he explained and added:

If the Lepcha children are given the opportunity to study in Lepcha language, at least as a subject, then they will have confidence to compete with others. Right now what is happening is our children are forced to study in alien languages – Bengali, Nepali, Hindi, Tibetan, English – and they are not confident. They hesitate and the drop-out rate is staggering. Therefore, we are still backward.

Proper education leads to progress, development. We do not have proper education. Our people might be able to write their names in other languages but they do not understand the forms given by the government, or they do not understand the instructions. Therefore, they just sign it. Literacy is defined as a person who can read and write. Of course our people read and

write but they do not understand what is behind it. That is making us backward.

The ILTA had lobbied the West Bengal government for many years for inclusion of Lepcha language in the school curriculum while concurrently creating a local solution. When we met (in April 2006) there were 40 Lepcha night schools. They were built on donated land in villages and staffed by volunteers who taught Lepcha language, literature and other cultural subjects. The community published books in Lepcha language: primers, dictionaries, folktales and plays. 'If you want to sing a Lepcha song, if you want to know the meaning of it, if you want to feel the song – then you must know the language,' Major Tamsang said.

At this, the first of many meetings, Major Tamsang patiently described a brief history of the Lepcha world, the regular prayers and festivals that honour nature and the rituals that form part of Lepcha history that, to some extent, still pepper village life in Kalimpong. He described a forthcoming Lepcha ritual – *Lyang rumfát* – performed to worship the earth:

Lyang means soil, earth, and land. *Rum* means god. *Fát* means service ... [*Lyang rumfát*] is service to the land, the soil, to Mother Nature. In this place no other people, no other races pray. The *bóngthíng* performs the ritual. He offers cereals, fruits and chicken. He thanks the earth, the soil, for everything she has given us ... we are thankful. It is elaborate but in brief it means we thank you and next year if you give to us abundantly, you will make us happy, you will make us prosper.

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The Kalimpong Lepcha's agenda of cultural revival served, in part, to combat the loss of cultural identity brought about by the dominant (and mainly Hindu) Nepalese majority and the influence of Christianity on Lepcha culture. The Christian church's agenda of converting Hindu and Buddhist followers to Christianity gained traction in Kalimpong and Darjeeling long after the period of Scottish missionary zeal. The Lepchas' shamanistic practices (called *Bóngthíngism* and *Munism*) suffered through the conversions because the nature-

worshipping practice was easily tolerated alongside Buddhism, but not alongside Christianity. Major Tamsang (who is Buddhist) explained:

Talking about religion is quite inconvenient but still, we must. Both religions, Christianity and Buddhism are not ours. When the Tibetans came to Mayel Lyang – when outsiders came – they brought religion first. The Tibetans came and brought Buddhism and converted the Lepchas, but Buddhism is a tolerant religion and [Lepcha] *mun* and *bóngthing* were accepted, equally accepted.

He explained that prior to a Buddhist ceremony, a *bóngthing* would conduct a *Lee rumfát* to appease the house and god there. ‘Upstairs the Lepcha lamas will read the Buddhist script in Tibetan and downstairs the Lepchas sit and read their own *rumfát* in Lepcha,’ he said.

Major Tamsang estimated the ratio of Buddhist and Christian Lepchas in Kalimpong to be 55 to 45 (Buddhist 55 per cent, Christian 45 per cent) but noted that Christianity was increasing. He attributed the high rate of conversion to the affluence of the church. ‘The Christian religion is increasing day by day because they have the backing, they have the money, and they introduce this language, free education, medicine and medical facilities.’

The rate of Christian conversions was a popular topic during my visits to the area. The most common reason given was that the church offers Buddhists and Hindus free education, books and clothing for their children in return for service to the church. The owner of a bed and breakfast where I stayed in Darjeeling once complained that her workers could no longer come to the house on Sunday as they had become Christian during the week. ‘Those converters,’ she said angrily. ‘Those converters, they come to the poor people who cannot resist because they want their children to go to school. Or because they have a wedding or a funeral and it is too expensive to have Buddhist or Hindu rites.’⁵ I asked her if the conversions were sincere. ‘At first they just do it to get the food, medicine, books and uniforms. But after a while, they become the converters,’ she replied.

⁵ Buddhist and Hindu rituals can take several days and typically involve more than one service. They involve many expenses: food, transport, and remuneration for priests.

I once travelled from Darjeeling to Kalimpong with a driver who often worked for Renu and Lue. He was of Nepalese-Tamang heritage and the son of a Buddhist lama. He had recently converted from Hinduism to Christianity and spoke about his Christian faith for most of the journey. When I bought Buddhist prayer flags for a friend's prayer room he asked me to hide the packet saying that Buddhism was evil, that there was only one God, and that those who worshipped several gods were foolish. He declared that he had burnt all his lama father's Buddhist texts and religious objects. When I related the story to Renu she said the driver had been an alcoholic who was often in trouble with the police but that after he converted to Christianity he gave up drinking and started working. 'He tries to convert all of us,' Renu laughed. 'But it [converting to Christianity] has probably saved him.'

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If Christianity was the interface through which lower castes experienced modernity (Menon 2002, p.1663), among the Lepcha community conversion to Christianity – while providing access to health and education for many who would not otherwise have had it – was also an access point to social inclusion among other ethnic groups.

Tom Frick's work among the Tamang community in Timling village in Nepal revealed similar reasons (health, education, economic advantage) for conversion to Christianity. However Frick noted the Timling villagers sought out their new religion. He asked whether the extent to which imported ideas associated with 'the modern' represent ruptures or continuities with existing cultural attributes (2008, p.18).

Christianity has had a rupturing effect on Lepcha culture that continues. Because of its lack of tolerance for Lepcha beliefs, it created a social difference between Christian and Buddhist Lepchas.

Major Tamsang pointed to the spread of Christian worship as one reason Lepchas were losing their language. Christian services are conducted in Nepali, Hindi or English, even though the earliest translated bible in the area (published

in 1845) was in Lepcha script. Major Tamsang was concerned for Christian Lepchas without Lepcha language:

In churches all the services are done in alien languages and in that sense we are losing our language. The Christian Lepchas are losing their language, their culture. In that religion they have dos and don'ts. They say, 'Don't do that, it is a sin. Don't do that, you do this', and it confuses the Lepchas. In towns with Christian Lepchas you will not believe that they [the young people] do not know a single Lepcha word and this is a very sorry state. I do not know when they will realise it, when they will come back to their roots. They must come back to their roots.

Major Tamsang also told stories of Christian Lepchas living in villages who consult *mun* or *bóngthín* in secret. 'This is a shame,' he said. 'Being a Lepcha and consulting a *bóngthín* or *mun* through the back door. I can't believe it and I think the young people now ... if you do not go back to your roots you lose your identity.'

In an attempt to be inclusive of all beliefs, ILTA promotes the cultural ideal of being Lepcha and worshipping nature first. The nature-worshipping rituals are usually conducted by the *bóngthín* and *mun* although lay Lepchas will conduct modest daily rituals themselves. Christianity, Buddhism or Hinduism would still have a place in belief and culture, but it would follow, rather than lead, a Lepcha's spiritual life. According to Major Tamsang:

Primarily we are Lepcha, religion is second. Let us think first that we are Lepcha. We act like Lepcha, where all this language, literature, culture, tradition, custom, you name it, civilisation – that is priority number one and only then the religion. [Worshipping nature] is culture, *rumfát* is prayer. Lepchas believe in prayer because when you pray you are near the god.

Major Tamsang's goal for Lepchas to put their culture first and religion second relied on Lepchas being able to separate their culture and their adopted religion – or separate them enough in order to rank them. It was an ambitious goal because many of the priests in the Darjeeling district and Kalimpong subdivision

were Lepchas, including the bishop of the Darjeeling diocese.⁶ He was articulating a fusing of nature and culture where they were not separate realities. The academic and theatre director, Baz Kershaw said: ‘any attempt to comprehend “nature” from within “culture” is similar to thinking you can turn on a light quickly enough to see what the dark looks like’ (Kershaw 2002, p.119). Major Tamsang was trying to turn a light on nature *as* belief, nature *as* history, nature *as* identity.

While he was gracious and helpful, he was also understandably clear about his expectations of how his people should be represented: ‘I like the truth. If you are writing about the Lepchas I’d like you to write the truth, whether it is bitter or sweet, or bittersweet. We must bring out the truth about the Lepchas.’

But which truth? For there are many, or perhaps none, as the philosopher and pragmatist William James (1907, p.223) proposed when he said ‘we have to live today by what we can get today, and be ready tomorrow to call it false’.

The patronising colonial ‘truth’ presented the Lepcha as a ‘shy retiring person ... dweller in the forests, worshipping the spirits of the mountain, river and tempest’ (Macdonald 2005, p.258); or as ‘honest peace loving and unselfishly helpful’ (von Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956, p.142); or ‘great nature lovers and good entomologists and botanists ... most excellent and trustworthy servants’ (White 2000, p.7). Perhaps it was this colonial representation that Major Tamsang was keen to avoid for it placed Lepchas into compliant servitude as uneducated, poor, easily exploited and powerless participants in a diminishing culture. Tamsang’s father (a Lepcha community leader who assisted the linguist R K Sprigg with his work at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London) had fought for what he considered to be truthful representation of Lepchas. K P Tamsang questioned the accounts of ‘the long string of foreign writers’, mostly colonial, whose work he said the community appreciated but who were mostly incorrect. ‘They are badly worded, open to misinterpretations and dangerous to the interest of the Lepchas’ (Tamsang 1998, preface).

⁶<http://www.darjeelingdiocese.net/parishes/> has a list of each church and its priest. Several have Lepcha names (accessed 18/9/10)

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Lue had asked his nephew Nahalon Namchu to take me to meet Uncle Lawrence and soon after my meeting with Major Tamsang, Nahalon arrived at my hotel with his friend Dorji Lepcha. Nahalon described Dorji as living in a Lepcha community. 'I guess out here, especially in Darjeeling district, we have two types of Lepchas: one who has already been nurtured from childhood in Lepcha tradition and customs; and one like me, who has been in a Lepcha house with all the Nepalese. More or less we lived in a cosmopolitan society. My name is Lepcha. My name is Nahalon Namchu, but that is it. Other than that, I am not Lepcha,' Nahalon said.

Nahalon was learning Lepcha language, as were many Lepcha youth who did not know their language or culture. They organised seminars in the villages to highlight the importance of Lepcha identity. 'We, those of us who have been outside, have started an initiative.⁷ All the Lepcha youths, we have started a club where people like myself and brother Dorji share our expertise with each other. We are trying to bridge this gap. The gap was getting wider and wider so we, as the youth of today, think it is high time we should know our language. We should know the importance of our culture.'

I asked Nahalon what led him and his worldly friends to reconnect with a culture they had either not experienced or left behind long ago. He said that the spirit was 'always in us, we just couldn't express it'.

We went to Dorji's house in nearby Mane Gombú. Dorji, who had been wearing jeans and a t-shirt, left the room and reappeared in traditional Lepcha clothing – the *thókro-dum* – a grey and white striped cloth draped around his body like a tunic, and loose, white, calf-length cotton pants, plus a cane Lepcha hat. He led us down the stairs to his prayer room. The room was sparsely decorated: an altar on one side, modestly adorned with leaves, flowers and fruit; and a cushion and small stool on the other. Dorji sat cross-legged on a cushion on the concrete floor and placed the manuscript for a Lepcha prayer on the small stool in front of him.

⁷ Outside means away from local community and the Darjeeling district. The terms 'outside' or 'out' are frequently used to describe people who have worked or been educated elsewhere – probably Kolkata, Delhi, Mumbai or other large Indian cities – and return home with some worldliness.

At his side rested a bamboo flute. For a few seconds he chanted, then he lifted the flute to his mouth and played softly.

‘He is asking Mother Nature for forgiveness,’ Nahalon explained. ‘With the ritual there will be a lot of noise and he will disturb her. So he asks her to please forgive us, for our rituals may offend you.’

Nahalon and Dorji were part of a small but significant group of Lepcha youth in Kalimpong who were creating a way of articulating the rituals and beliefs more easily expressed by their elders. They were appropriating the traditional way of performing ritual but doing so in a way that complemented the context of their contemporary lives.

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The Himalayan region of Darjeeling and Sikkim, with its extensive forests, which cover the entire southern face of the Himalayas, from the eternal snow, barren rocks and virgin forests of pine and fir on the top and spreading down below to the dense, luxuriant, tropical vegetation of the plains, is the country of the Rongs. They gave to this country the appellation ‘Ne Lyang,’ meaning a place of refuge, a haven of rest, lying in the lap of Kingtsoo-nzaong-nyu-boo Chu, that is Mount Kangchendzönga .

Narrated by Lawrence Sitling-Rong
Kalimpong 2006⁸

Lue’s uncle, Lawrence Sitling-Rong, who is Nahalon’s great uncle, is a learned man of advancing years. When I visited with Nahalon he was sitting on the flower-ringed terrace of his house tapping the keys of a manual typewriter ‘copying’ the stories he had written. He wouldn’t hear of me taking them into town to be photocopied. Instead, he carefully and accurately retyped stories he had written some time earlier so that I could have them.

Always within earshot Aunt Kate, Lawrence’s sister, added to his narrative by relating anecdotes and fragments of the family stories. Kate and Lawrence were Christians and spoke excellent English, as did most of the well-educated Lepchas

⁸ Extract from a Lepcha story, written by Lawrence Sitling-Rong and given to the author in April 2006.

in Kalimpong who had been schooled in Christian private colleges. Aged 85 when I met him in 2006, Lawrence had lived an eventful life. For 28 years he worked for the former prime minister and late king of Bhutan (great-grandfather to the current king) and had helped set the foundations for the modernisation brought about by the reigning monarch's grandfather. Many of Lawrence's life stories were from his Bhutan years, but he also drew from his memory traditional Lepcha stories, many of which had their genesis in Dzongú. He started by telling me there are three groups of Lepchas that reflect the shifting history and colonisation of the region.

One group is in Sikkim, all Buddhist, all Tibetanised, their names Tibetanised. In Kalimpong, all the Bhutanese were here; for 150 years this was Bhutan, so all these people here who are Lepcha are all of Bhutanese tradition. Then the third group is from Eastern Nepal, in Darjeeling and these Darjeeling people are neither Buddhist nor Hindu for they were not influenced by that, they never became Hindu, they were spared that, though now they have taken Hindu names... When the British East India Company came into Darjeeling district, they were interested in trade, and they naturally wanted to open the silk route. Then later came the missionaries who had to build the roads and Lepchas who came in from Ilam [Nepal] built the Darjeeling Road. All these things were built by them, and one happened to be our great-grandfather. So eventually they were converted into Christianity and educated by missionaries.

The impact of the missionaries on Lepcha culture was profound. In the Christian faith there is one god and in the teachings of Christianity, no other god can be worshipped. Traditional Lepcha beliefs involve appeasing the *múng* spirits, described by the Lepcha writer (and Lawrence's cousin) Arthur Foning as 'unwelcome and unwanted malignant spirits and devils that roam and pester our world. The *múng* are appeased by the Lepcha "priests and priestesses" - the *bóngthíng* and *mun* who conduct rituals and make offerings on behalf of the Lepcha community' (2003, p.60). Foning's grandfather was a *bóngthíng* and his grandmother a *mun* at the time Christian missionaries from Scotland were fast expanding. 'They were coaxed and wheedled to accept this new creed [Christianity],' said Foning (2003, p.22).

According to Lepcha tradition, only Lepcha rituals will stop the *múng* from harming the community. Lawrence and Kate related a story about a neighbour's boy who had committed suicide. There was concern that his family had Buddhist funeral rites, which would not pacify the spirit of the place where the boy died. "The place where he died had a *múng* spirit in the rock. When we were youngsters our aunts and uncles would say "don't laugh there, don't play the fool". There was a woman on that path, a *mun*, named *Sangklong* who after death could send your soul to a place, so my aunts always said don't play the fool there," said Lawrence.

'Someone saw her spirit. They gave a description and said a woman had come and if anyone in the house had woken she wouldn't have taken the boy but since no one in the house was awake she took him,' said Kate. 'Such a nice boy. That boy committed suicide for no reason. He was quite happy. He came up here. He went up there, chatted to the boys, laughed. Suddenly he was dead.'

"They are Buddhist but they still follow the Lepcha way. Unless they can pacify that spirit it's going to hit their family again and again. They brought this *bóngthíng* from Sikkim and he came and said "this place has got a spirit but the spirit has to be pacified". So now they pacify it, make offerings to it,' Lawrence added.

Lawrence and Kate were committed Christians and did not follow Lepcha cultural traditions however their telling of this story suggests some reciprocity towards those who did, and acceptance of the '*múng* spirit in the rock'. It would be overstating it to say they held dual-beliefs but they comfortably tolerated Lepcha shamanistic beliefs and ritual along with their Christian faith.

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Dzongú North Sikkim⁹

⁹ Also called zongú, zónggú, Jongu

I had heard about the famous Lepcha 'reserve' of Jongu, somewhere up towards the north of the country... To visit this place was my long-standing dream. Here I had longed to go and meet the culturally and otherwise supposedly unadulterated and unspoilt kinsmen of mine.

Arthur Foning, 1946 (2003, p.260)

Arthur Foning's dream to visit Dzongú was shared by many Lepchas I met who lived outside the reserve. They told me it was the birthplace of the Lepcha race, the place of 'pure' Lepcha, where I can experience 'authentic' Lepcha culture. As it is a reserve, with just 6,000 inhabitants, it was difficult to gain access in 2006. A first-time visitor to Sikkim back then would have struggled to independently obtain a permit, a guide and transport there but fortunately, before I departed for my first field trip, I had some luck. I met, through Lue and Renu, the Chief Secretary of Sikkim in Sydney. Karma Gyatso was once the Tourism Minister for Sikkim and early in his career, the District Collector in Mangan, the town that is the administrative centre for North Sikkim, which includes Dzongú. A few months later in April 2006, thanks to Karma's assistance, I waited in the District Collector's office in Mangan to collect my permit. A young boy named Phurba waited for me. 'He is your guide,' explained the District Collector and she handed me a small piece of paper that recorded his school results:

Name: Phurba Tshering Lepcha

Class X passed from TNA

I was left in the safe pair of hands belonging to this smart, 17-year-old Lepcha boy, who studied at the prestigious Tashi Namgyal Academy (TNA) in Gangtok, and was at home in Dzongú for the holidays. He was a modern boy, with spiky hair dyed orange with henna, an earring, a secret tattoo and, I quickly noticed, a photo in his wallet of a beautiful girl which he looked at frequently.

Neither Phurba nor I had a plan other than to cross the Sangkalang Bridge to Dzongú although I told him I wanted to record folk stories and asked him if he could help me. He shrugged and explained that he did not know any but that his grandmother knew many stories. He explained that we would stay with his

relatives, as there are no guesthouses in Dzongú. We walked from the District Collectorate and as we got to know each other a little better, Phurba's initial shyness evaporated. He sized me up as candidate for trekking to his village where his grandmother lived, which was, for a 'slow' person like me, a two-hour vertical walk.

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The journey to Dzongú starts with a white-knuckle ride in an overworked jeep from the Mangan taxi stand. The crowded jeep overflows with curiosity and goodwill, with me facing the personal questions that are asked out of interest rather than intrusion in India. 'How old are you? Are you married? Do you have children?' I dodge the first in case they think I am ancient and give a disappointing 'no' answer to the next two, wondering if my single and childless state will be viewed curiously or sympathetically. After a 40-minute drive through drizzling rain we arrive in 4th Mile, a small village situated beside the main road which, after passing the houses, weaves its way upward to the Himalayan snow line. I step out of the jeep and am enmeshed by the surrounding forest. Mist clings to mountains like a soft, sheer veil falling to the trees and rivers below. Barely felt raindrops spray the grassy embankment and Dzongú – or Mayel Lyang as it is frequently called there – feels a forgotten place, a lost world where nature heads the social order and people live within the natural structure determined by the seasons.

In 4th Mile there were approximately 20 homes, half of which were perched precariously along the banks of the Rangyong River, the rest facing the road that led to the mountains above. The people of 4th Mile grew cardamom crops and there was just one outward sign of commerce: a small store that sold little bits of the world found on the other side of the Sangkalang Bridge – Sunsilk Shampoo, Velvet Soap, Colgate Toothpaste, Pepsi Cola, soy sauce, rice, sugar, powdered milk and shoe laces. I spent three days huddled in a small room attached to the village store for Mother Nature was nurturing her soil, drenching it with flooding rain, preventing us from travelling to the top of the ridge beyond Lingthem where Phurba lived. The walls in my small room were painted turquoise and

decorated with birthday cards and posters of Bollywood stars. During the three days I closely observed every gap in the wooden floor, every creak of the bed and the way the light flickered when switched on and off. The rain pelted the river outside, smoothing rocks on its journey downstream; its roaring song almost unfamiliar, for Australia had been in drought for some years. I chose to read and write rather than join the village boys watching martial arts films while huddled around the portable television that was connected to a satellite dish which brought the whole world to this remote part of India. Three children kept me company: a young girl, who carried her baby brother in a sling over her shoulder, and her other brother, who kept his hand inside hers. They brought me a mother cat and her kittens to play with and stood quietly in the doorway gazing at me, and my lap full of cats. Phurba popped in from time to time and noticing the cats said:

Cat is regarded as monk. It is believed that when a person gets sick if you place the cat on the altar and pray, then the person will get better or cured. And its relation to the monk is because the monks do pujas and make people well.¹⁰ If you kill a cat it's equal to disturbing a gonpa.¹¹

Each day he would bring a progress report on the weather. 'Still raining. Too wet to walk today.'

I ate *dal bhat* and vegetables for breakfast, lunch and dinner, cooked by Phurba's cousin who banished me from the warmth of her kitchen because she was too shy to cook in front of me. A Lepcha elder, Chungden Turzed Lepcha, visited and told me the story of the creation of her clan named *Sangtam Turzed Pucho*.

My race started because there was this stone in the river. I don't know the specific place but it should be inside Dzongú, and beside that stone there was a huge rock. Beside that rock there was dry land and in the dry land the water came out as if it was spring water – hot spring water. And beside that spring there was a tree and this stone was called *Rungh Rungot*. Beside that stone a river came up from the mountains and that river was called the

¹⁰ Puja is a Hindi word meaning prayer or ritual.

¹¹ A gonpa is a Buddhist monastery

Turzed. That is why my race was called *Sangtam Turzed Pucho* and from there the race began.¹²

I asked her when she got married but she didn't know which year.

'We don't keep dates,' Phurba explained. 'But it was a long time ago, maybe 1972.'

On the fourth day the sun shone and brought out the village boys who played cricket on the road using a stone for a ball and a lump of wood for a bat. I had become comfortable in my 4th Mile cocoon and when Phurba pointed up to the top of an impossibly high ridge to show me the walk to his village above Lingthem, my enthusiasm for exploring Mayel Lyang temporarily dampened.

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For the European the landscape is one of overwhelming beauty, spoilt only by the very considerable difficulty of travelling about, so rocky and precipitous is the land. The picture I should like to convey is of a very steep and broken series of hillsides, except in small clefts nearby bare of big trees but almost entirely covered with low growths of shrubs and saplings of various tints of green, flecked with patches of colour at some seasons ... The paths are the faintest tracks, invisible until you come upon them; there is no main road, nothing to guide your way; except there are usually more stones – for the bigger stones will have been removed from the neighbouring fields and piled on the path to make drier walking in the wet weather – there is little to indicate what is path and what merely rough ground. Overtowering and dwarfing all the works of man are the enormous ramparts of the gleaming snows, cutting short a quarter of the horizon in almost every direction. You can see that the land is in part cultivated and inhabited, but the part seems insignificant; in the battle between man and nature, nature seems everywhere the winner.

Geoffrey Gorer, *Himalayan Village* (1938, p.81)

¹² Chungden Turzed Lepcha's origin story was recorded by the author in 4th Mile on 7 April 2006

Phurba's prediction that it would take me at least two hours to reach his village of Upper Sangkalang from the main road at 4th Mile proved to be generous. We had to travel just past Lingthem, where Geoffrey Gorer and John White stayed for three months in 1937. We stopped frequently on the way up, first to have tea with the local representative of the 4th Mile village panchayat¹³. She told me that her main job was to hold meetings with villagers to discuss and resolve problems. The problems might relate to water, irrigation or electricity. She was nearing the end of her five-year term and hoped to be re-elected. From 4th Mile we walked up towards Lingthem village along a concrete path that had been cut into the mountain like a hardened, winding seam that joined those who lived near the road with those who lived remotely. I puffed my way up this path, stopping frequently to catch my breath and sip water, often under the guise of taking in the scenery.

We were surrounded by dense forest, but if we looked up or down we could see small settlements; sometimes a lone house, ringed with prayer flags, smoke curling through the kitchen chimney; or tiny villages where houses were linked by stone-peppered pathways bordered by cardamom crops and paddy terraces. The mountains provided the backdrop to these settlements – sloping hills coloured green, blue and purple, reflecting the mood of the sky, and at their highest point, white, icy peaks.

Dzongú has three climatic zones: subtropical, temperate and alpine. Lingthem is in the temperate zone of Upper Dzongú. Australian eucalyptus trees grow there but they are easily outnumbered by bamboo, which is possibly the most important material in Lepcha society. It is used for food, housing, village infrastructure such as bridges and fences, clothing including hats, vessels like water carriers and traps for fishing and hunting. From the jungle the Lepchas also source food and medicine. A study of ethnomedicinal plants use by Lepchas in Dzongú documented 118 medicinal plant species in Dzongú (Pradhan & Badola 2008).

¹³ Panchayat is the local government, village administration.

Phurba did not break a sweat. He strolled effortlessly up the steps, frequently waiting at a bend in the path for me to catch up. At Lingthem we stopped for tea in the house of a *bóngthíng* who, with Phurba translating, told me that being a *bóngthíng* is inherited. He had gained the power from his grandmother, who was a *mun*.

There was from ancient times all grandfathers and grandmothers and who used to have this power; maybe they had some spirits in them. The power has carried from generation to generation.

God gives us this spirit to be a *bóngthíng* but I have to follow certain rules. I shouldn't drink alcohol like *cí*. If I drink anything I'll go mad. But if I do my puja every day, if I do my puja well, I'll learn more about being a *bóngthíng* and the spirit will come to me more and perhaps I can do something extraordinary.

I asked him about the things he does to help people. I remembered Renu telling me she once went to a *bóngthíng* when she had a toothache. Phurba described what the *bóngthíng* did to a disturbed person as a kind of magic trick.

To see what has happened to the victim I will first do a type of puja. This may include a kind of dance. Then I will come to know which spirit is there or what happened to that,' the *bóngthíng* clarified.

Actually *bóngthíng* does cure people if the people get affected by the spirits and all. So he comes to know which or what kind of spirit is there. So he'll do the puja and the victim will get cured.

'If someone has a broken arm, would they come to the *bóngthíng*?' I asked.

'No that's a different case, but he can do puja,' said Phurba.

'If they do come to me with a broken arm I'll do some certain type of puja and the victim will feel a bit better even if he isn't cured,' said the *bóngthíng*.

As we left Lingthem and headed upward again towards Upper Sangkalang, Phurba, referring to the *bóngthíng* said, 'Actually he's a really good one, lots of people refer to him'.

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These first few days in Dzungú were more about going with the flow of the household rather than trying to impose any kind of researcher's structure to the process. There was no making appointments, or even loose arrangements. And storytellers were in short supply. The young people – about Phurba's age – did not know the old stories; their parents *might* have known some, but possibly not the whole story and were often too busy to stop to remember them. Most people when I mentioned my interest in old stories, deferred to their elders. It became clear early in that first trip to Dzungú that, in order to record a Lepcha folktale, I must first find a Lepcha elder. One of the most highly respected and well-known Lepcha elders in Dzungú was Phurba's grandmother Chindemu Lepcha, who lived with them; although Phurba informed me that she might sleep in any house in the village of extended family members, as she was welcome in all.

God sent a man and a woman, the first man and woman. The man's name was Tukbothing and the woman's name was Nazongnyu. Actually Lepcha started from here in Dzungú, when it was called Mayel Lyang. These two gave birth to many babies and from among those children a king was created.

Narrated by Chindemu Lepcha, aged 84

Phurba's family home was typical of the style of the village. It was a timber house built on a concrete foundation and rose some distance from the ground. The steps from outside led directly into the kitchen, which is the largest room in the house and the centre of social activity. Its most striking feature was a large double fireplace made of clay in the centre of the room. There were two ovens with the clay shaped into three prominent mounds within which a fire burned and the pots were balanced. Firewood was suspended from the roof's rafters and dried over the fire. In one corner was a sink on the floor with a tap for washing dishes and in another corner stood a bench for food preparation and shelves for crockery. Cobs of corn, harvested the previous summer, hung from the ceiling. Phurba grew up in this house, with his schoolteacher father, his mother and younger sister.

Chindemu was 84 when we met. She knelt in a corner of the kitchen peeling hot boiled potatoes with her fingers. Phurba's mother Achen, crouched low to the floor and rolled chapattis¹⁴. Phurba crushed chilli while his father Gay Tsering, sliced the potatoes peeled by his mother. Families preparing food together was a common scene in a Lepcha kitchen, often punctuated by visits from neighbours who, more often than not, were relatives.

Chindemu was an active woman – physically fit from a lifetime of walking up and down the steep hills and knobby jungle paths around Lingthem. She wore a grey woollen *baku*, with a floral flannel shirt covered by a blue jumper. On her feet were rubber sandals. She wore headscarf typically worn by Lepcha women made from cotton towelling, wrapped around her head and tied at the back. She had a hand woven Lepcha bag hanging over her shoulder. Her dress seemed to illustrate the cultural change that had touched Dzongú during her lifetime: the *baku* is a Bhutia skirt in the Tibetan tradition; the rubber sandals were made in China and worn throughout India; the shirt and jumper were probably made in China or possibly in India but in the Western style. Her headscarf and her bag were Lepcha, as was her language, for Chindemu spoke only Lepcha, which even in Dzongú is rare. Although it is a Lepcha reserve, Nepalese language is usually spoken alongside Lepcha. She is known for her knowledge of Lepcha folklore and has been consulted throughout her life by families wishing to track the relationship of a potential bride and groom by going back through time and oral history to ensure the families were not related.¹⁵

Chindemu told me about Lepcha stories and beliefs. Her voice was loud, long ago calcified and she laughed a lot. She related the stories in a long reminiscence with Phurba translating, often interrupting her to clarify the story. Her memory was sharp and she recalled tiny details about what the characters thought and the choices they made. She joked often with Phurba who laughed but refused to translate her jokes so it was possible that the joke was at times on me.

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¹⁴ Chapatis are flat round bread-like patties.

¹⁵ Chindemu's nephew, Sonam Rinchen Lepcha told me about her reputation for tracking family relationships through stories.

Phurba asked Chindemu if she thought it was important for the young people to learn the folk stories. She said it was important but that there was no one to tell them. His mother Achen said she would tell the stories to keep the culture.

After the storytelling Chindemu sat in the corner of the kitchen, Phurba at her side and for a short while no one spoke. Phurba cut and filed his grandmother's fingernails. His mother swept the floor, which she did several times each day. His father chopped potato. The fire, which always burned, warmed us.

The next morning, before heading down to the road I stood for a while on the steps just outside the kitchen and looked around the village. Each house had a kitchen garden and pens for livestock. In front of me were hills and slopes peppered with cardamom and in front of the cardamom groves, were the local primary school and the Lingthem monastery.

Further down the hill was the road that took the community to the world on the other side of the Sangkalang Bridge. This was Phurba's other world, where he had lived for several years at boarding school. It was a world his sister wanted to occupy and she had sat the exam for a scholarship to the TNA School the previous day. It was the world that taught him English and would give him a chance to follow his ambition to study economics. It was a world that held no interest for Chindemu who I had heard, refuses to travel in a car. When I stood outside the kitchen and heard her crackling laugh and the sound of Lepcha words and sentences drifting from the house, I wondered if I was listening to a dying language. In Kalimpong only a minority of Lepchas spoke their language. In Dzongú they all did but what of the next generation who looked for a future outside the village? How would they keep or learn their language, and their culture, and forge an identity that was relevant outside Dzongú. I thought of Dorji in Kalimpong who donned traditional Lepcha dress to pray in the mornings as a way of outwardly inhabiting his Lepcha identity. Would Phurba feel the need or have the desire to do this? How would he and his school friends at TNA find relevance in their 'Lepchanness' in the world on the other side of the Sangkalang Bridge?

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I returned to Sikkim in December that same year, intending to record more folktales. But within a couple of days, I met two people who changed the course of my research - Sherap Lepcha and Dawa Lepcha, two committee members of social activist group, Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT). The first encounter with Sherap and Dawa had a major effect on how I would record Lepcha narratives and view Lepcha culture.

I had found Sherap online, on a website promoting ecotourism in Dzongú and I booked a trip with him from Australia via email. My plan was to once again travel to Dzongú to meet Lepcha elders who might share the old stories with me and build on the trip I had made the previous April. I hoped Sherap might be able to smooth my journey and introduce me to his elders. I had arranged to meet him at my guest house in Gangtok, set in the grounds of an orchid nursery run by a family of Lachenpa–Bhutias from Lachen in the far north of Sikkim. The family worked in forestry and horticulture and their daughter ran the guesthouse along with working in the nursery.

‘Indian stretchable time,’ said the Lachenpa daughter when I looked at my watch¹⁶. I had been waiting more than 30 minutes for Sherap but had not wanted to phone him, self-conscious that by checking on his whereabouts I would be revealing my Western attitude to time management. I feel stressed when I am running late and relieved when I arrive on time. It is an aspect of my personality that has no agency in India.

When I finally phoned I learnt he had been waiting at the front gate since 10.00am – the time we had agreed to meet.

We spent some time discussing my trip, which he described imprecisely. I realised quickly I would need to put aside my need for order – which preferably took the form of an itinerary with bullet pointed descriptions of my pick up address, driver, car and meeting place in Mangan. This journey would have to be

¹⁶ Lachenpas are people from Lachen in North Sikkim

one of small achievements. I would get a public taxi to Mangan (which first required a taxi from my hotel to the taxi stand) and be met there by Sherap's sister Lhakit, who would first take me to the Mangan District Collector's office to obtain a permit to enter Dzongú, then, following a wait in Mangan for another public taxi, would take me to their family home in Tingvong village in Upper Dzongú. Sherap explained he could not take me himself because he was organising a rally.

'A rally?' I asked.

Sherap's demeanor changed, he became animated, engaged and emotional. He described the struggle he and his friends had been involved in for the past three years trying to stop dams being built in Dzongú. When I showed interest he offered to take me into Gangtok to meet and interview his friend and fellow activist, the filmmaker, Dawa Lepcha.

I sat in the front passenger seat of Sherap's well-worn Maruti sedan and found a place for my feet on the cluttered floor. Sherap turned the ignition and first drove to the District Courthouse nearby to check if the government had granted his group a permit for a protest march.

As I sat in the car waiting for Sherap to collect his permit I wondered if this change in plans also meant a change in the direction of my research. A little later, as the car rattled over the potholes that pocked the road through Sichey to Gangtok's centre I felt that that this unexpected change in plans was the start of something new.

I made a note in my diary after that meeting: Sherap Lepcha is an angry young man – angry because his homeland is being violated. He said Sikkimese people are too subservient. 'They are too laid-back; they can't be bothered; they don't care enough about anything to protest about it.'

Sherap left me at Oberoi's, a popular café on Gangtok's main shopping district, Mahatma Gandhi Marg (MG Marg) and returned soon after with Dawa, who slid into the seat facing mine and talked about the projects and the activism that had dominated his life for three years.

Dawa was known in Sikkim for his documentary work. I had seen his films before we met - beautifully shot, unpretentious stories about traditional tribal life in Sikkim. He captures people in remote communities simply and sparingly, showing their lives by allowing the stories to reveal themselves authentically, without adornment or manipulation. Dawa, like his films, was understated – he spoke softly, and chose his words carefully.

I asked him if he realised the importance of his Lepcha identity only after it was being threatened.

‘No, it was much earlier than that,’ he said.

All this project business it came up much later but our thoughts were there before and we were participating in our cultural events ... Once we go out [outside Sikkim], get exposed, we see things, understand things. After we are the outsiders, then we understand what the hell is going on. So we start thinking and then we start realising the importance of all these things. So in a way our people up there [Dzongú] at the moment are all simple village people without education, so I think this particular type of realisation hasn't come. That's why people who want to take advantage of all these things come and say, "it's going to bring you money, and it's going to bring you a lot of money, all the luxury you'll ever want.

It was after meeting Sherap and Dawa that I considered a different context in which to view traditional Lepcha narratives. If their fight for land were also a fight for their culture what would young, modern Lepchas learn during the process of saving it? Sherap and Dawa's fear that the development of dams on their land would change and diminish their culture reflected an acknowledgement that it is not only the displaced that experience displacement (Bhabha 1989, p.10). Their displacement would occur despite their remaining on their land. When they looked into the future they saw a Dzongú so changed by development that the 'illusion of a natural and essential connection between the place and the culture [would be] broken' (Gupta & Ferguson (1992, p.10). They did not say then that their attachment to Dzongú had strengthened because they feared it would be destroyed but as Burgess and Gold suggested, the strength of attachment to ordinary places and landscapes frequently only emerges when

they are threatened by change (cited in Kong 1993, pp.348). Sherap and Dawa had both lived outside Sikkim: Dawa to study filmmaking in Kolkata and Sherap when he played football for the Indian National League. They knew what it was to yearn for a place, to feel its loss and to value what was taken for granted. The young Dzongú Lepchas who had joined ACT were, I heard, living their own lives and doing their own thing until the threat of the dams taking the land jolted them into action.¹⁷ They spoke of their fear of cultural displacement for their identity and their relationship with their land was enmeshed with their historical and cultural connection to nature. 'We are the nature worshippers,' they said frequently, 'we are Children of Mother Nature'.

It was this fear of cultural displacement that led them to activism. Sherap and Dawa (and the founding members of ACT) became architects of, and participants in, Sikkim's longest protest – a 915-day hunger strike. The 'Children of Mother Nature' in deciding to defend their land were also defending their culture.

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¹⁷ Several young ACT members told me this, especially those who had moved from Dzongú to Gangtok.

Chapter 2 – Narratives of identity and politics – from Mayel Lyang to Tibet Road

It would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation.

Joseph Campbell (1993, p.3)

There is a celebrated Sikkimese story about the signing of a treaty in blood by the Lepcha chief, Thekong Tek, and the Bhutia Chief, Khye Bumsa. It is a story about the formation of the Kingdom of Sikkim and the coming together of two tribes. It is a story with two different perspectives: for Lepchas it is about loss, for Bhutias it is about gain. It is a traditional folktale, an old story refreshed every year during the annual *Pang Lhabsol* festival that honours Mount Kangchendzönga and marks the treaty between the Lepcha and Bhutia people. The story is also a political narrative, cited by the Lepchas and Bhutias when they feel their 'first person' status in Sikkim (and the advantages this status brings) is threatened by government rhetoric or policy. As a political narrative it is a shared narrative, with a shared perspective, rippling with secret openings that reveal a history of political and cultural turmoil stretching from 'old Sikkim' (a time that I identify here as the period before Sikkim joined the Indian Union in 1975) – to 'new Sikkim'.¹⁸ It reflects Barthes view that:

Ancient or not, mythology can only have historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history; it cannot possibly evolve from the 'nature' of things. Rather than transform some form of fixed or essential meaning, myths arise out of the social conflicts created by historical forces. (1972, p.110)

The Lepcha narratives I recorded all, in some way, reflect the cultural and political shift of society from the 'historical forces' that have travelled from old Sikkim to new Sikkim. Some would be considered myths, some history; many are old stories narrated by Lepcha elders. They represent the mythology being

¹⁸ Old Sikkim included the Darjeeling district, which is now part of the neighbouring state of West Bengal. I include some Lepcha narratives from that district for in Lepcha society, the border – from a cultural perspective – does not exist.

referenced by the ACT protesters to prove their stewardship of Dzongú and illustrate how the narratives from old Sikkim continue to have social and political currency in new Sikkim – in particular the new Sikkim narratives of Lepcha protest. I often heard fragments of these stories, with different storytellers sharing different parts of a narrative. I also heard varying versions of the same story: a name was different, or a different road travelled, a perspective changed over the generations and place of the story being told. Quite often a story varied in the telling by a Lepcha from Darjeeling or Kalimpong, and a Lepcha from Sikkim. But the essence of the story – and the lesson of the story – was consistent from wherever and whomever it came.

The seven narratives I relate here symbolise the Lepchas' journey from Mayel Lyang to Tibet Road (Gankgtok) and illustrate that the narratives from old Sikkim continue to have social and political currency, in particular in the new narratives of Lepcha protest. The first two stories come from the time when only Lepchas lived in Sikkim. The first tells the story of the creation of the Lepchas and their journey to Mayel Lyang; the second, a story about the people of Mayel, which features strongly in Lepcha folklore. The third story, an 8th century story about the visit of Guru Padmasambhava to Sikkim foreshadows the coming of Buddhism – and those who brought it – to Sikkim. This is confirmed by the fourth story, the pivotal 13th century story describing how the Bhutias and Lepchas came together in brotherhood leading to the creation of the Kingdom of Sikkim. I have also included a seldom-heard story of the Lepchas as warriors; then an anecdote about the last royal wedding in Sikkim held not long before the end of Sikkim monarchy and the period of change when Sikkim merged with India. The final story is about the first major Lepcha protest against the dams in Gangtok.

Lessa says 'myth does not reveal the whole of a people's culture and design for living, though what is embedded in tradition often leads to knowledge and truth lost to the conscious minds of a people' (1966, p.3). The narratives here do not reveal the whole of Lepcha culture and design for living, however they do represent major periods of change in Lepcha society, linked by relating the coming of others and the increasing marginalisation of Lepcha people. The Lepcha storytellers provide a modern and often political context to the

narratives. For example, Guru Padmasabhava's 8th century prophecies have 21st century currency when retrieved as a protest weapon by the President of ACT.

The final story – about the first major protest by ACT members in Gangtok – is a contemporary narrative that looks forward. This modern story could be what Sorel was referring to when he said: 'Men who are participating in great social movements always picture their coming action in the form of images of battle in which their cause is certain to triumph' (Sorel G 1999 cited in Edelstein 2007, p.33).

The young warriors from ACT who are the characters in this story were not then conscious that they were creating a narrative that would live on in Lepcha mythology, but they were consciously and overtly asserting their Lepcha identity in this early stage of the battle for Dzongú.

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Creation

The great mother-creator, Itbu-mu, created the land where Lepchas live, known as Mayel Lyang. She first created the cú (mountains) and made them male, and the dâ (lakes) and made them female. She created plants and animals and to look after them she created the first Lepcha man Fadongthing, from the pure snow of Mount Kangchendzönga, collected in her right hand¹⁹. Then she took snow from the mountain in her left hand and created the first Lepcha woman, Nuzaongnyoo. As Fadongthing and Nuzaongnyoo were created by the same being, they were considered brother and sister and their mother-creator, Itbu-mu, placed them far away from each other – Fadongthing at the top of a mountain and Nuzaongnyoo at the base of the mountain beside a lake. Itbu-mu told them to separately find their way to Mayel Lyang and not to meet until they reached there. She told them they could never marry and if they defied her and lived as husband and wife, terrible things would happen.

¹⁹ Fadongthing is also known as Tukbothing and Tasheything.

But Fadongthing and Nuzaongnyoo separately reached a place called Kohol Lake and rested there together for a few days. Although they tried to obey Itbu-mu, they could not stay away from each other and fell in love. Nuzaongnyoo's dog tried to prevent Fadongthing from sleeping with her but Fadongthing beat the dog and made it sleep elsewhere. The lovers' secret trysts led to the birth of a son but, fearful that their relationship would be discovered by Itbu-mu, they hid the child and neglected him, leaving him behind when they continued their journey.

They reached Mayel Lyang late and Itbu-mu asked them why they were delayed. The dog, angry over his treatment from Fadongthing, told Itbu-mu about their relationship and she became very angry but the lovers continued to live as husband and wife.

Their first child, the son they abandoned, cursed them, saying that their future children would be born as demons – known as múng. This came to pass and these evil demons caused great suffering in Mayel Lyang.

After some time Fadongthing and Nuzaongnyoo were forgiven by Itbu-Moo and she sent them to a place called Suryo Suvo Lyang and allowed them to give birth to human children. They had a boy and a girl, Nunglen Nue and Kathongfe, from whom the Lepcha race began however, the Lepchas were plagued by misery brought by the múng .

To stop the power of the múng they decided to hunt the first-born demon child of Fadongthing and Nuzaongnyoo. He was hard to kill as he was able to change his form each time he was slain, earning the name, Láso múng puna.

After one year, when he had changed from a rat to an ox, to a tiger, to an eagle and many more animals in between, he was killed in the form of pig on the last day of the twelfth month of Lepcha calendar Marlavo Tyangrigong²⁰.

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I was in Darjeeling in April 2006 when I first heard a fragment of the creation story of the Lepchas. It was told to me by a Lepcha elder, SM Lepcha. His house was on Tenzing Norgay Road (named after the Sherpa who first reached the

²⁰ I have heard different fragments of this story which I have drawn on here. I have drawn from SM Lepcha's narrative, the work of KP Tamsang and the story related on the website for North Sikkim <http://northsikkim.nic.in/html/namsoong.htm> (accessed 15 January 2011)

summit of Mount Everest with Edmund Hilary), and it was Tenzing Norgay's son-in-law, Dhendup Tshering, husband of Tenzing's eldest child Pem Pem, who took me there.

'Tenzing was my father's neighbour and my father knew him very well,' said SM. 'Many times Tenzing said to my father, "come climbing from mountain to mountain, climb Kangchendzönga". My father said no, for Lepchas are not allowed to put a footprint on the mountain because the mountain is our god'.

'So there are no Lepcha mountaineers?' I asked.

No, because we pray to the mountain to our god. Actually we are very animist you know. The mountain is our god, the first god creation and Lepcha boys and girls came from pure snow from Kangchendzönga. That is why we pray to Kangchendzönga; that is why we are animist before. I cannot climb any mountain.

At the time we met, SM Lepcha was President of the Lepcha Association in Darjeeling and, with his wife Rosa, involved in teaching programs aimed to connect young Lepchas to their culture. They encouraged Christian and Buddhist Lepchas to understand themselves as Lepcha first and then Christian or Buddhist. Their teachings placed Lepcha culture at the heart of Lepcha identity, followed by religion. Torri noted that Buddhism and *Munism* form a double-layered religious system, (Torri 2010, pp.148–165) which can coexist harmoniously. However SM and Rosa's encouragement of Christian Lepchas to put their culture before their faith was a challenge to the Christian doctrine of a single God.

'At this time, 80 per cent of Darjeeling district is Christian. Christianity is indirectly wiping out our community, no doubt,' said SM who identified as 'pure animist' meaning that he does not practise any other religion.

Rosa, who is Catholic, nodded agreement.

SM and Rosa viewed educating the young Lepchas about their culture as their duty to their community. 'We are going door to door [and saying] first of all, we are Lepcha. Christian and Buddhism, there is no difference. Our blood is

Lepcha's blood. That is why Lepcha language is so important to survive our culture: dress and language and culture. Rosa is cultural secretary and she is presenting many [Lepcha] fairy tales.'

I asked Rosa whether children were hearing the Lepcha folktales for the first time from her. 'Some children know them from their families, others we have to teach,' she said.

SM interrupted, laughing. 'Madam – excuse me, my wife belongs to the Roman Catholic [religion] but now she knows what is animist. My luck is that I marry a Roman Catholic, but today she understands a lot.'

Rosa laughed: 'I never knew anything about Lepcha [before]. I am Lepcha but I don't know about Lepcha... I learn so many things about Lepchas and whatever I learn I am teaching the children.'

The story of Fadongthing and Nuzaongnyoo was one of the stories Rosa taught the Lepcha children of Darjeeling. It is one story all Lepchas share and it heralds the beginning of Lepcha belief: the appeasement of the *múng* (demon) offspring of the illicit lovers that plague Mayel Lyang, and the worship of the *rum* [god(s)].

Many Lepchas, including SM Lepcha, call their early belief system animism; others call it *Bóngthingism* or *Munism* and it is the *bóngthing* and *mun* who speak directly to the *múng* and *rum* (Tamsang 1998, p.43). Many simply refer to their beliefs as nature worship. Morris refuted the term 'animism' as a description of Lepcha beliefs saying, 'animism implies the attribution of a living soul to inanimate objects and natural phenomena; but the Lepcha has not this belief. According to his ideas, trees, rivers, rocks and other natural objects are only the homes of spirits ... the objects themselves, while they are sometimes thought to possess a separate soul, do not need to be propitiated' (Morris 1938, p.69). Morris's interpretation of animism is slightly narrower than Wenner's in that it encompasses philosophical, religious, and/or spiritual beliefs that souls or spirits exist not only in humans but also in all other animals, plants, rocks; in natural phenomena such as thunder; in geographic features such as mountains or rivers; or in other entities of the natural environment (Wenner 2001). Morris is right in saying that the spirits Lepchas appease live in the surrounding environment, but

Lepchas also worship the place where the spirits reside. For Lepchas, the Teesta River is a place of worship and it is an object of worship. As are Mount Kangchendzönga, the Lepchas' mother mountain, and many other sacred places.

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In the Lepcha village, on the last day of the twelfth month of the Lepcha calendar, the slaying of *Fadongthing* and *Nuzaongnyoo's* demon child *Láso múng* is commemorated at the annual *Nambun* (New Year) festival.

With the crops harvested and stored, a time of rest, celebration and appeasement begins. Lepchas working outside home return to their village for several days. They might attend a village celebration, often at the local monastery where the night before *Nambun*, they will appease the *múng* that have caused them trouble during the year just gone. The following day they will offer prayers to the *rum* asking for good health and happiness for the year ahead.

I attended *Nambun* in Mane Gombú village at 11th Mile in Kalimpong at the home of Dorji Lepcha in December 2006, early in my fieldwork before I had become accustomed to Lepcha social norms. Along with friends from Australia, I sat self-consciously in Dorji's living room, sipping *cí*. Our self-consciousness was despite of our welcome, which was warm and generous. It was the awkwardness that comes with being a newcomer, an outsider, and not knowing what was about to happen. Should we stand? Should we sit? Should our shoes be on or off? Should we accept the offering of a kettle of boiling water used to top up the warm fermented millet inside the bamboo tube? 'More *cí*?' The water would be poured into the bamboo vessel before we knew whether to accept or refuse. I drew the liquid through a bamboo straw and felt its warmth spread through my chest, down to my belly. This *cí* would not have been the special *Nambun cí* prepared months earlier, for that is saved for the gods first, offered to the Lepcha *rum*, before anyone else. 'This is our traditional drink,' said Dorji's friend, Azuk Tamsangmoo. 'It is made of millet. There are no chemicals in it. It is very important, as it is our holy drink. We use it when a child is born; their first drop is *cí*. At *Nambun* our prayer is not complete without *cí*. And when we die, *cí* is there. From birth to death we have *cí*, it is a very holy drink for us. When we

[the Lepcha] took the recipe to make *cí* we cheated so the person who had that recipe cursed us. He said “if you use it in a good way it will be very good for you but if you overdo it, it will be very bad”.’

Azuk then showed us the ritual Lepchas practice before drinking *cí*. He pulled the bamboo straw out of the vessel and lightly shook it three times, sprinkling *cí* in the air. ‘If we don’t do this, it’s not good for us. Maybe we might be over-drunk, fall and get sick. This is an offering to our god.’

Arthur Foning’s description of ‘the appeasement’ at the start of *Nambun*, is close to what we witnessed that night (2003, p.252). We were led to a neighbour’s house where the offerings to appease the *múng* were laid out on two round, flat, rattan trays. There were twigs and leaves, to remind the *múng* of their slaying of *Láso múng*, for the demon hid in the forest before being killed. There were grains: rice, millet and wheat, and small figures made from dough, plus some fruit. The offerings act as deterrents and obstacles to their onslaught upon us humans (Foning 2003, p.253). Dorji’s neighbour was the most senior man in the village and would therefore make the offering. Dorji and his wife (who is a *mun*) assisted with the ritual. They walked around the room, drizzling water (or was it *cí*?) on everyone’s head. Dorji told us that all the bad things from last year had been taken away and that the *múng* had been appeased to stop any bad things coming during the following year. There was a thin line, drawn in flour separating one side of the doorway from the other. We could not cross the line to leave the house until the offerings had been taken from the room and a bamboo torch had been lit outside the house.

With the appeasements inside the house complete, we crossed the line and followed the young men who took the trays with the offerings and armed themselves with flaming bamboo arrows. They yelled out as they ran through the village in the dark, their shouting peppered with cries of *mútuncí róngkup, aachuley*²¹. My friends and I followed along narrow access paths in the rice terraces, ignoring our hosts’ pleas to be careful. We chased the dots of fire until

²¹ *Mútuncí róngkup* means children of the Rong. *Aachuley* is a Lepcha word which is used to show approval, agreement, pride, celebration and on 12 December; all of those things and unity. It is loosely translated as ‘hail to the Himalayas.’

we reached a clearing from where the night sky illuminated the patch of flat land. The men placed the trays on the ground, steadied their bare feet against the soft earth, pulled back their bows and shot the flaming arrows into the air so the *múng* could see where the offerings lay.

We slowly made our way back to the house where a feast had been prepared. The young men slid easily from the traditional *Nambun* rituals to a night of drinking beer and whiskey, and singing and dancing. The songs were a mix of Lepcha language – an improvised chant of *aachuley* and Nepali songs, in particular songs by Darjeeling band *Mantra* whose music formed the soundtrack of that time, so omnipresent it seemed to be played in every café, bar and taxi we entered in the Darjeeling hills.²²

We left the celebrations early and Azuk offered to drive us back to the hotel. We squeezed into his small Tata car, which lacked the power to drive up the hill. Azuk rolled the car to flat ground and revved it. As the Tata wheezed away from Mane Gumbo, he felt compelled to explain its uneasiness. He advised: ‘My car is unaccustomed to Australian weight.’

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The people of Ney Mayel Lyang

They met a man from one of those houses and enquired from him. But he instead asked them ‘How have you two come into our land? Here, where no living humans can ever reach. There are only seven families of us living in these seven houses left behind a long time ago by Sage Mensalong’... On that night, all the young men of the seven houses brought the two of them food, milk, fruits, mangoes, oranges. They ate to their full satisfaction and as they talked, gathered that these persons had been living there from ages ago. In this land, they did not know starvation or famine; on this land there were plenty of greens, fruits and nuts and all kinds of crops could be grown here. In their houses, food, clothing and salt never finished or ran short.

Narrated by Lawrence Sitling-Rong

²²Mantra, (2003), *Mantra*, pub. Indreni Audio Centre, Kathmandu.

Lepchas talk of a secret place in Dzongú called Mayel Kyong where seven Lepcha families live a traditional Lepcha life. They have all the food they could ever eat for everything there grows all year; there is no disease, no famine, and the Mayel Kyong villagers have the gift of eternal life. During the day they are young and strong yet they grow old each evening with the setting sun. Mayel Kyong is believed to be located just near the base of Mount Kangchendzönga. To get there you must trek for several days through the jungle until you find an entrance that is sealed by a huge stone. Only a pure Lepcha, one who has only Lepcha ancestry, speaks Lepcha language and follows Lepcha traditions, can move the stone by placing his left hand on it. However if he enters Mayel Kyong and then leaves it, he will never find it again.

Arthur Foning wrote that Mayel Kyong was once a large country at the base of the mountains where the Lepchas were placed by their creators but 'on account of our human failings, this utopia has been defiled and has shrunk to a limited size, only fit for a few souls to live in, only the pure and the unsullied ones finding an abode there' (1987, pp.50–52). He also believed Mayel Kyong was impossible to find.

An oft-repeated saying, illustrates this belief: *Alyu arong linba, Long nun paruk dongba; Mayel Kyong ka thisyong re*. This means, 'When cats grow horns, and the rocks sprout shoots, we will reach Mayel County'; in other words, it is impossible to reach the Mayel County... some natural obstacle, or barrier, such as heavy rain, a hail storm, sleet or a landslide, will prevent us, and drive us away... it is also said that formerly they used to meet us humans. But, alas, because of the degradation caused by our unworthy behaviour, they now shun us, and never appear before us, but confine themselves to the sacred place among the gods in the mountains (2003, pp.50–52).

~

I first heard of Mayel Kyong in April 2006, from Dorji Lepcha who told me a story about an American woman, who was a clairvoyant and astrologer, he had met in November 2000. She was searching the world to find heaven and Dorji related that she had met the Pope and the Dalai Lama and asked them where heaven was

and they had replied that they did not know. The Dalai Lama told her that Shangri-la was in the Himalayan Mountains, which brought her to Darjeeling where she met two young Lepcha boys who told her the stories of Mayel Kyong.

The American woman enlisted Dorji's help to find Mayel Kyong and prepared enthusiastically for the visit. They met each morning for Lepcha language and culture classes and later consulted a *mun* who performed a puja to determine the best time to visit Dzungú. They decided to leave Darjeeling on 10 February in order to get to Dzungú on the night of the black moon, 22 February 2001. Their party consisted of Dorji, his Lepcha friend, the American woman and the *mun* – but they faced many obstacles. The day they were to leave Darjeeling there was a strike that lasted five days and they could not get transport out. On the 15th they travelled to Gangtok, where there was lightning and thunder and they again had to delay their journey. When the storm subsided, they drove to Dzungú.

'Everyone had to be Lepcha, even the driver,' said Dorji.

'We visited every corner of Mayel Lyang ... we did pujas everywhere and we tried every corner to open the door [to Mayel Kyong]. We went to Sakyong and Puntong and finally reached the base of Kong Chen [Kangchendzönga],' he added.

The woman said she had power and in a vision she saw that she went to the rock and physically touched it with her left hand. She wanted Dorji to do that for her – because being pure Lepcha his hand would be accepted. He felt he should not, that it was not right to do this and the pilgrimage ended.

~

Throughout my research, I encountered many stories of Mayel Kyong after hearing Dorji's story of the American woman's desire to reach it. In Kalimpong and Darjeeling some Lepchas refer to it as Ney Mayel Lyang – *ney* meaning purity and distinguishing it from the rest of Mayel Lyang. It is in Dzungú where they call it Mayel Kyong, meaning paradise village. I sought out stories of Mayel Kyong, my search for these narratives leading to tales of hunters, *bóngthings*, and kings entering the secret village and meeting the people of Mayel. At our first meeting in 2006 SM Lepcha mentioned in passing that his father had twice met the people of Mayel. I did not realise its significance at the time, but three years later, when

we met again at his daughter's house in Passingdang, in Dzongú, I asked him to tell me the story.

My father when he was 16 or 17 years old lived in Rabong in Sikkim. One night he had a fever at midnight so he stayed in the downstairs of the house. He could hear a meeting upstairs but he knew that everyone was at the Teesta-Rangit mela [fun fair] and that he should have been alone. My father was very shocked to here the voices upstairs. He thought, there is no person in my house so who has come here?

He went upstairs where he saw many people having a meeting. They were very beautiful and handsome and were wearing very good clothes and precious stones, just like a king or a queen. The guard on the door said to my father: 'Do not come here, please do not come, because you are dirty with fever, your body is dirty, so you are not allowed in this place. We are assembling here by Ney Mayel Lyang for we are the Ney Mayel Lyang people'.

My father could feel his fever going down so he ran one kilometre from his house down to the Rangit River and washed and returned home. 'I am clean,' he said to the guard, but the guard noticed he had dirt in his nails. He ran back to the river and this time he thoroughly washed himself with sand and water. A small bird greeted my father *khame-ri mo* and my father replied, *khame-ri mo*.

'We are visiting your village because your family is very pure. That is why we have assembled here but our meeting is over,' said the bird.

The next day my father wondered if it had been a dream, but he saw he had some blood under his fingernails from scrubbing them the night before, and he could understand bird language so he knew he had met the bird.

SM said his father's experience with the people of Ney Mayel Lyang attracted many birds to the garden. 'When I was 10, I carried lunch to my father in the garden – some water, bread and *cí* – and I saw so many birds around my father, sitting on his shoulder, his head and my father spoke their language. I asked my father "Papa why do the birds come near you?" but he just smiled and said "the time will come when you also feel it".'

SM said birds still come to his garden – 20 or more birds come, and always at *Nambun*. ‘They always come early in the morning in my garden, to see my wife Rosa and my eldest daughter Nimkit. So many birds, nice birds – white, green yellow, 30 and 40 birds came to my garden at Darjeeling. Then we feel, *Ah, Nambun*. They come just on this day but I can’t tell anybody else, any Nepali person, any Bhutia person, this story. We pray to the birds. We say, *khame-ri mo* and they stay no more than 10 minutes before gliding away, towards Mount Kangchendzönga.’

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Guru Padmasambhava’s visit to Sikkim

In the 8th century, on his way to Tibet where he was called by the Tibetan king to spread his teachings, Guru Padmasambhava visited Bhutan and Sikkim. In Sikkim, he met the Lepcha chief, Thekung Adek, who also had divine power; so strong that he had defeated Guru Padmasambhava many times, before the two became friends and together visited caves, hot springs and other sacred places. While in Sikkim, Guru Padmasambhava made many prophecies, including a prediction that Buddhism would come to the land centuries after he had been there. He named Sikkim, Ba-yul Demojong, meaning the hidden valley of treasures and while there he hid many treasures, including secret Buddhist texts in the lakes and caves, in preparation for them to be found and revealed in the future.

He converted the demons of Sikkim, Dākinī [deity] of space, goddess of medicine, gods of land and water, arrogant spirits and bound them under solemn oath. The demons were appointed as guardian deities of the hidden treasures and protectors of holy dharma and instructed to grace the land with good harvest and timely rain and to prevent natural calamities. Guru Padmasambhava also warned the people that the worship of these local deities would prevent unnatural calamities and wars in Ba-yul Demojong and ordered the people to observe the rituals with faith and sincerity. Guru told that as long as people kept this order and observance the land of hidden country of Demojong would be peaceful where religion would flourish and the harvest be bountiful.

Acharya Dugay Lepcha (1995)

In every Buddhist household and every monastery in Sikkim, there is at least one, most likely several images, of Guru Padmasambhava, the patron saint and protector of Sikkim and teacher of Mahayana Buddhism. Guru Padmasambhava introduced Buddhism to the Lepchas in the 8th century, but it was the 18th century before it was fully embraced, although Lepcha shamanism managed to coexist with Buddhist customs and beliefs (Plasier 2005, p.9). When Sikkim did become a Buddhist kingdom, Guru Padmasambhava's teachings were – and continue to be – practised alongside Lepcha rituals with *bóngthings* and lamas in some circumstances jointly conducting ceremonies.

I consulted Athup Lepcha for understanding of where Guru Padmasambhava's teachings and the practice of the Lepcha *bóngthing* came together. Athup is a retired lawyer, and once held the position of Forestry Minister in the former Congress State Government in Sikkim.²³ He is also the current President of Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT). He fervently believed that the protective deities of Sikkim had been angered by the dam construction in the state.

We met on 24 February 2010 in the cramped office used by ACT in the basement at BL House. 'I want to know about the sacred,' I asked him. 'I want to know what you say the deities will do if all the dams go ahead.' I had noted that Athup had cited Padmasambhava's predictions in letters to Sikkim's Chief Secretary concerning the dams. He first showed me a small paper, translated from Tibetan to English and asked me to read it. It mentioned threats to Sikkim, some political, some from nature, others from deities. It was mostly prophecies, some that had already happened, others that were to come. Athup would not allow the page to be copied but wanted me to read it so I would understand when he explained that the narratives relating to Guru Padmasambhava's visit to Sikkim were not Buddhist narratives; they were unique to Mayel Lyang. He explained:

People said this is Buddhism, I say this is not Buddhism, Buddhism is different from all this. In the 8th century, Padmasambhava, our tantric guru from Uddiyana in India, came to Mayel Lyang before going to Tibet, and he met the Lepcha chief. From here he went to Tibet and later on he returned to

²³ Forestry Minister sometimes referred to as Environment Minister

Sikkim along with his 15 disciples and at that time he visited all the parts of Mayel Lyang; he explored all the sacred places, lakes, rivers and mountains.

Before his arrival, the Lepcha *bóngthíngs* were celebrating [performing rituals] all these sacred places and deities and when the Guru came here with his disciples he consulted the *bóngthíngs*. He saw these deities – actually he met them – and he asked them ‘What you want, you have to listen to me, my advice you have to take’, then he subdued them and said offerings will be given to you by the people of this land and you do not harm them.

Before Padmasambhava came here, these things were done by the Lepcha *bóngthíngs* but they used to sacrifice animals. Now naturally Padmasambhava was non-violent, no killing, no sacrificing animals and he said ‘don’t do this’. So this is the difference. But the deities are the same and just the methods of giving offerings to the deities are different. *Bóngthíngs* give offerings in one way, and this tantric guru in some other way. That is the only difference; otherwise the deities are the same.

Athup talked about one of Padmasambhava’s most well-known predictions: that the Tibetans would come to Lepcha lands and with their migration, the first king.

He told the Lepchas: in future, many Tibetans will come to your country and after some generations one of the Tibetans will become the first Tibetan king of your country. And after some generations, Khye Bumsa came along with his family members, his servants and he contacted the Lepcha *bóngthíng*, Thekong Tek. They met at Kabi – you know that sacred place, so after 5th generation, most probably 6th generation, came Puntsong Namgyal. He was born here in Gangtok. Before Puntsong Namgyal there was no kingdom. Lepchas were ruling on their own, independent, no rules, no regulations for the Lepchas. They were on their own.

A boy ran into the office with a parcel wrapped in newspaper. It was a framed *Rigzin Tsa-Sum* thanka – known by every Buddhist in Sikkim, and possibly every Sikkimese as the image is so prevalent. Athup held up the thanka: ‘Let us see if I can explain it to you or not,’ he said. ‘I’ll try’.²⁴

²⁴ A thanka is a Buddhist religious painting – see Appendix A for the image of *Rigzin Tsa-Sum* thanka



Rigzin Tsa-Sum thanka

The thanka was vividly painted and depicted demons, deities, lamas and the Guru in the centre. Athup explained who the deities were and their role in Guru Padmasambhava's journey in Sikkim. He pointed to each of the demon-like deities and explained that 128 treasures of Padmasambhava have been hidden in Mayel Lyang and to look after those treasures the Guru engaged these deities.

Athup traced the images on the thanka with his finger.

Over here you see this is Padmasambhava. He is in another form, not in this form. This is our deity who looks after the sacred land, she looks after sacred lakes. Now these here are the monks who established the kingdom. Here is the first king of Sikkim. Now these are the ten deities, this is Junga -- his palace is Kangchendzönga; here is Bishu Karma, and this is Yeshe Gonpo,

wisdom protector. They are deities, not Buddhas. This is Srinpo Lanka-Dengchu who has ten heads; this is Naga. This is Thanglha, Chumbi Valley – Chumbi once belonged to Sikkim. When you are coming up from Siliguri to Sikkim, near the hydro project, this deity is there. This is Mamo. They are the main deities.

Over here we have the local deities, Tashiding Monastery, Pemayangtse monastery, Enchey monastery, Tholung monastery. There are certain lamas appointed to offer something for these deities, daily. They need offering to these deities but not by Tibetans.²⁵

The deities don't respond to offerings by foreigners and can be angered by the intervention of outsiders. Athup related a story about the late 16th Karmapa from Rumtek monastery in Sikkim who was Tibetan born and who told him of his lack of success with the Sikkim deities.

'He told me, "these deities are very ferocious. They do not listen to me. The more I try to pacify them, the more they become ferocious". So they listen only to the local lamas, not the foreigners.'

He then related another story about a warning from a lama before a visit by the Dalai Lama: "This lama told me some people will die when Dalai Lama is here – this is their reaction, action, cause, effect – because this land and this place belongs to Nyingmapa sect and Dalai Lama is Gelugpa sect. I did not believe the lama, how could it be? Yet the Dalai Lama came here and people came from Natula to get a blessing and there was an accident and 25 people died on the spot. The reaction [of the deities] is like that.'

Athup then related further evidence that local village deities can get very angry with people who do not respect them and can drive them out of a village.

²⁵ The identifying of local deities is not always consistent. Many original local deities have been integrated into Buddhism, even if still worshipped as a 'local' deity. In many cases famous Tibetan names have been pasted onto Lepcha/Bhutia local deities as a way of elevating them. Plus, some are only general classes of beings (Naga, Mamo) while others have precise identities, localities and histories. Some are even deified ancestors. Anna Balikci's book, *Lamas, Shamans and Ancestors. Village Religion in Sikkim*, offers deep insight into village religion in Sikkim:

There was some land dispute between Bhutias and Lepchas. The Lepchas said to the deities: "The Bhutias are doing injustices to us, or we are to them, you are the witness. Now whoever is on the wrong side, you punish them. If we are on the wrong side you punish us, if they are on the wrong side, you punish them." The Bhutias did not know the local deities there and started to suffer -- leprosy, so many diseases, they had to leave that area. They went to Tumlong side. They have their own land there but they cannot live there.

He wrote to Sikkim's Chief Minister in August 2007 to explain the danger the government was courting by proceeding with the hydro projects. He first proved Guru Padmasambhava's accuracy by relaying prophecies well known in Sikkim to have come true; the coming of Tibetans to Sikkim to spread Buddhism, how a man born in the Year of the Mouse would be the first king of Sikkim, how the 11th king would be born in the Dragon Year and the warning that if a Tibetan born in the Year of the Pig became the 12th king, he would be the last. Then, after more proof of prophecies, and acknowledgement that the Chief Minister had obtained 'rarest merit' by building a statue of Guru Padmasambhava at Samdrupti which was sanctified and consecrated by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and His Eminence the Dordrupchen Rinpoche, he delivered a veiled warning:

... in the land blessed by the Guru, [the Chief Minister] may kindly not involve himself in activities to cause destruction of beings which cannot express their sufferings. Let us not forget Guru Padmakara's²⁶ prophecies relating to Sikkim, Nepal and Tibet. We have a few more prophecies of guru relating to Sikkim, but we reserve the disclosure of them at this point in time.²⁷

I asked him if the government had listened to his warnings relating to the anger the dams had caused the deities.

There was no reaction, why should they react? They don't understand. They don't know who our deities are, they don't know and they don't care about them. But the Tibetan kings in Sikkim, how they would finish, that was written by Padmasambhava. And now one thing is left and that is that China is coming for this land – that is definite, if the government doesn't take any initiative to

26 Guru Padmasambhava is also known as Guru Rinpoche and Guru Padmakara.

27 Letter from Athup Lepcha, President ACT to the Chief Minister of Sikkim, 16 August 2007

prevent that eventuality. They [China] are looking down at the opportunity and the appropriate time to strike because it is already destined. It is fixed.

Athup's warnings to the government connected traditional beliefs with modern politics. His warnings came from genuine concern, yet in the fractious environment of the Dzongú anti-dam era (2006–2009) they were dismissed by a government intent on damming the Teesta which ignored widespread and deeply held beliefs (possibly held by some government ministers) relating to Guru Padmasambhava's prophecies.

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The coming of the Bhutias to Sikkim

In the 13th century, in the Chumbi Valley, where modern day Tibet, Bhutan and Sikkim intersect, lived a Bhutia Chief, Khye Bumsa and his wife, Jhumo. Khye Bumsa was a man of great strength, known in Chumbi as 'the superior of ten thousand heroes', yet he and his wife were unable to have children. They consulted with lamas who told them that if they travelled west, to the land of the Lepchas, they would meet a revered and powerful Lepcha bǒngthǐng, named Thekong Tek, whose blessing could bring them a child.

They travelled with a small party of 17 and set out west from Chumbi on a journey that took many weeks, passing through rhododendron forests which reached so high they could barely see where the forest ended and the sky began. They navigated mountains and rivers stopping for rest at the many lakes, finally crossing the Yak la [pass] and travelling through Penlong, in East Sikkim to Satala, near Rangpo and on to Gangtok.

In Gangtok, they met an old man, his skin black from tilling his burnt field. They asked for information on Thekong Tek but he would not help them. Khye Bumsa and his party were suspicious of the old man's reluctance to assist them and secretly followed him to a house. After some time, and negotiation, they were allowed to enter a room where they saw the old man clad in a robe adorned with the heads of many animals. He was seated on a dais, his followers placed on the floor in worship before him. Khye Bumsa then realised the old man was the venerable Thekong Tek he had been searching for.

Khye-Bumsa offered Thekong Tek many gifts and Thekong Tek reciprocated with a blessing that Khye-Bumsa would have three sons. With this assurance he returned to Chumbi, where he and his wife had three sons, born quickly after each other.

After the birth of their third son, Khye Bumsa, with his wife and sons, returned to Sikkim and travelled to Kabi in North Sikkim, to thank Thekong Tek and to ask for a blessing for their sons. When Thekong Tek lifted one of the sons in his arms, the boy's feet touched his forehead. Thekong Tek was so concerned by this event, which he took to be a sign that the Lepchas would one day be ruled by the child's descendents, that he asked Khye Bumsa to immediately swear eternal blood brotherhood with him as a symbolic sign of acceptance of Bhutias and Lepchas as equals.

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Three centuries later, in 1642, Thekong Tek's concern was proven when a descendent of Khye Bumsa, a Bhutia man called Phuntsog Namgyal became the first Chogyal of Sikkim.²⁸

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I have heard and read many versions of this story and the heart of each remains the same: that the Lepchas and Bhutias swore an allegiance to each other and this event was a precursor to the creation of the Kingdom of Sikkim. Kabi Longchok, where the treaty was 'signed in blood', is about 25 kilometres north of Gangtok, at an elevation of 1950 metres above sea level and marked on the road by a tourist sign and a pagoda-style entrance to the Kabi grove.

Kabi is one of India's 13,720 documented sacred groves in 19 Indian states and the largest of Sikkim's 56 sacred groves. It is around three square kilometres and has more than 241 species of plants: 44 species of trees, 26 species of shrubs, 91 species of herbs, 21 species of climbers, 13 species of grasses and 16 species of epiphytes (Dash 2005, pp.427-428).

²⁸ This story was informed by conversations with Lepchas and published sources: Wangchuk & Zulca, *Khangchendzonga, Sacred Summit*, pub. Pema Wanchuk, 2007, p. 54; Risley H H, *The Gazetteer of Sikkim*, (fp 1928), Low Price Publications, Delhi, 2001, p 8-9

I first visited Kabi Longchok with Sherap Lepcha in January 2007. We had driven north from Gangtok, enroute to Dzongú in his courageous Maruti sedan. As the car huffed along the partially unsealed road, he played old cassette tapes and we sang along to long-forgotten artists like Smokie: *Cos for 24 years I've been living next door to Alice*, and the ubiquitous (in India) Bryan Adams: *Look into my eyes, you will see, what you mean to me*.

Accompanying us was a Bengali-German journalist who lived in Berlin. She wanted to write about the dams, and this trip – her first and my third to Dzongú – was a ‘site inspection’ to enable her to experience the beauty of the land and see where the dams would be built. We entered the sacred Kabi grove and picked our way along the path, adding a pebble to the wish-building stone. We walked up the steps to the small *chorten*²⁹, which we circled once clockwise, then down towards the Statue of Unity, an impressive yet gentle depiction of the blood-brotherhood treaty between Thekong Tek and Khye Bumsa. Thekong Tek appears to be giving his blessing with his wife Neukong Da standing just behind him as witness. Khye Bumsa is kneeling and pointing upward, perhaps towards Mount Kangchendzönga.

They are draped in silk scarves known as *khadas* brought by pilgrims and surrounded by trees that, between the branches, have row upon row of Buddhist prayer flags draped above the statue to form a circle of worship around this moment in history.

At the time Sherap was the Treasurer and in charge of publicity for ACT, and working full-time to stop the dams. He was brimming with Lepcha nationalism and when relating the story of the brotherhood treaty between the Lepcha and Bhutia leaders, informed us that Khye Bumsa’s son, when held high by Thekong Tek, ‘pissed in his eye’ and that caused Thekong Tek’s premonition that the Lepchas would lose their land to the Bhutias.

Sherap wasn’t the first to give a less than glowing view of this important event in Lepcha-Bhutia relations. Arthur Foning, attributed the Lepchas’ belief in the

²⁹ A Buddhist monument acknowledging the Buddha or the spirit of a deceased person. It usually contains offerings to the gods and the ashes of the deceased. Also known as a stupa.

power of the *Long-Chok* (upright stones) as the reason Thekong Tek welcomed Khye Bumsa and his family in Kabi.

The simple and guileless Lepchas, in obedience to the divinity attached to these upright stones without so much as a yea or ney, acknowledged these intelligent and clever people as their own divine kings. Even after a lapse of about three and a half centuries, and even after the conversion into Christianity of a sizeable section, and getting wedded to a plethora of other cultures, one seldom hears a Lepcha speaking ill of these kings (2001, pp.37–38).

The brotherhood treaty remains relevant in Sikkimese culture and politics. The Lepchas and Bhutias, now minority tribes in Sikkim, have become skilled proponents of Sikkimese identity politics, asserting and reclaiming ways of understanding their distinctiveness that challenge dominant oppressive characterisations, with the goal of greater self-determination. The members of their association, Sikkim Lepcha Bhutia Apex Committee (SIBLAC) are vigorous defenders of the rights of the ‘first’ Sikkimese. Their narrative is of struggle, survival and native rights:

With growing awakening among the indigenous Bhutia-Lepcha who have been reduced to minority in their own native land, if their precious rights and interests are not restored and safeguarded as provided in the Indian Constitution, the very concept of integration, assimilation or pride in being involved in nation-building will be rendered meaningless (2008).

Yet, this politically contentious narrative has its challengers, among them a younger generation who do not have their own memories of the Chogyal’s reign, or the Sikkim of old, when Bhutias and Lepchas enjoyed the principle of ‘communal parity’ in Sikkim government.³⁰

³⁰ Ranjan Gupta noted that the parity formula was ‘bitterly resented’ by the Nepali Sikkimese for a successful candidate for the State Council had to obtain a minimum of 15% of the votes from a community other than his own. In addition, under the election rule proclaimed in March 1953, the Sikkim Council consisted of six Nepalese members, six Bhutias and Lepchas and five members nominated by the Chogyal ‘in his discretion’. Gupta R, *The Merger with India*, Asian Survey, Vol 15, No 9, September 1975: 786–798

The generation that came after those who fought for one vote, one person, is a generation that has grown up as Indian citizens and are less wedded to communal history than their parents. ACT's protest about the dam, while seen as a Lepcha issue because the dams are in Dzongú is, according to the young protesters, an environmental issue for all of Sikkim. The young Sikkimese-Nepali blogger, when creating weepingsikkim.blogspot.com to support the ACT hunger strikers, used an image of the Statue of Unity as its banner, but extended the historical narrative. He symbolically rather than literally interpreted the story stating that: 'The Statue of Unity signifies the unity of brotherhood between Lepchas, Bhutia and Nepali with Kangchendzönga deity as the witness. We uphold this spirit of universal brotherhood' (weepingsikkim 2007).

The blogger's reframing of history reflected that the character of ethnicity changes over time, as do the ways in which it is experienced and expressed (Nygren 1998 pp.31–63). His narrative was to show solidarity between the various ethnic inhabitants of Sikkim. It was a modern narrative, born of his generation – the educated youth, who identified as Sikkimese. It was also a protest narrative against those who said the battle was a 'Dzongú thing' or a 'Lepcha thing'. By adding Nepalis into the unity of brotherhood – even though the event occurred before Nepali settlement in Sikkim – was saying dams affected all Sikkimese.

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The Great Lepcha Warrior – Chanzod Karwang

One of the greatest Sikkimese warrior dynasties started with Chandzod Karwang, the Lepcha prime minister who came into prominence during the reign of the baby king, the fifth maharaja, Phuntsog Namgyal (1733–1780). The young maharaja's right to the Sikkimese throne was not recognised by Shalgno Chandzod Tamdring and his brothers who assumed power, with Shalgno taking on the name Gyalpo Tamdring. However the Lepcha prime minister Chandzod Karwang backed the young raja and took him away to Sinchel, near Darjeeling where, using his own property for payment, he led a revolutionary army in a battle which raged for

several years, eventually forcing Gyalpo Tamdring to flee to Tibet after ruling for just three years (1738–1741) and thereby saving the Namgyal Dynasty.

In 1752, Chandzod Karwang fought an uprising by the Tshong community and in doing so converted them to respected and loyal fighters for Sikkim. He gave them grand presents and privileges. He had kettledrums beaten in their honour and created banners and flags according to their rank and position.

Under Chandzod Karwang's leadership Sikkim's army fought numerous Gurkha invasions from nearby Nepal. In 1775–76, in response to a Gurkha invasion, Chandzod's son Chagzot Chogthup honoured his father's legacy by also becoming a great warrior. His army beat the Gurkhas 17 times, earning him the respect of the Nepalese Shah who called him Satrajit – the Nepali word for 17.

In 1788–89 the Gurkhas again invaded Sikkim and captured Rapdentse, which was then the capital. The sixth maharaja, Tenzing Namgyal (1769–1793) and his family fled to Kawe Ringchom in Sikkim and the Lepcha resistance army fled to Sakyong-Puntong in Upper Dzongú in North Sikkim.

In 1790 the maharaja travelled to Tibet where he asked the Tibetans to send an army to Sikkim to fight the Gurkhas however during his mission Chagzot Chogthup and the Sikkimese army drove the Gurkhas out of Sikkim and back to Nepal thus saving the sovereignty of Sikkim.³¹

Stories of the Lepcha as warrior are not found in the tourist guides, the folktale collections, or the official history of Sikkim. Most recorded history of Lepchas characterised them as placid and docile. The official website of the Government of Sikkim repeated the European colonists' patronising description of Lepchas as 'mild, quiet and indolent' and added : 'They are a simple people in rhythm with nature.' However Lepchas have a military history, rich with stories of heroism and bravery against the Bhutanese, the Tibetans, the Nepalese and the British.

³¹ There are different versions of the story. I have heard that Changzad Karwang was known as Satrajit and fought the Nepalese. In Lyangsong Tamsang's version published in *Auchuley* magazine in 2007, Chandzed Chotup is referred to as Changzad Tshoop Thoop. Halfdan Siiger in *Lepcha Land*, tells a different version of this history. Using the Gazetteer of Sikkim (Risley: 1894) as his source, he says Changzed Karwang, a Lepcha minister in the court of the fifth Maharaja was really a slave, though his mother said that he was the illegitimate son of the Raja. He attained greatness in Sikkim and it was his son, Changzed Chothup, who distinguished himself in 17 battles against the Nepalese during the 1770s and was given the Lepcha honorific name of Athing to commemorate the victories. What is not in doubt is that Changzad Karwang was a great Lepcha warrior and protector of Sikkim.

White mentioned disputes between Tibetan and Lepcha factions in Sikkim in the early 1800s that caused disturbances on the Indian frontier. (White 2000, p.7)

Halfdan Siiger, the Danish anthropologist who visited Sikkim in 1950, wrote of the battles at Chumbi and Rinchenpong between the Maharaja of Sikkim's men and, the British and their Sikh soldiers. Siiger related a story he heard in Tingvong from his informant, Adir whose grandfather who was among the Lepcha soldiers sent from Chumbi to defend Sikkim against the Tibetans and then at Rinchenpong against the Sikhs.

Almost all the Sikhs were killed in the retreat; only a few escaped. The Maharaja's soldiers acquired much booty in money and guns. Believing they had now won the war, they made a great three days' feast. But later the Sikhs returned, this time more numerous than before. The Maharaja's soldiers were not equal to the occasion and were forced to withdraw to Tumlong (1967, p.160).

This battle led to the British treaty with Sikkim and the granting of a strip of land in a part of Sikkim that leads down to the plains and is now known as the Darjeeling district of West Bengal. It is on that strip of land that the West Bengal Lepchas celebrate the life of another great Lepcha warrior, King Gaeboo Achyok. The legend of King Gaeboo Achyok, born in 1732, tells how he saved his people from the rampaging Bhutanese army in the late 18th century but was later murdered by the Bhutanese. His legacy is celebrated every year in Kalimpong on the anniversary of his birthday. On the 20th December each year, a ritual is held in the early morning at the ruins of Damsang Fort, the King's former home and the site of a great battle. The fort is near Pedong, a small village close to the West Bengal-Sikkim border and a 30-minute drive from the centre of Kalimpong. It is a steep walk from the road to the fort; however, in December 2007, when I attended the celebration, most of the 100 or so Lepcha pilgrims, wearing traditional Lepcha dress, arrived by jeeps, squashed inside or travelling on the roof. They shouted *aachuley*, over and over, crying out their 'hail to the Himalayas' in full voice as the jeeps wound their way three kilometres upwards, dodging rocks and potholes and tricky, sometimes treacherous, bends. There is

not much left in the ruins of the fort but there was a place of offering and the early morning *cí rumfát* offered by a *bóngthíng* honoured the Lepcha warrior.

After the ritual at Damsang Fort, we moved to a fairground in the town of Kalimpong and joined hundreds more for a program that included Lepcha cultural events. Lepcha literary works were launched and there were speeches, songs and dances, along with competitions in archery, tug of war and hair plaiting. Before the threat brought by the dams to Dzungú, there were few Lepchas from Sikkim who attended this event – indeed few who knew much of King Gaeboo Achyok – but the battle for Dzungú was a catalyst for bringing the Lepchas of Sikkim and Darjeeling district together, bound by their shared history and culture, and recognition that Dzungú is the motherland for Lepchas everywhere.

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Siiger noted that war belonged to the historical past of the Lepchas and they had to take to arms several times to defend their country. He recorded a warrior's ritual, conducted before departing for battle.

Before setting out on warfare each man used to perform a private ceremony in his own house. For this purpose he took a bird, a fish, beaten rice, butter, a hen, and the root of the fruit called *hing*. Then he arranged these offering gifts on a large, flat vessel or basket, placed his weapons around it and poured *cí* into a small vessel. Sprinkling *cí* on all these things he prayed to the war god as follows:

Fa lo gra fa lo rum

remain close to my body

go with me into the war

do not cause me death and sickness

from now on until I shall come home

do not cause accident to my hand and accident to my leg.

After the prayer he ate the hen and the vegetables and drank the *cí*. Then he gathered a good provision of beaten rice, tea dust and salt, the rations for the first days, took leave of his family and reported at the place previously fixed by the headman, stating that he was ready for departure. When all the men drafted had arrived, the headman chose the leader of the party. Then they all set out, a member of the party playing a Lepcha flute as they marched along (1967, p.158).

The ceremony that marked the creation of Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) was similar to the warrior ceremony described by Siiger. On a warm, overcast day in August 2005, a large group of young Lepcha men and women, gathered underneath a re-creation of a traditional timber Lepcha house at Namprikdang in Upper Dzongú. Traditional Lepcha houses were built on massive timber trunks and set upon large, round stones. The floor rests on cross beams, set high above the ground, each beam slotted into its partner. Underneath, there is a space large enough to keep farm animals and above the living area is an attic, where grain and other dry goods are stored. The walls are made from bamboo, mud and straw. This architecture is rarely seen now, as the traditional houses are now only built to support Lepcha cultural and tourism initiatives. The house in Namprikdang rests high above the riverbed at the confluence of the Rungyu (Teesta) and Rangyong rivers. This is also the site of the 280 megawatt Panan hydroelectric dam.

On the day of ACT's ceremony, the river was swollen from the monsoon and the ground was thick and heavy from weeks of rain. Dawa Lepcha was part of the group, as were Sherap Lepcha and Pemzang Lepcha – who had recently returned from America where he studied engineering. Also attending was their elder, Athup, Chopel Lepcha, a lama from Lingthem monastery in Upper Dzongú, and Tseten Lepcha from Chungtang, which is on the other side of the river. As in Siiger's story, these men were the drafted men, and they chose as their leader Athup Lepcha. With them was a *bóngthíng*, also from Dzongú, who performed a ritual very similar to that described by Siiger performed by Lepchas before going to battle. The *bóngthíng* arranged the food offerings on bamboo and cane mats and covered them with banana leaves. He offered them to the deities asking that they protect Dzongú, and not to be angry. Because the ritual was taking place at

Namprikdang, the *bóngthing* appeased the guardians of that area, Rongdok and Somfyok, who live in the rocks that flank the river.

After the *bóngthing* appeased the deities, Affected Citizens of Teesta was formally launched. Athup was appointed President; Chopel, Vice President; Pemzang, General Secretary 1; Dawa, General Secretary 2. Sherap was appointed Treasurer and Tseten, Chief Coordinator.

That day marked the official start of a new Lepcha battle – the battle for the rivers of Dzongú and for the hearts, minds and opinions of the Dzongú community.

‘I’m not sure I felt like a warrior when we launched ACT,’ said Dawa Lepcha. ‘All I knew was that we were going to have a huge task, which would need determination and dedication.’³²

Most of the ACT members who participated in the ritual were young. Wulf argued that rituals are necessary for the development of young people (2010, p.vii). Dawa and his young friends turned to the rituals first created by their ancestors as a way to mark the beginning of ACT. In Lepcha society in Dzongú, modernity had not removed the need for ritual, which, by creating social cohesion, served the Lepcha youth in the same way it served their elders.

The coming of Hope – and the end of a Kingdom.

I wanted to write about the last Chogyal, the most misunderstood man, even we Lepchas don’t know him ... I knew him also, he was with me in school. He was a Rinpoche. It was only when the elder brother got killed he was brought in to become a layman. He was not a man after power and all that. He was misunderstood. Hope Cooke, she also came for folk tales, actually she was on a Fulbright scholarship ... So it happened that Hope Cooke and this girl came up, they both came for oriental studies. Hope Cooke alone came to Darjeeling and met the Chogyal [at the Windamere Hotel] ... when she came to Sikkim, she became the

³² Email to Kerry Little from Dawa Lepcha dated 3 January 2010

*Gyalmo*³³. I went to the wedding. I took the Bhutanese delegation. She dressed as a Lepcha, and food also, all traditional Lepcha food, this stinging nettle soup and cí.

Lawrence Sitling-Rong.

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For Sikkimese of Lepcha or Bhutia origin, perhaps the last decade of 'old Sikkim' began on 20 March 1963 when Palden Thondup Namgyal, the Crown Prince of Sikkim (and son of Tashi Namgyal, the 11th and reigning Chogyal) married 22-year-old American, Hope Cooke. The first ten years of their marriage was also the last ten years of Sikkim's Namgyal Dynasty. Sikkim's treaty with India (struck in 1950) meant that internal affairs were the exclusive concern of the Sikkim Durbar, while the Government of India undertook responsibility for the country's defence, external affairs and strategic communications (Rustomji, 1983, p.149). However, soon after India's independence, the Sikkim State Congress started an anti-monarchist movement to introduce democracy in Sikkim. Following the death of India's Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru in 1964 and Sikkim's Chogyal, Tashi Namgyal in December 1963, anti-monarchy sentiment in Sikkim gained strength.

In April 1973, political forces working against Palden Thondup, who was by then the Chogyal, and working for closer ties with India, mounted an agitation against his rule that led to an agreement between the Chogyal, Sikkim's political parties and the Government of India. This agreement, which provided for a Legislative Assembly for Sikkim to be set up on a 'one man, one vote' basis, paved the way for Sikkim's annexation into India in 1975 and the end of 333 years of royal rule in Sikkim by the Namgyal Dynasty³⁴.

The Nepali Times describes the half hour it took for Sikkim's palace to fall to Indian troops:

King Palden Thondup Namgyal, the Chogyal of Sikkim was in his palace on the morning of 6 April, 1975 when the roar of army trucks climbing the steep streets

³³ Gyalmo means Queen

³⁴ The first Namgyal Chogyal of Sikkim was Phuntsok Namgyal who was crowned in 1642.

of Gangtok brought him running to the window. There were Indian soldiers everywhere, they had surrounded the palace, and short rapid bursts of machine gun fire could be heard. Basanta Kumar Chhetri, a 19-year-old guard at the palace's main gate, was struck by a bullet and killed the first casualty of the takeover. The 5,000-strong Indian force didn't take more than 30 minutes to subdue the palace guards who numbered only 243. By 12.45 it was all over, Sikkim ceased to exist as an independent kingdom (2001).

Hope Cooke left Sikkim, and her marriage, soon after the 1973 agitation and has never returned. She was accused in *Newsweek* of having delusions of grandeur, of being obsessed with wanting to be a real queen of an independent nation (Cooke 1980, p.245). She denied this charge, believing it was motivated by India and said she had 'worked hard enough for Sikkim to earn my passage out,' but the article made it 'even more necessary for me to go, so as to provide no extra incitement or target for further ravages of Sikkim...' (Cooke 1980, p.247). The Chief Executive of Sikkim during 1973–74, B S Das, concurred with the views expressed in *Newsweek* and said Hope Cooke must share the blame for the events that led to the 1973 agitation and 1975 merger due to her influence over the Chogyal (2002, p.92).

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The writer Patrick French visited Sikkim in the early 1990s when researching his biography on Francis Younghusband. He said:

This tiny, isolated mountain kingdom had the hopeless glamour of a truly lost cause. Trapped between the competing demands of Nepal, India and Chinese-occupied Tibet, it was swept into history in 1975 when that arch-democrat Indira Gandhi sent in troops to depose the last Chogyal. Since then Sikkim has been the twenty-second state of the Indian Union, a forgotten victim of Superpower politics (2004, p.169).

There are many in Sikkim who would agree with French's assessment of their state and possibly an equal number who would not. Sikkim's merger with India 35 years ago remains a contemporary narrative of loss for the minority Bhutia-Lepcha people, who fought hard to keep the old laws of Sikkim that protected their land and employment rights. These laws are now enshrined in the Indian

constitution and are frequently quoted in political discourse in the state.³⁵ While the official message is one of communal harmony, the status and special concessions for various tribes are a running thread through Sikkim's political and social narrative. Sikkim's ethnic majority (around 80 per cent of the population) are Nepali-Sikkimese who are mostly Hindu and the second largest ethnic group are the Bhutia-Sikkimese (around 12 per cent) who were the early settlers in Sikkim. Lepcha representation is almost eight per cent. I mention the ethnic parity of Sikkim not to reinforce the communal impression of Sikkim but because it would be naïve not to. A person's heritage in Sikkim is a very important part of their identity for cultural, social and political reasons.³⁶

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That successful agitation for more representative government was reflected in the 1974 election which was held under the guidance of the Chief Election Commissioner of India and which effectively ended the parity formula. The National Party, predominantly Nepali Sikkimese, long treated as outsiders despite their geographical closeness prior to migration, and their majority numbers in Sikkim, won a clear majority. The Chogyal, who had until then remained the secular and religious head, was sidelined. The outsiders had become insiders and were now running Sikkim. The following year, Sikkim joined the Indian Union.

Sikkim's history and the shifting ground under the feet of various rulers and leaders hold significance in contemporary political and social debate. The Sikkim Bhutia and Lepcha Association (SIBLAC) when arguing for the rights of Bhutias and Lepchas, regularly cites Article 371F of the Indian Constitution which allows for special provisions with respect to the state of Sikkim including; that the privileges of the Lepcha-Bhutia groups are assured as minorities, that their rights

³⁵ Article 371F was inserted into the Constitution of India in 1975 when Sikkim became the 22nd state of India. It is designed to protect the old laws of Sikkim and the rights of Sikkimese people. Article 371F also provides that the Government of Sikkim shall have special responsibility for peace and for an equitable arrangement for ensuring the social and economic advancement of different sections of the population of Sikkim and in the discharge of his special responsibility under this clause, the Governor of Sikkim shall, subject to such directions as the President may, from time to time, deem fit to issue, act in his discretion. <http://www.answers.com/topic/constitution-of-india-part-xxi>

³⁶ Data on Sikkim population was obtained from the State Socio Economic Census, 2006, pub: Department of Economics, Statistics, Monitoring & Evaluation, Government of Sikkim p 61.

and interests will be protected, and that the Government of Sikkim make provision of a number of seats in the Legislative Assembly of the State of Sikkim for Bhutia-Lepcha candidates.³⁷ When supporting the Lepcha protest against the dams, SIBLAC often refers to the ‘protectionery [sic] provisions in the Indian Constitution viz, Article 371F’³⁸ when putting their case against what they describe as ‘displacement and dilution of the Indigenous minority tribal Bhutia-Lepcha people of Sikkim.’

The last queen, Hope Cooke, is still talked about in post-merger Sikkim. Perhaps the memory of her time there is, in part, kept alive because her daughter, Hope Leezum lives in Gangtok, and is active in conservation projects in Sikkim. Or perhaps because a pro-monarchy cohort remains in Sikkim that keeps a watchful eye on political developments that may dilute Article 371F and the privileges of Lepcha and Bhutia people.

Many of the narratives that relate to the anti-dam protest have been spoken in a post-merger time, but much of the language originates from old Sikkim; a world that remains in the hearts of many Sikkimese, and which permeates new Sikkim like the smoke from the *sang* that is wafted into every room of every Buddhist household each morning as an offering to the gods.³⁹

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Tibet Road and narratives of protest

Sikkim is not only a place of inaccessible terrain and tortuous hills. Nature has blessed it with favourable water currents, which could form as yet another significant source of state revenue. If utilized with wisdom, these rivers and streams could be converted into a white gold. The electricity-generating potential of the available resources in our state is a whopping 8000 MW. Today, this potential is

³⁷ Article 371F also provides that the Government of Sikkim shall have special responsibility for peace and for an equitable arrangement for ensuring the social and economic advancement of different sections of the population of Sikkim and in the discharge of his special responsibility under this clause, the Governor of Sikkim shall, subject to such directions as the President may, from time to time, deem fit to issue, act in his discretion. <http://www.answers.com/topic/constitution-of-india-part-xxi>

³⁸ Letter to Sonia Gandhi sent 25 October 2006 by SIBLAC

³⁹ Sang are burned conifer leaves

being wasted for nothing. A negligible 0.4% of the available currents are being utilized as against the 99.6%, which is being wasted. Recently, the 60 MW Rangit Hydel project has been commissioned and work has begun for the fifth phase of 510 MW Teesta project. We have included hydel-power development as our priority areas, which is a promising source of state exchequer. In the near future, electricity revenue to the state of Sikkim is destined to touch a new height. In addition, sufficient power is required for the establishment and development of hi-tech modern industry in the state.... We will only weaken ourselves if we do not discard the obsolete norms, and remain enveloped in petty considerations of caste and creed. In such situation, our competitive spirit will not find a ready ground to flourish. Hence, we cannot cross the threshold of 21st century with a mentality that feeds on communalism. Those who bathe in the unholy water of communalism will not gain entry into the temple of 21st century world. In case that happens, that becomes an irony unmatched in human history.

Chief Minister of Sikkim, Pawan Chamling
2001 Millenium Speech⁴⁰

Anytime you disagree with the government you are accused of being communal.

Sherap Lepcha, December 2006

On 12 December 2006 I joined a small number of Lepchas who gathered in Bhutia-Lepcha House (BL House) on Tibet Road in Gangtok. Tibet Road is the kind of street you pick your way along rather than stroll down, for its surface is narrow and uneven, and the footpath offers bare resistance to the steady stream of cars and jeeps that use it as a through road between Lal Bazaar and the northern end of Gangtok. On Tibet Road you can find a tailor, and a jeweller, as well as more than one restaurant that sells 10 momos for 10 rupees⁴¹. There is a club called Live 'n Loud, which most nights lives up to its name; and there is an upmarket hotel called The Chumbi Residency which has a doorman on duty

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<http://www.pawanchamling.org/pages/books/English/PrespectiveDreams/sikkimperspectivesandvision.pdf> (accessed 12 January 2011)

⁴¹ A momo is a steamed or fried dumpling, filled with either spinach and cheese, beef, or chicken.

24/7. BL House is next door to The Chumbi Residency but these neighbouring buildings have little in common. The Chumbi's traditional façade promised an old Sikkim experience; the type exoticised by travellers on the Buddhism circuit. BL House was a 'modern Sikkim' building; a three-level concrete block that provided basic facilities but was in need of repairs. I doubted it would pass a major earthquake test (important in Sikkim given that the entire Himalayan belt is one of the most seismically active regions in the world and there had been an earthquake in Sikkim earlier that year), but then most of the modern buildings in Gangtok would not. What BL House did offer was a place for the Lepcha and Bhutia communities to meet and it was in a large room on the top floor, where the main action was happening.

The meeting at BL House was organised by ACT and was a compromise, for it had started life as a rally that would stretch from Baluakhani above Gangtok to Assembly House: the State Government's offices. It was this rally that Sherap Lepcha had been attempting to get a permit for one week earlier, on the day I met him, but the rally had to be cancelled. The days prior to 12 December had been divisive for many in the community with one Lepcha association deciding not to support ACT and calling for dialogue with the Government, rather than the more confronting rally. The differing approaches by the Lepcha Associations were reported daily in the Gangtok English Language newspaper *Sikkim Express*, which first wrote that the ACT does not have support of the All India Lepcha Student Development Organisation and other associations (2006, p.1). The Concerned Lepchas of Sikkim (CLOS) organisation immediately publicised its support for the ACT saying;

it is beyond anybody's doubt that the Hydel Power Projects in Dzongú will bring in its wake innumerable ill-effects to Dzongú and other areas, which will certainly have adverse affect on the lives of the Lepchas of these areas ... it is pertinent to mention that the Proclamations and Old Laws enacted during the reign of Chogyal prohibited settling and/or carrying on any occupations in Dzongú by the outsiders' (NE News Bureau 2006, p.1).

So with the Lepcha community divided over how the objection to the hydels should be made, a compromise of sorts was reached the morning of 12

December with the rally being downgraded to a public meeting on the understanding that if the Chief Minister of Sikkim, Shri Pawan Chamling, did not meet the activists and agree to review the projects then the Lepchas would hold an all night candlelight vigil at the Statue of Unity in the middle of Gangtok.⁴²

The Sikkimese Government had talked of yielding around 5,000 megawatts of power valued at approximately Rs. 2,000 crore⁴³ per annum by tapping into 'the enormous hydroelectric potential from the run of the two snow-fed perennial rivers Teesta and Rangit'.⁴⁴ Its vision was of a 'prosperous Sikkim with an effective public sector, thriving trade, abundant hydroelectric power, tourism, horticulture and floriculture and without poverty, illiteracy and unemployment.'⁴⁵

The Chief Minister of Sikkim closed his 2001 Millennium speech with this undertaking:

We have taken special care to ensure that development projects do not produce an adverse effect on our fragile ecosystem. We have also been cautious to see that Sikkimese tradition and culture is preserved for our posterity. In short we want to project our indigenous culture and tradition in the garb of modernity. (Chamling 2001)

Six years after the Chief Minister made this commitment, a group of around 30 Lepchas, dressed in traditional garb waited quietly in the large dusty room at BL House for the meeting's conveners to arrive. It was after the proposed start time of noon and seating was arranged for ten times the number of people. Banners hung from the walls with defiant messages – 'Save North Sikkim', 'Protect Kangchendzönga National Park', 'Save Our Environment', 'Save Sikkim', 'Save

⁴² The Statue of Unity in Gangtok is the same as the statue in Kabi Longstock, that commemorates the treaty between the Lepcha and Bhutia leaders and the creation of the Kingdom of Sikkim.

⁴³ The terms lakh (100,000) and crore (10,000,000) are used in Indian English and Pakistani English to express large numbers. For example, in India 150,000 rupees becomes 1.5 lakh rupees, written as 1,50,000 or INR 1,50,000; 30,000,000 (thirty million) rupees becomes 3 crore rupees, written as 3,00,00,000 with commas at the thousand, lakh, and crore levels; and 1,000,000,000 (one billion) rupees (one hundred crore rupees) is written 1,00,00,00,000. Source: ,

⁴⁴ Letter from Affected Citizens of Teesta (nd) which is sent to NGOs and interested parties p.4

⁴⁵ <<http://www.sikkimipr.org/GENERAL/ECONOMY/ECONOMY.HTM>> (accessed March 2007) More recent news reports (Jan 2008) state the yield is 8,000 MW.

Article 371F⁴⁶, 'Stop mega Hydro Electric Project' – but, despite the strong messages, the empty room appeared to signal a lack of support for the activists. I had been invited to the meeting by Sherap and as I looked around the bare room, I worried that this small group might be it; that the organisers may outnumber the audience, and that I would be witness to a downturn in the social movement that needed so much support. For some time little happened. A few people dribbled upstairs but did not bother to take a seat as there were hundreds of chairs available and little else happening.

Someone leaning against the window called out and we rushed over. Looking down to the street below we saw a convoy of around 30 jeeps making its way up Tibet Road; each carrying a dozen or more people, all who had made the long and expensive trip from Dzongú to hear the activists' perspective on what was happening to their land and to make their voices heard. Old men wearing their traditional, *thókro-dum*, and young men in jeans and sneakers made their way past the police who casually hung around outside. Upstairs, Lepcha lamas grouped together like a voting block of maroon sitting in a field of colour, for the grandmothers, mothers, daughters and sisters were there wearing their *dumdem*, a soft, colourful tunic which flowed from their shoulders to their feet. The atmosphere was festive, hopeful and, for the next couple of hours, optimism was the unifying thread that linked the drama, humour, warnings, ideas, combativeness and solutions offered to the audience by the committee members of the Affected Citizens of Teesta.

ACT President, Athup Lepcha talked quietly and everyone listened respectfully. His speech was punctuated by his son, Inchung, who interrupted his father to shout defiantly, provoking a response from the audience of claps and cheers. Other than occasional fragments of conversation being translated for me by the

⁴⁶Article 371F of the Indian Constitution allows for special provisions with respect to the State of Sikkim including that the privileges of the Lepcha-Bhutia groups are assured as minorities, that their rights and interest will be protected and that the Government of Sikkim make provision for the number of seats in the Legislative Assembly of the State of Sikkim for them and that the Government of Sikkim shall have special responsibility for peace and for an equitable arrangement for ensuring the social and economic advancement of different sections of the population of Sikkim and in the discharge of his special responsibility under this clause, the Governor of Sikkim shall, subject to such directions as the President may, from time to time, deem fit to issue, act in his discretion.
<<http://www.answers.com/topic/constitution-of-india-part-xxi>>

students standing nearby, I didn't understand a lot that was said that day, but I could sense the ground shift on the hydro issue. It was apparent that many people were hearing things for the first time and they were concerned by what they heard and unified in their desire to stop the development on their land. There was hope, strength, respect and a touch of militancy in the cheers of *aachuley* that punctuated the audience's response to each speaker. They may be best known for their shy, quiet persona but that day 500 or more Lepchas, from the remote north of Sikkim, where they may normally encounter just a handful of people each day, discovered their loud voices and they hollered and clapped and laughed their support for the group who would lead them in this fight for their land and culture.

When the meeting broke for lunch the ACT committee members made their way to the office of the Chief Minister. They were determined to get the outcome they wanted and they returned an hour and a half later with the news that the Chief Minister had met them and agreed to review the Dzungú hydroelectric projects.

'Do you believe him?' I asked Sherap who confirmed the news. Is it this easy? I thought. Hold a meeting, make some noise, visit the Chief Minister, explain your case and get the outcome you want?

According to newspaper reports the following day, the Chief Minister offered to review 'every aspect' of North Sikkim dams and also expressed 'deep concern' for the people of North Sikkim ... 'that culture, tradition and identity would never be compromised for the sake of economic development alone' (*NOW! Daily* 2006, p.1). Sherap and Dawa told me that the 12th of December 2006 was the day the movement gained new momentum; a turning point in the campaign to stop the dams.

Six months later however, that promised government review had not happened and the young boys in jeans together with their Lepcha sisters learnt a new narrative. It required them to reconnect with the stories of their elders in order to embrace and relate to their unique identity. Their new narrative was also one of defiance, and of confidence. It was a narrative that would forever change how Lepchas were regarded in Sikkim, and outside Sikkim's borders. It would also

change the way these young Lepchas viewed themselves. The Lepcha narratives for the next 18 months would be viewed in the context of a long, arduous battle for Dzongú. The weapons were a hunger strike fought on the pavement outside BL House on Tibet Road and a war of words fought in the villages in Dzongú between Lepchas with opposing views on the right future for their people.

Chapter 3 – The hunger strikers that wept for Sikkim

A complete fast is a complete and literal denial of self. It is the truest prayer.

Fasting unto death is the last and the most potent weapon in the armoury of Satyagraha. It is a sacred thing. But it must be accepted with all its implication. It is not the fast itself, but what it implies that matters.

A hunger strike loses its force and dignity, when it has any, if the striker is forcibly fed.

Mohandas K. Gandhi 1869–1948⁴⁷

Tenzing Lepcha had recently completed his final year at college when he heard there was a Lepcha hunger strike in Gangtok to protest the Dzungú dams.

Tenzing is from Hee Gyathang, a small village in Lower Dzungú where nothing much happens to disturb the usual rhythm of daily rural life. The news that his fellow Lepchas were on hunger strike saw him hurry to Gangtok's Tibet Road, to Bhutia-Lepcha House (BL House). There, upon seeing 35-year-old Dawa Lepcha and 42-year-old Tshering Lepcha sitting on what they called an indefinite hunger strike, he made a snap decision that changed his life. 'I came suddenly. I had just heard we are going to organise a hunger strike and I saw two seniors, Dawa and Tshering. I didn't see any youth and I felt very guilty so I decided if I stay then my age-level friends will get inspired,' Tenzing said.

'You decided on impulse?' I asked, struggling to fathom the immediacy of his decision.

'I just decided then myself and everyone was surprised,' Tenzing confirmed. He hadn't consulted his family or his friends and according to his contemporaries

⁴⁷ These quotes of M K Gandhi are published on mkgandhi.org, a joint venture between Gandhi Research Foundation and Gandhian Institute Bombay Sarvodaya Mandal. <http://www.mkgandhi.org/momgandhi/chap36.htm>

who were at school with him, he was ‘the last person you would expect to do this’.⁴⁸

During 2007 and 2008, Tenzing and Dawa, following a long-held tradition in India of political fasting, participated in two indefinite hunger strikes against the construction of six mega-hydroelectric dams in Sikkim. Although fasting is a centuries-old religious act, it was Mohandas Gandhi who used the fast for political purposes when protesting racial laws in South Africa. ‘Gandhi drew on the rich traditions of religious (Hindu in his case) fasting to hone this political innovation and it soon became a central feature of the Gandhian Satyagraha.’⁴⁹ (EPW 2009, p.7)

The Lepcha hunger strikes were enacted in the spirit of Satyagraha and were the flagship events of the protest against the dams in Dzongu by ACT. They were local actions that drew on global themes; they were confronting actions that had political and personal consequences. They brought some communities together and split others apart and, during a three-year period, between 2007 and 2009, a relay hunger strike was an experience where a group of young men and women, boys and girls, explored what it meant to them to be Lepcha.

BL House – the site of the hunger strikes – was a space of strength where the protesters gave each other emotional sustenance. It was also a space of loss, where the destruction of Dzongú was contemplated, debated and prematurely mourned. It became a space of transformation that nurtured a more vivid sense of life (Taussig 1987, p.335) where hunger-striking youth contemplated the meaning of their Lepcha culture, which, due to the development of the dams on their land, they feared would be destroyed.

The space of loss highlighted by the hunger strikes stretched beyond BL House, which was where the members of ACT created their headquarters. It was also in the hospital where the hunger strikers languished, and in the Lepcha kitchens in Dzongú villages, where the hunger strike was debated, supported, or disparaged – depending on whether you were supporting or opposing the development. It

⁴⁸ Several young people told me they were shocked when they learned Tenzing was on hunger strike.

⁴⁹ Gandhi, developed the Satyagraha – meaning devotion to truth – as a form of non-violent protest.

was in the Government Secretariat, where state government officials weighed up the pros and cons of giving ground to the protesters. In this space of loss and gain, where Lepcha identity was explored and contested, a movement identity was created that brought feelings of belonging to the protesters and strength to the protest. The Lepcha hunger strike was, like other hunger strikes, a dance of negotiation with authorities that was designed to 'undercut the political resolve of the State by posing a moral dilemma to its personnel' (EPW, 2009).

When the first indefinite hunger strike ended on 20th August 2007, the activists had made significant gains, however the Government's promises of talks and compromise were soon broken and the second indefinite hunger strike, which lasted 96 days, was called.

Tenzing and Dawa kept diaries of their experiences and Tenzing shared his diaries with me. Fragments of his diary entries are threaded through this chapter.

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Our first day ended without difficulty.

Tenzing Lepcha

20 June 2007. DAY 1 and the atmosphere in the Indian Himalayan hill town of Gangtok had taken a turn. No one knew if it would be for better or worse but if you had sniffed the air that swirled around BL House up and down Tibet Road, spreading the scent of the early monsoon rains and the Dikchu village mudslide⁵⁰, you would have smelt a recent history of disappointment and dissatisfaction among many of the Lepchas of Dzongú.

There was a mattress on the ground in front of BL House and sitting on it cross-legged were Dawa Lepcha, Tshering Lepcha and Tenzing Lepcha. They were framed like the three wise monkeys, but rather than exhort passers-by not to see, hear or speak evil, they had stopped eating and said they would start again only when the Sikkimese government scrapped plans to build seven hydroelectric

⁵⁰ Reported in *Sikkim Express*, 2 June 2008, p.1

dams on their sacred land. On the Teesta River at Dikchu, where construction had started on one dam, brown sludge from a mudslide had oozed into the houses and fences through the crater-sized cracks caused by the construction.

The three men, whose slender frames easily and elegantly fitted the single mattress, seemed to be saying 'do no evil', for to them, the construction of the six hydroelectric projects inside Dzungú would be a cultural and environmental catastrophe. The men had decided to fight this intrusion with the only weapons they had: their spiritual connection to their sacred landscape; their love for their culture and their land; and their unfailing belief that the dams would do far more harm than good to the Lepchas of Dzungú and the people of Sikkim.

ACT's hunger strike was borne out of their objection to the dams and the process of approval for the dams. There was an alternative voice in the debate on hydroelectric projects in Dzungú at a time when the state government's advocacy of development dominated public discourse.

To gain a voice, they offered their bodies. Going on a hunger strike gave them a 'weapon designed to turn weakness into strength, a political and propaganda tool which has the power to cast the striking prisoners as victims and the government being struck against as the oppressor' (Perlman 2007, p.307), and offered them a powerful platform for their anti-dam protest. Their intention was to highlight the long-term and little known impact of the dams to Sikkimese and to Sikkim and to pressure the state government for a quick resolution.

The hunger strikers fought for the rivers of Sikkim; in particular, the 'mighty Teesta', as it is often described in tourist literature which was having its 'might' diverted into dams.

The protest also provided a forum for debate on what is compromised by development, what is lost and what can never be regained. To the young ACT protesters, this was their culture, land, language and environment – aspects of Lepcha life they had, until then, taken for granted in the protected Dzungú reserve. To the state government, in a hurry to implement some 33 hydroelectric projects across Sikkim, the hunger strike was a political act, for it had the potential to disrupt its development agenda. To the Lepchas who had

sold land for the projects and supported the development, the hunger strike threatened to derail the land acquisition process. A clash was inevitable, but the young men who stuck their 'Save the Teesta' banner to the wall, sat outside BL House and refused food did not envisage the ferocity of the battle that followed.

As it was DAY 1, the men's eyes were bright as they sat forward and received *khadas* from well-wishers. The lamas came to say prayers, children lit candles and their friends were there, supporting their bravado and their bravery. This would be their best day, for they were not then tired or hungry and the public had not yet tired of them. Tshering soon became sick and had to withdraw, but Dawa and Tenzing committed to stay there until the government stopped the projects. The Gangtok English language newspaper *NOW! Daily* reported on the progress of the hunger strike and during the following weeks others – young and old, joined the anti-dam movement, from all over Sikkim and neighbouring West Bengal, many alternating between BL House and the emergency ward of the Gangtok Hospital.

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Hunger strikes are deployed in large and small protests in India. The large protests, or those by high profile activists, are well known; Indian freedom-fighter, Jatin Das died in Lahore jail in 1929 after fasting for 63 days, and Gandhi held as many as 17 hunger strikes in India, before and after independence. In 2006, the prominent Indian social activist Medha Patkar, went on hunger strike for 20 days to protest the raising of the height of the Narmada dam in Gujarat and has since deployed the 'weapon' of hunger strike on other occasions to bring attention to various issues.

The symbolism of fasting as an act of moral purity, along with the lack of resources for many who wish to protest, are two reasons hunger strikes remain a popular form of protest in India. All over India, at any time, there will be relay hunger strikes in force; they are held by farmers, nurses, teachers, students, fisherman, in cities and in rural areas. Most hunger strikes are local actions, unreported and unknown outside their jurisdiction. But some strike a chord with the public and authorities and are an impetus for change. In July 2012, the

activist Anna Hazare began his fifth hunger strike in 16 months, agitating for anti-corruption legislation in India (*The Guardian* 2012). His first hunger strike, which was televised and lasted 12 days in August 2011, was celebrated as a 'People's Victory' when the Indian parliament passed an unprecedented resolution in support of his demands (Rahman 2011).

The symbol of Gandhi provides both inspiration and a tool of protest in India. Many hunger strikers, including Anna Hazare are photographed in front of a photo of Gandhi. When relaunching his campaign in January 2013, Hazare announced he would bring the bloodstained soil and grass from where Gandhi was killed to administer the oath to supporters of his India Against Corruption movement (Choudhury 2013).⁵¹

Hunger strikes have followed a familiar pattern in India, a 'cat and mouse game played out with different intents...including the forcible feeding of socialist revolutionaries in India and a conundrum over how to respond to the Gandhian 'fast' to purge the nation' (Singh 2012). They are successful in bringing attention to an issue, but 'it is rare that the State concedes the demands of hunger strikers' (EPW 2009) The overriding feature is that no one is allowed to die and the State will intervene to prevent it. Jatin Das died because the intervention killed him – he was force-fed with milk, which went into his lungs. Swami Nigamanand, who protested against illegal mining, died in hospital in 2011 after fasting for 114 days. India's Environment Minister blamed the Uttarakhand State Government for the Swami's death (BBC 2011).

The longest 'serving' Indian hunger striker is Irom Sharmila, from the north-east state of Manipur, who is protesting the Armed Forces (Special Powers) ACT, 1958 that provides legal immunity to officers of the armed forces, allowing them to shoot and kill anyone without recourse. Irom Sharmila (who has been held in a secure hospital, charged with attempted suicide) has been subjected to force-feeding for 12 years through a nasogastric tube, known as a 'Ryles tube', that connects her nasal passage and her gut.

⁵¹ The bloodstained soil and grass was bought at auction in London for £10,000 in 2012. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/Europe/Grass-with-Gandhi-s-blood-sold-for-10-000-pounds/Article1-842280.aspx>

Although hunger strikes were common in India, in Sikkim they were rare. I had heard of just one, also to protest a dam⁵².

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A stone statue of Mahatma Gandhi is the focal point of the marketplace in Gangtok. If you walk past the statue heading north, at the next corner you reach another statue: the Statue of Unity, commemorating the treaty between the Lepchas and Bhutias and the birth of the Kingdom of Sikkim. If you follow the road to the right, then take a left into Tibet Road, past the tourist hotels and internet cafes, you soon reach BL House. The Lepcha hunger strikers sat there under a banner that proclaimed in large blue type: INDEFINITE HUNGER STRIKE. Among the banners, hung an image of Gandhi.

The Lepchas' journey to BL House followed the Chief Minister of Sikkim's broken promise to review 'every aspect' of North Sikkim hydro projects that he made at the Lepcha protest meeting at BL House on 12 December 2006 (Chapter 2). The following week he was scheduled to attend *Nambun*, the Lepcha New Year celebration in Dzongú. Some Lepchas thought he might use the occasion for a positive announcement on the dams but he sent a representative to the celebrations and remained silent. It was this silence that brought the Lepchas back to BL House, still waiting for the review of the six dams they were promised eight months earlier.

The Lepcha activists decided on Gangtok for the site of their protest because it would help to garner media attention along with the attention of the authorities. BL House was a prominent location, and its position on Tibet Road attracted local and tourist traffic. They wanted to spread the protest – which had been mostly contained to Dzongú and surrounding areas – to a larger audience. Their protest was local but the themes were global, and as they became more enmeshed in the protest their awareness of themes of indigenous disadvantage,

⁵² In May 1995, Concerned Citizen of Sikkim staged a hunger strike in Gangtok to protest a dam on the Rathong Chu in West Sikkim. For more information: <http://www.himalmag.com/component/content/article/2934-A-Sikkim-awakening.html> (accessed 24/3/13)

cross-border development and global capital flows – and their ability to articulate them to advocate for Dzongú – increased.

It was to the online blog ‘weepingsikkim.blogspot.com’ where people who were distant from the protest site turned for news of the hunger strike. The blogger posted updates on the hunger strike, articles on the struggle, opinions for and against the dams. I had become addicted to this website, checking it frequently, and often rising in the middle of the night in my Sydney apartment to see if the blogger had posted news. DAY 1, the blog proclaimed in fat red letters launching with a photo of the first three hunger strikers. By DAY 6 Dawa appeared weaker in the photos. On DAY 1 he had smiled, his eyes and mouth showing his resolution and excitement: in the photograph taken on DAY 6, he just looked sad.

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26 June 2007: *Anum Dawa was admitted to hospital 5.00pm coz his health had gone down and I too was suffering a lot but I was quite OK compared to him.*

Tenzing Lepcha

By DAY 8, Dawa was in hospital on a drip, dehydrated but defiantly refusing to eat. Tenzing lay on a mattress outside BL House. The state government had agreed to review the projects, however the Chief Minister was ‘out of station’ on tour in the USA with his family and therefore not directly involved in the discussions. The Lepchas rejected the government’s assurances of a review and continued to fast until something more concrete was offered.

This toing and froing was the dance of negotiation – the ‘cat and mouse’ – that involved each side moving incrementally closer then further away from each other. In this dance, the hunger strikers had the moral leadership but the State had the power. Mediating (while usually claiming neutrality) was the media which, depending on the position taken, can greatly influence the balance of power. The impact of Gandhi’s fasts in 1932 and 1943 was lessened in the UK because of the ‘almost complete absence of photographic representations of his emaciated body’ (Pratt & Vernon 2005 p103). The Lepcha hunger strike benefitted from the imagery of Dawa and Tenzing sick in hospital, however

media coverage of the Chief Minister's refusal to address their demands or engage directly with ACT diminished the impact of their protest.

The indefinite hunger strike by Dawa and Tenzing was strongly supported by the concurrent relay hunger strike conducted by members of ACT and their supporters. However relay hunger strikes are more notable for their symbolism than their suffering. And in India, where indefinite hunger strikes are a frequent form of protest, relay hunger strikes are considered by some to be endemic.

The protesters sat outside BL House for a minimum 24-hours to show solidarity for the 'indefinite hunger strike'. The relay hunger strike ensured there was a protesters' presence, even when Dawa and Tenzing (or others who sat on hunger strike for protracted periods) were hospitalised and therefore out of sight. The relay hunger strike was also a show of solidarity and a strengthening of collective identity. At its most narrow: young educated Lepchas from Dzongú. At its broadest: people who opposed the dams and identified with the Lepcha struggle.

Polletta and Jasper define collective identity as an individual's cognitive moral and emotional connection with broader community, category, practice, or institution ... distant from personal identities. They ask why people join collective efforts when they do not know whether their presence will do any good (2001 p283-305). The Lepcha hunger strike was also about personal identity. Their strength to continue the strike – without knowing whether their action would do any good – came from their shared context of personal identity.

I asked Phurba Lepcha, the young guide who took me to Dzongú in April 2006, what it was that made him feel Lepcha. He said: 'speaking Lepcha language and growing up with Lepcha people makes me feel Lepcha. And growing up with my great-grandfather who is Lepcha.' At boarding school in Gangtok, (where Phurba spent most of the year) the lessons were in English, but the language spoken outside class was Nepalese, the lingua franca of Sikkim. He was in his final year when we met. He told me that he wanted to study economics and help his people.

Dawa Lepcha told me (months before the hunger strike) that there are things that make him feel Lepcha. 'Land, the way you worship, language is part of it. If you don't know your language gradually identity slips away.'⁵³

ACT's Chief Coordinator Tseten Lepcha, when describing the impact of the power projects said: 'The history, the ethos, the folklore of Sikkim is connected with the Teesta and it is practically going to vanish' (WED 2005). His words were reinforced by Dawa Lepcha who, with other members of the Lepcha community, wrote to the Government of Sikkim seeking the review of stages III and IV of the Teesta Hydro project and stated:

The land which we have under our possession is our ancestral land tied to our culture and history and dear to us. Our religion based on nature will be destroyed by the advent of such a large project. Our delicate social, cultural and historical fabric will be destroyed by the advent of such a project. The delicate ecosystem of the valley will also be destroyed. The coming of large numbers of workers for the project will unbalance the demographics of the area having long-term repercussions on the survival of our tribe'(esgIndia 2005).

Gyatso Lepcha, president of the youth movement, Concerned Lepchas of Sikkim (CLOS) said:

The issue is not just about whether we are giving our land for the project or not. It has much larger implications. It is the question about our very survival. If we have our land we can flourish as a race, as a community. Our ancient practices, our cultural heritage can be preserved for future generations. With our land gone, we will be finished as well. We will die but we will not give our land (Zulca 2007, p.15).

Lepcha narratives of personal identity were reinforced in the wording of banners that hung above the hunger strikers outside BL House, which as the hunger strike continued, became more aggressive and more despairing.

Dzongú is the Holy Land of the Lepchas

⁵³ Interview with Dawa Lepcha in Gangtok, 4 December 2006

They're all set to Dam(n) you – Dam our culture and heritage, dam our ecosystem, dam our natural resource, dam our future!

They're choking our rivers. They're destroying our forests. And you still think this doesn't concern you?

Dams in Dzungú shall be built over our dead bodies – ACT

The strength of an identity comes from its emotional side (Jasper 1998, p.415) and the Lepcha protest narratives, which included imagery of their wasting bodies, were highly emotive. The protest banners told an evolving story – chronicles invested with moral meaning through emplotment (White cited in Polletta 1998, p.140). Polletta says 'in telling the story of our becoming – as an individual, a nation, a people – we establish who we are.' (Polletta 1998, .141) ACT's protest narratives reached into Sikkim's history of settlement, telling a story that unfolded to reveal past injustices to the Lepchas leading to the current 'injustice' of land appropriation for development. Over time the tone of the narratives on the banners became more strident. From the simply stated 'Save the Teesta' on the first day of the hunger strike to the dramatic 'Dams will be built over our dead bodies' written weeks later. The escalation of the narratives reflected a temporal journey of awakening for the young activists who were collectively asserting their identity as 'moral owners' of Dzungú. They also imagined a possible future, wherein Dawa and Tenzing's bodies fail, sacrificed at the altar of 'bad government'.

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ACT's multi-modal protest narratives – incorporating ownership, tradition, culture, religion and concern for the environment – were repeated, modified and codified as a narrative template for the movement.

Part of that narrative template was their assertion that the hunger strike wasn't political and wasn't a 'Lepcha protest'. But it was inevitably viewed that way. Defying a government is a political act. Protecting their reserve, a Lepcha act. Citing indigenous rights, which were also part of their protest narrative, an

ethnic act. As Cohen said, if the ethnic card is played in identity ... it is a political claim, which entails political and moral rights and obligations (1993, p.197).

But whether a political act, or social act, identity – and the threat of losing it – remained a powerful theme for ACT and its supporters. The young hunger strikers who sat outside BL House for almost three years, examined what it meant to them to be Lepcha in the context of a fight for land, that they viewed as a fight for culture. The wider context was globalisation and their awareness of what it gives and what it takes grew as they became more involved in the movement. While globalisation is the enabler of cross-border and cross-country trade in electricity, creating demand for mega hydroelectric power, it is also the enabler of ecotourism, the Lepcha protesters' preferred solution for non-agricultural trade in Dzongú. And it is the enabler of digital cross-border communications, which, via 'weepingsikkim.blogspot.com', email and other blogs and websites created as the movement against the Dzongú dams strengthened, gave the Lepcha protesters a global voice.

Lepcha culture is becoming homogenised, but the Internet and its reach (for those with access) is enabling Lepchas to reach farther and wider to share their knowledge and experiences. The challenge for the young protesters from ACT – who started the movement after coming together to plan a village economy that wasn't reliant on agriculture, but exploited the global industry that is ecotourism – is to embrace what globalisation can give them, while rejecting what it takes away. It would be naïve to believe this is clear-cut and that the choices are entirely theirs. But the movement was giving them a window to global themes they would not have otherwise considered. It taught them how to use technology; reach wider than Sikkim's borders, to research and create policy, negotiate with communities and government and to consider carefully how the Dzongú they prefer will offer its youth a future.

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29 June 2007: As I had giddiness and complication in urine and other parts of body I was taken to emergency ward...I met Dawa at hospital, he was lying on the bed with drips.

As the hunger strikes wore on, Dawa and Tenzing's health deteriorated, and pressure on the state government, and ACT, intensified. On the 12th day, following many days of talks with the state government (but not the Chief Minister) ACT reported that 'the indefinite hunger strike would continue till such time that the hydel projects planned for Dzungú were scrapped and all aspects of the other hydel projects in North Sikkim reviewed' (*NOW! Daily* 2007, p.1). While Tenzing remained in hospital Dawa had returned to his post out front of BL House joined by 12 new relay hunger strikers.

The dramatically told daily news stories on the hunger strike – and the health of the hunger strikers (and Dawa and Tenzing in particular) – put pressure on government, opposition parties, the Lepcha community in Dzungú, and ACT. By DAY 10, stories in *NOW! Daily* reflected the views of the political narrators. Dzungú's MLA⁵⁴, Sonam Gyatso Lepcha, a supporter and enabler of the dams (who during the protest became Power Minister), defended the hydro projects and questioned the legal position and credentials of ACT. 'A handful of people with vested interest are trying to send a wrong message to the people thereby misusing the protection provided under the Constitution of India' (2007, p.1). The pro-dam network in Dzungú who supported the MLA and sold land for the projects claimed the Panan dam would bring prosperity to Dzungú, 'open-up' Dzungú, and provide economic and social development, which would help to save, not destroy, Lepcha culture (McDui ra 2011, p.90). The anti-dam network argued the landowners, offered up to nine times the worth of their land, were those with a vested interest.

The 'vested interest' label is common in Sikkimese political discourse and used in a derogatory manner, implying that people or groups with a vested interest are behaving against the greater interests of Sikkim and India. This anti-development/anti-national tag is a common label ascribed to protesters of dams by Indian state governments: 'The tribals and peasants will have to sacrifice in the name of the 'nation' while their loss is not a national loss' (Sangvai 1994,

⁵⁴ Member of Legislative Assembly

pp.537–540). The Sikkim State Government’s narrative often positioned the Lepcha protest as a selfish protest. The State Government asked ACT to ‘call off the hunger strike immediately and unconditionally in the larger interest of the people’ (*NOW! Daily* 2007, p.1).

ACT responded that they remained ‘hopeful of a positive outcome from the assurance given by the Chief Minister [on 12 December 2006] to consider scrapping all hydel projects planned for Dzungú and review all aspects of hydel projects planned for elsewhere in Sikkim’ (*NOW! Daily* 2007, p.1).

The tone of the political narratives set the tone for negotiations. The government and ACT executive wavered between courteous and encouraging dialogue and threats and counter-threats. The Dzungú MLA remained defensive, for it was thought by many that it was his influence that encouraged the landowners to sell land and local village *panchayats* to support the dams. Opposition parties used the ACT hunger strike to take pot shots at the government. Meanwhile, the hunger strikers shunted between BL House and the STNM Hospital in Gangtok, their narratives enacted in their bodies while around them talks continued.⁵⁵

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3 July 2007: *Why don’t the people understand? Is this the way development compels us to do this thing?*

Tenzing Lepcha

Within the paper-thin walls of hospital room number five, another Dzungú existed. It was a heterotopic Dzungú, which Foucault may have described as a crisis heterotopia given Dzungú’s preponderance of threatened sacred places and its reserve status. The hospital room was also a heterotopia of deviation, as a space wherein those ‘in which individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed’. (Foucault 1984) The deviation was both in the physical space of the hospital where the hunger strikers were placed, having the consequence of hiding their ‘abnormal’ behaviour from busy Tibet

⁵⁵ Sir Tashi Namgyal Memorial Hospital

Road; plus it was reflected in the health and action of usually active young men, who lay on cots, having traded physical strength for political influence.

The footpath in front of BL House had become a shrine of sorts to the protest movement. Visitors shuttled between Tibet Road and the hospital following the migration of the protesters. Lepcha children wore *Save the Teesta* t-shirts and lit candles. An officer from Sikkim Vigilance Police arrived daily, noting the names of those sitting out front and taking their photos. Inside, lamas from Lingthem monastery in Upper Dzongú performed twice-daily prayers asking that their monastery – which would be affected by the dam – be spared. Dzongú as a heterotopia of deviation was also at BL House, for it was also a counter-site (Foucault 1984) for nature; inhabited by the nature worshippers who were trying to save it.

There was a shortcut close to BL House that led to the hospital. Its entrance was just past the Chumbi Residency, down a set of wide, stone steps that led to an uneven track that was strewn with litter. Here, ACT's 'foot soldiers' shuttled back and forth several times a day. They delivered documents and newspapers, took instructions from their elders, and kept the hunger strikers company. The shortcut linked the two spaces that were ACT headquarters: the actual headquarters, which had an office, computer, printer and other facilities inside BL House; and the hospital, where, from his hospital cot, Dawa had created a satellite ACT office. He wrote press releases and letters and received visitors including supporters, associates, NGOs, media and his family. He typed emails, letters and other documents on a laptop, copied them onto a USB stick and gave them to a foot soldier to action. He also prayed, closing his eyes and his mind to the wails of children and ravings of drunks through the swinging doors to the emergency ward next door.

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The number of protest banners outside BL House increased and support came from unexpected quarters. Three Nepali-Sikkimese men from Rakdong-Tintek in East Sikkim sat in solidarity with ACT to protest the Stage V dam project. Lepchas from the Darjeeling district of West Bengal organised a rally at the Sikkim/West

Bengal border town of Melli to support the Dzongú Lepchas. And in Sydney, I came to know young Sikkimese who were concerned about the dams. We held fundraisers for ACT and took photos in front of the Sydney Harbour Bridge of supporters holding 'Save the Teesta' banners which were posted on the blog and subsequently appeared in Sikkim newspapers and magazines.

Support from outside Sikkim and outside India gave the protesters a morale boost and served to widen the issue within Sikkim. The UK newspaper the *Independent* and the BBC World News website wrote about the protest. When French MP, Jean Lassalle (member of the French Parliament and President of the World Mountain People Association), wrote a letter of support for ACT to the governments of India and Sikkim it appeared on page one of the Gangtok newspapers.

The emergence of 'outsiders' in a 'Sikkim issue' was deeply troubling to a state government that prided itself on running one of the 'safest' states in India. The protest from the West Bengal Lepchas gave the Dzongú campaign enormous strength for they were experienced campaigners in relation to Lepcha affairs in their state and had relationships with ministers and bureaucrats in the Central Government.⁵⁶ They were also well organised and able to spread the activists' message beyond Sikkim's border.

For the Sikkim Government, used to keeping matters about Sikkim inside Sikkim, this was confronting. The State Government's rhetoric to the Central Indian Government was that Sikkim is a peaceful state, one of the few states along the north-east mountain block where there isn't any internal unrest. And, as Sikkim receives a high level of funding from the Centre – many say a disproportionate amount compared to other states when considering the size of Sikkim⁵⁷ – the State Government is protective of its image in New Delhi where defence and funding decisions are made. According to the Governor in his 2008 budget

⁵⁶ The ILTA has for many years lobbied the West Bengal and Central Indian governments for recognition of Lepcha language in the Darjeeling district and for it to be taught in schools as it is in Sikkim.

⁵⁷ This is a frequent observation by Gorkhaland supporters who complain that Sikkim receives far more funding than they, as part of West Bengal receive.

speech, Sikkim enjoys the status of 'one of the best performing states in India'. The Governor said the achievement was possible because 'we are an insurgency free state with no communal and religious tensions. The peace and tranquility has, therefore, been the most important factor which has accelerated the development process in our state' (Agarwal 2008).

The Government begged Dawa and Tenzing to stop their strike 'for the sake of peace and tranquility' in Sikkim; the refrain often repeated. The Renjyong Mutanchi Rong Ong Shejum [Sikkim Lepcha Youth Association] issued a press release pleading with the hunger strikers to remain 'patient and keep peace and tranquility' (Now *Daily* 2007, p.1). This narrative was gratuitous from the activists' perspective as their protest was non-violent. However their use of fasting, what Feldman termed a 'body as weapon' (cited in Yuill 2007), was their strongest weapon of resistance which grew stronger as Dawa and Tenzing's physical appearance deteriorated. The pressure from the State Government to stop the strike had escalated, but the thinner Dawa and Tenzing became and the more their appearance changed, the greater the pressure they exerted back onto the government.

Actions and reactions can create an upward spiral of protest, repression, greater protest, and greater reaction – building until the landscape of contention, including the strengths and aims of both insurgents and authorities, are utterly changed (O'Hearn 2009, p.491). Dawa and Tenzing's fading health was the most effective challenge to the authorities and, unintentionally, to the committee members of ACT. Their bodies were oscillating sites of resistance and power, holding ransom to – and held ransom by – pro-dam proponents in government and the Lepcha community. The responsibility for their health shifted between the government and the office bearers of ACT; each blaming the other for the longevity of the protest and each warning of the consequences of Dawa and Tenzing's death.

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23 July 2007: *Anum Dawa was very serious and everyone was worried and crying and he was busy chanting to the god for our survival.*

I received a late night email from a friend in Gangtok who wrote: 'I've just been at the hospital, everyone is crying, it's so sad.'

The Lepchas' protest showed some sign of success on DAY 27 when Sikkim's Chief Minister, under pressure from the unprecedented media attention, announced that 'the sanctity of Dzungú will be protected at all costs' (*NOW! Daily* 2007, p.1). His pledge to protect the sanctity of Dzungú and review the projects was designed to stop the hunger strike but the Lepcha activists refused to stop unless and until the projects were officially and publicly called off. Instead, ACT submitted a 7-Point Appeal to the government that included conditions for the review committee (*NOW! Daily* 2007, p.1). The government appealed to ACT to withdraw their hunger strike in order to 'bring about a congenial atmosphere within which your demands as raised in your letter under reference could be examined within a period of one month as requested.'

The following day, after ACT's refusal to stop the hunger strike and demand that the committee be headed by 'an independent person well versed in social, religious, environmental and technical aspects of projects' (*NOW! Daily* 2007, p.1), the tone of the Government's narrative changed substantially. In a letter from the Chief Secretary ND Chingapa to ACT president Athup Lepcha the following day, the Government 'requested' the hunger strike be called off within 24 hours, 'failing which the State Government would have no alternative but to take necessary action as per law.' The government claimed ACT had been 'infiltrated by anti-social elements and is now under the influence of vested interests and outside forces that are inimical to the 'peace and tranquility' prevailing in the State' (*NOW! Daily* 2007, p.1). By insinuating that the protesters weren't thinking for themselves, and reinforcing the tired 'backward, timid' trope, so carelessly and easily assigned to Lepchas, the Government underestimated the strength of the protesters who no longer saw themselves as others had once seen them. Having rejected the 'gentle and timid' label they had worn for generations, they now saw themselves as fighters.

27 July 2007: We heard that today Government had asked ACT to call off the strike within 24 hours otherwise they will arrest every one of us.

Tenzing Lepcha

Threats to arrest the protesters did not eventuate and concern for Dawa and Tenzing's health increased pressure on the Government and ACT. The State (through the actions of doctors⁵⁸) took control of Dawa and Tenzing's bodies on DAY 42. Doctors insisted on inserting a Ryles tube – a painful procedure that involves threading a plastic tube through the nose down to the gut through which liquids can be given. Even if they had been able to convince the doctors not to feed them artificially, the hunger strikers were told that they either accepted the tube or they would be transferred to Siliguri hospital, in West Bengal. If banished out of the state to Siliguri, they would lose their audience, their voice and their leverage so they succumbed to being force-fed. As Nestor Goldsmith noted in his analysis of Mapuche Indian activists' hunger strikes in Chile,⁵⁹ 'in order to empathise with the audience, the striker's body, the centre of the struggle, must be visible, seen by the audience. Without a visible suffering body, there is neither credibility nor persuasion by appealing to audience emotion' (Goldsmith 2011, p.23).

The ACT hunger strike was offered to the citizens of Sikkim as a performance of resistance (Walsh & Tsilimpounidi 2012, p.82) in the 'theatrical' spaces of BL House and the hospital. But without the visual performance of the lead players in the protest – Dawa and Tenzing and their wasting bodies – the protest would lose its power. Dawa and Tenzing understood this and willingly gave their bodies in service of the protest; however, their hunger strike had become a prison from which they could not escape without suffering immense loss. Their right to protest through hunger strike was disregarded when their right to starve

⁵⁸ ACT members told me the doctors had been instructed by the Government to ensure the hunger strikers stayed alive.

⁵⁹ As at October 2012 there had been three 'major Mapuche prisoner hunger strikes in three years, along with multiple shorter hunger strikes by non-Mapuche students in the last two years. 2010 and 2011 each saw a Mapuche hunger strike that lasted over eighty days. Both included demands similar to those of the strike at hand, such as an end to unjust detention of political prisoners, the total return of ancestral land and an end to trials carried out under a tough anti-terrorism law, which hands out harsher convictions for crimes than would have otherwise been processed under civil law'.
<http://www.thenation.com/blog/171140/hunger-strike-calls-attention-mapuche-plight-chile#>

was forcibly refused; in being forced to accept the feeding tube they were losing leverage over the Government, but if they abandoned the hunger strike they would lose everything. The hospital ward had become that uncomfortable space between the rock and the hard place. And in that narrow and suffocating space they suffered while their supporters and detractors waged a public relations war of fluctuating impact.

The right to hunger strike to the death is a debate often framed around protesters who are incarcerated in prisons. One of the most widely known hunger strikes was that of ten IRA prisoners, including leader Bobby Sands, who fasted in protest over the British Government's refusal to treat the IRA fighters as political prisoners. They died in the Maze prison in British-ruled Northern Ireland in 1981. The British Government's public position then was that the prisoners were criminals, not freedom fighters. 'Crime is crime is crime. It is not political,' said Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (McShane 2012). However, papers from a 2 July 1981 cabinet meeting held after four of the ten prisoners had died, revealed international confidence in British policy towards the IRA hunger strike had eroded. The British Government had considered compulsorily feeding the prisoners intravenously but was concerned that the prison doctors may not cooperate and 'if intravenous feeding led to all the protesting prisoners coming out on hunger strike, the authorities would be faced with the enormous task of sustaining such methods indefinitely' (Bowcott 2011). The British Government was clearly aware of and disturbed by the power of the IRA hunger strike. According to the cabinet papers, Irish Foreign Minister Professor James Dooge told his British counterpart, Lord Carrington, 'every death is a victory for the IRA' (Downey 2011). Dawa or Tenzing's death would not have been a victory for either side, however both sides were invested in finding the 'tipping point' of public opinion, on which side it would fall and when, and wagering on what might be an end date of the hunger strike.

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The final three weeks of Dawa and Tenzing's first indefinite hunger strike were dominated by political, cultural and extreme weather events. The opposition

parties burned an effigy of the Sikkim Governor and were arrested. The Government consented to forming a committee to examine the dam projects but rejected ACT's demand that their representatives make up 50 per cent of the committee. An important cultural festival for the Lepcha community, *Tendong Lho rumfát*, which celebrates the Lepchas surviving a great flood, passed without celebration by ACT members. The Dzungú MLA handed out compensation money to landowners and later that night, a Teesta tributary, the Rongyong River, flash flooded in Dzungú. The flood killed four power company workers and destroyed the power company's drilling machines. The dam issue was so sensitive that the inaugural issue of the glossy monthly public affairs magazine *Talk Himalaya* was pulped in Gangtok because its cover story *Protest in the Hills* was about the Lepcha hunger strike. The publisher, worried about the response from the State Government, his biggest advertiser, quickly gathered the issues that had left the printers and destroyed them.⁶⁰

The hunger strike was also taking an emotional toll on Dawa and Tenzing and the other members of ACT; some thought the hunger strike should stop but others disagreed. The burden of the decision rested with Dawa and Tenzing. He told me about one night, after more than 50 days on hunger strike had passed, when he agonised over when it should stop.

I slept with a photo of the Rinpoche under my pillow, and later when the other boys were sleeping I thought, please tell me how to solve this. I was so desperate, so weak and there was so much disagreement going on in the group I thought things might just go wrong and break up the group. But when I woke up I felt very calm. I felt great and thought clearly that I have started this in a way, and all this revolves around me so I have to decide how I will solve the problem myself, and then I had the answer.⁶¹

The answer Dawa found that night was to continue for a few more days. Around a week later, on 20 August the committee members of ACT met at the hospital. It was clear that the hunger strike couldn't continue without grievously

⁶⁰ A person involved with the publication who wishes to remain anonymous related this story to me. I found I was able to buy the publication in West Bengal, but not in Sikkim. Newsagents informed me it had been withdrawn.

⁶¹ Interview with Dawa Lepcha and Sherap Lepcha at BL House on 29 December 2007.

endangering the lives of Tenzing and Dawa. Overnight, the Chief Minister had appealed to Tenzing and Dawa to halt their strike and promised to immediately look into the matter. The ACT warriors hadn't won the war but they had won several battles. The State Government had agreed to cancel four hydro projects that were inside Kangchendzönga National Park, a biodiversity hotspot. And there were other concessions: the Government agreed with ACT's demand that no migrant workers could stay in Dzongú and that all non-gazetted jobs in Dzongú would go to Lepchas of Dzongú. The Chief Minister had, for the first time, directly asked that the hunger strike end and gave his personal assurance that he would review the contested projects. It was not a major win for ACT in respect of the Panan dam project, but they had succeeded in bringing the issue to the attention of most Sikkimese, the Central Indian government, environmental NGOs and others outside India who had become supporters of ACT.

They prepared their strategy. Dawa and Tenzing would stop their hunger strike but the relay hunger strike would continue outside BL House to keep pressure on the State Government and to maintain awareness of the issue in Gangtok. The young members of ACT and CLOS moved to Gangtok to share the load. They decided to build on their Delhi connections; with NGOs, Central Government officers and lawmakers and to make them aware of the lack of probity and transparency by the State Government, in particular the Power Department, and the hydro companies. And they would release Dawa and Tenzing, from the hunger strike that had become their prison.

The next day, in the small three-bed ward, wedged between the nurses station and the emergency room at STNM Hospital, supporters and media gathered. ACT President Athup Lepcha and Lama Sonam Paljor, a hunger striker from a former hydro battle, blessed the weak and thin satyagrahis who, after 63 days, brought a cup of fresh orange juice to their lips and sipped. It was an emotional moment, layered over the hundreds of emotional moments of the preceding 62 days.

21 August 2007: *When we took the first sip of juice to our mouth we felt as if we are free today. Our eyes were full of tears when we broke our strike. Anum Dawa*

and I said if there is no good result then we may continue whenever the situation warrants us.

Tenzing Lepcha

When Dawa and Tenzing ended their 63-day hunger strike, attention and media coverage of ACT's platform subsided, and although the relay hunger strike prevailed at BL House, it had to be punctuated by other events to bring attention to the protest and provide motivation for the young members of ACT.

The social environment following the end of the first hunger strike remained politically charged and the Government appeared to follow a strategy of ignoring the protesters until their funds or resolve ran out.

Quiet weeks where the battle seems stagnant can be demoralising and the activists must have felt frustrated that their work, their sacrifice, their achievements, had brought them to this point of treading water. However their motivation to continue their protest remained high.

Their strength lay, in part, in their identity as Lepcha protesters which never wavered. Gamson (1991, p.40) suggests collective identity links three embedded layers – organisational, movement and solidarity – and that sometimes they are so closely integrated they become a single amalgam. The hunger strikers were already closely integrated by their Lepcha identity and out of the protest grew a 'movement identity', which 'for better or worse create boundaries between an "us" and a "them"' (Gamson 1991, p.42). The first hunger strike had strengthened the 'us' (ACT members and supporters) and distanced the 'them' (government and dam supporters).

The strength of their movement identity was tested in March 2008, when the Chief Minister reversed his assurance that the sanctity of Dzungú would be protected and announced that Sikkim would go ahead with the hydroelectric projects as planned. 'I want this on record and maintain that we will go ahead with all the power projects in Dzungú ... A few anti-development people cannot deter our vision; we will not allow development to be held hostage by them' (weepingsikkim 2008).

The Chief Minister's (and State Government's) use of an anti-development label for the protesters, expanded their politicisation of ACT's identity (and strengthened the 'us' from the 'them'). Cohen could have been talking about the Sikkim hunger strikers when he said,

The politicisation of cultural identity requires people to react against their own felt disadvantage and denigration. It seems also to occur in characteristic economic and political circumstances. So far as the former is concerned, a crucial factor appears to be the relentless centralization of the big economy – that is to say, the increasing political, geographical, and conceptual distance between those who produce and those who control economic decision-making (1993, p.200).

The members of ACT were forced to choose between accepting the Chief Minister's decision to go ahead with all the power projects in Dzungú, thus ending the protest – or reinvigorating it.

They chose to reinvigorate it, first with a peace march in Gangtok of more than 300 Lepchas from Dzungú who held up banners calling for the dams to be stopped and, in a show of solidarity, (and perhaps resistance) they carried Lepcha flags.⁶²

It was in this environment that Dawa and Tenzing kept their promise to each other made the day they stopped their 'indefinite' hunger strike. *If there is no good result then we may continue whenever the situation warrants us.*⁶³

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It was late in the day of 10 March 2008, directly after the peace march, when Dawa and Tenzing, with their friend Ongchuk, once again sat outside BL House on an indefinite hunger strike.

I had spoken to Dawa in between the time he completed his first hunger strike and before he started the second. He told me he had been hungry for two or three days but after that he didn't think about his hunger. But on his dark days

⁶² The Lepcha flag was created by the Kalimpong and Darjeeling Lepchas and adopted by ACT during the protest. It is not officially recognised in Sikkim.

⁶³ Tenzing Lepcha's diary entry, 21 August 2007.

he worried about his children and their future. He said: 'All I thought of were my two children. If I didn't come out of it I hoped that they could be educated, that someone would help them to be educated.'

To go on a hunger strike again meant Dawa's worries about his children would return and Tenzing's post-college life would remain on hold. But using their heightened profile in Sikkim, which had come as a result of the first hunger strike was, in their view, their best chance of forcing the government to negotiate.

Like many other political movements in India, ACT had few resources, little money, and scarce ability to attract the kind of financial support they would need to mount a significant legal and public relations 'war' on the government. They needed to once again raise the stakes and to provoke the emotions of their community in order to pressure the government to negotiate with them. Their bodies remained their most effective weapons and they hoped a second hunger strike would bring the same pressure to the government the first had done.

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I arrived in Gangtok on 11 April 2008, after an unscheduled overnight stay in Siliguri forced upon me due to a Gorkhaland strike that had closed the national highway to Sikkim. I went to the hospital, to room number 5, bed numbers 1, 2 and 3, where Dawa, Tenzing and Ongchuk were lying in the same narrow three-bed ward. At that time the second hunger strike was one month long and the men were pale and thin and the feeding tube hooked from their nostril to their gut was an ever-present reminder that they didn't take food. Tenzing told me it was very painful having the tube inserted and that it hurt for two or three days.

It was both shocking and curious to see them in those circumstances. Shocking because they were pitifully weak, and curious due to the feeling of normality in the room. This was the 'new normal' for those involved in, and on the perimeter of, the indefinite hunger strike: the new normality that comes after a long period of abnormality.

Tenzing read and practised writing Lepcha script for although he was a Lepcha speaker, his written Lepcha was not fluent. He used a workbook from the school curriculum and gradually worked his way up from the Year 1 reader.

Dawa seemed over-burdened, he told me his mind was full. He was trying to work out an exit strategy for he worried about the sacrifice made by people helping because the protest had gone on so long. He thought the way out might be to get the government to confirm in writing the resolution from the first indefinite hunger strike, that the 'other' four dams won't progress, agree to that, then once this is ensured, fight them on the Panan project. They could break the hunger strike once they had the Government's written commitment.

At BL House, the 'new normal' was frustrating for the protesters, and difficult for the young students who had put their studies on hold, seemingly without an end point. Yet daily life continued, navigating around the protest. Sherap Lepcha's baby son was born during the second hunger strike, Dawa's sister married but as he was in hospital he couldn't attend the ceremony. Tenzing's cousin Mayelmit Lepcha sat her exams, somehow managing to study while organising a peace march.

The second hunger strike had not brought the same degree of public interest or pressure as the first. The media still covered the story but perhaps the many months of relay hunger strike had created a kind of 'protest fatigue' among the citizens of Gangtok. The movement needed a motivating event, something that would inspire the protesters and bring the issue of the dams to the fore. It came in the form of prominent social activist Medha Patkar who had agreed to visit Gangtok and offer support to ACT. Patkar is a veteran activist and has a global profile in relation to her work with Narmada Bachao Andolan, a movement against the Sardar Sarovar Dam.

Her pending arrival was communicated to the media when she was 30 minutes from Gangtok and by the time she reached BL House, there was a waiting party of approximately 50 journalists, activists and supporters.

She stopped at the front door and accepted *khada* from Athup, Sherap and others before bending down to speak to the relay hunger strikers, Inchung Lepcha and

Lama Chotol Lepcha from Lingthem. She appeared oblivious to the media scrum calling out to her, clicking photos, jostling for a good vantage point.

Inside, in the office in the company of ACT committee members, she peered at the maps of Sikkim and Dzongú, her eyes tracing the run of the Rangit and Teesta rivers. She asked a lot of questions: about carrying capacity reports, environmental impact assessments and land acquisition. She had heard versions of these stories before: at Narmada initially. Sherap Lepcha told her there were just 7,000 Lepchas living in Dzongú. ‘They will say that’s what makes it alright,’ she responded. Her phone, which had an incongruous ringtone of ‘Jingle Bells’, rang constantly, ignored by Patkar as she concentrated on learning the main issues facing the Lepchas, and quickly scribbled notes.

At her media conference, which she conducted in English, she was unequivocal in her criticism of the government. ‘The Chief Minister should open dialogue soon and realise that instead of making Sikkim a shopping mall for power developers and corporations, he should stand up for his people. Has he forgotten about the welfare of his people in his third term in power and increasingly becoming the mouthpiece for these multinational companies and big players? It is a shame to see these youth in such a critical condition, battling between life and death for a cause they believe in and not receiving the support and understanding that they should’.⁶⁴

After her press conference, Patkar shifted her focus to the hospital where Dawa, Ongchuk and Tenzing Lepcha waited. I observed her dramatic arrival, through the swinging doors of the adjoining emergency room, a large group from BL House swarming after her. As cameras flashed and the visitors squeezed into the small spaces between the beds, she greeted Dawa, Tenzing and Ongchuk, placing her hand on the forehead of each, enquiring about their health, their treatment, the stage of their hunger strike. She understood their symptoms and treatment for she had been on a 20-day hunger strike two years earlier to protest the raising of the height of the Narmada dam.

⁶⁴ I attended the media conference and the hospital with Patkar.

'How are you feeling?' she asked Dawa, as she inspected the long tube that hung from his nose.

'Now that you are here, we are strong Ma'am,' he responded. 'Now that you are here, we are stronger'.

Medha Patkar stayed in Gangtok just 12 hours (including overnight) yet her presence was a significant milestone for ACT and the movement and a morale boost for the hunger strikers.

The next day the State Government claimed her support for the Lepcha activists was 'politically motivated' at the 'instance [sic] of the opposition parties' and that she 'has always been against the development and prosperity of the country.' She was dismissed as 'neither a historian nor an expert on environmental related issues' (*The Statesman* 2008, p.5).

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I left Sikkim a week later. Tenzing had been (temporarily) released from hospital and continued the hunger strike outside BL House while Dawa remained in the hospital room alone. I stopped by BL House to say goodbye. Tenzing lay under blankets out the front, his Ryles tube still fixed to his nose. BL House was quiet, for the steady flow of visitors who came during the first hunger strike seemed to have retreated back into their lives. Their 'performance of resistance' the 'moral and ethical space carved by the act of the hunger strikers' (Walsh & Tsilimpounidi 2012, p.82) was losing its audience and though the resolve of hunger strikers had not wavered, it seemed to me as I watched people pass BL House without so much as a glance, that the resolve and interest of their supporters in Gangtok had. Excitement was being replaced by apathy. Medha Patkar's recent visit spiked but didn't sustain interest. To keep the protest alive ACT would need more spikes, more attention-attracting events that would garner media attention and help them to refresh their message and claw back some of the power that had been diluted by the length of time of the protest. They needed the complicity of an audience to engage in what Walsh & Tsilimpounidi call 'a space of ethical capital; an exchange' (2012, p.91). However, they lacked the money and resources to mount a campaign of

significant scale to achieve renewed passion for audience participation. *Himal* magazine claimed the 'overuse' of fasts and *bandhs* (strikes) in India has rendered them blunt; that the media tends to focus on high profile hunger strikers and the relay hunger strike was 'a favoured strategy for those who are unable to mobilise sufficient ground support, and it is little surprise that these types of fasts fail' (*Himal* 2011).

The Lepcha hunger strike and associated protest activities felt 'blunt', as though it had reached the point of diminishing returns for ACT. The community's fearfulness (expressed in the media, on blogs and on the ground) for the health of Dawa and Tenzing during the first hunger strike appeared to have diminished. Even though they were in terrible health the Ryles tube had weakened their leverage. When the State intervenes in a hunger strike, the body's power as a weapon is limited. As Gandhi said: *A hunger strike loses its force and dignity, when it has any, if the striker is forcibly fed.*

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Since the ill-fated intervention in 1929 that caused the death of Jatin Das, the [Indian] State has learnt how to deal with the political fast. It is now rare that the State concedes the demands of hunger strikers – Anna Hazare's first hunger strike a notable exception – and along with the dance of negotiation, or as part of it, tends to deploy legal, political and medical interventions to defuse the impact of hunger strikes (EPW 2009).

The 96-day second indefinite hunger strike in Sikkim ended when ACT negotiated the formal, written commitment of the State Government to scrap four hydro projects slated for land inside the Kangchendzönga National Park in Dzongú. The scrapping of these four projects had been negotiated during the first indefinite hunger strike some months earlier, but a written commitment hadn't been made. It was not a victory but it was a respectable enough reason to end the fast.

The day Dawa and Tenzing stopped their fast the Chief Minister laid a foundation stone for the Teesta Stage-III dam at Chungthang in North Sikkim.

And silt continued to fill the dam at Dikchu.

And the relay hunger strike – then 360 days long – continued for another 555 days.

~

Chapter 4 – BL House – a space for the politics of the time

'NEVER RESORT TO DESTRUCTIVE MEASURES IN THE NAME OF DEVELOPMENT'

A C T

OUR TRIBUTE TO EVERY HERO WHO DARES TO SHOW THE PATRIOTISM

20/6/2007

Wednesday

12.00pm

1

Record Book

for Indefinite Hunger Strike ...

'We can do anything to save our soil'

A.C.T.

Affected Citizens of Teesta

Cover of Hunger Strike Record Book No.1, 20 June 2007

~

My second visit to Bhutia-Lepcha (BL) House was a year after the first. It was in December 2007, four months after the first indefinite hunger strike had ended and six months into the relay hunger strike that continued. I arrived in Gangtok on 27 December, the night of Benazir Bhutto's assassination. I watched the coverage on cable TV much of the night, trying to make sense of a political act so swift and brutal and audacious that the Lepcha struggle seemed like a passive act, almost courteous, that possibly caused little more than inconvenience to the Sikkim government. Early the following morning, I made my way along Tibet Road, back to BL House 'under occupation' by the Lepcha protesters.

'We are on hunger strike,' announced the young Lepcha man, his head protruding from blankets, behind him a garland of *khadas*, above him several protest signs. *Indefinite Hunger Strike*, they proclaimed. *Save The Teesta*, they implored. *They're Going To Dam(n) You*, they warned. His companion in the

hunger strike lay next to him, his head curled into his chest, eyes shut tight. Sleeping outside BL house in winter with an empty stomach must have chilled every part of him.

‘We are protesting the dams,’ he added, his face smooth from sleep – a smile, despite the seriousness of his words.

‘I know,’ I said. ‘I’m looking for Dawa.’

‘He is my elder brother,’ said the smiling boy whose name was Ongyal, and he took me inside.

Dawa and I met on the stairs and I followed him down to his office, a small room on the basement level. He had semi-permanently moved there, rarely travelling home. We wrapped our hands around hot mugs of tea and talked about the previous year. He looked skinny but otherwise healthy and joked about his role in lifting the profile of the Lepcha people.

‘2007 was the year of the Lepcha. From nothing to people knowing about us,’ he said.

The walls of the office were covered in maps – maps of Sikkim and maps of Dzongú, with hydroelectric projects marked in felt pen. There were photos of Dzongú; the jungle, mountains and rare orchids. There were also photos of Tenzing and Dawa on the first and last days of the hunger strike, the change in their appearance the most revealing and compelling narrative of the protest.

ACT fully occupied BL House. There was a sense of permanency there that changed the building from its original purpose, as a meeting hall for Bhutia and Lepcha people, to being a protest site. The office, the banners, the protesters out front and a Buddhist shrine upstairs all suggested that ACT remained committed to their protest and prepared for a long fight. Their long occupation of BL House had transformed the space. They had brought the building alive changing its purpose and its identity. While sitting inside and outside its crumbling, damp, concrete walls, the protesters invoked the villages, mountains, jungle and wild rivers that flowed through their land. BL House had become a local Lepcha place, despite its location in multi-ethnic Gangtok, but it was also a global place, where

the impact of globalisation (the dams) and global social themes (environment, indigenous rights) were explored and held to account. As a local space, it was a place where global flows fragment and are transformed into something place-bound and particular (Wilson and Dissanayake 1996 cited in Tsing 2000, p.338). The place of course was Dzongú, and the particular – the dams. Upon digging deep into the particular you would have found other grievances, long dormant, such as the impact of Nepali migration, the merger with India, Lepcha land rights, access to education, loss of culture, and loss of language. *Do not make us refugees in our homeland* said the banners but the marginalisation had taken hold long before the protest.

For many of the relay hunger strikers, this was the first time they had engaged politically with their history. It was also the first time they had presented themselves as a rebellious force. It was a time of political awakening and cultural discovery. Many hunger strikers experienced empowerment through defiance; others found a well of confidence that had, up until the movement, been untapped, and all I spoke to experienced pride in their Lepcha identity.

Zhao notes that culture is important in almost every aspect of social movements and that the activity of movement participants is shaped by cultural conditions. He says a movement develops its subculture and brings cultural changes to society (2010, p.33). This Lepcha movement was imbued and informed by their feelings for their culture – in what they fought for and, in how they fought. The hundred or more relay hunger strikers who filled out the *Hunger Strike Record Book* each time they sat for 24 hours, were undergoing a metamorphosis of identity. They were using their bodies to explore Kafka's themes of belonging and exclusion, of tolerance and intolerance (Breckman 2000). Unlike Kafka's Gregor Samsa who underwent a complete physical metamorphosis, the 24 hour metamorphosis of the relay hunger strike incrementally changed their physical being, but profoundly changed how they were seen and how they saw themselves. This formed their subculture – their movement identity where they were confident, courageous and defiant.

~

I left BL House after my meeting with Dawa and walked to the main shopping street, MG Marg. It was a mess, a construction zone, for the State Government was turning it into a mall. It was closed to traffic but not people and they picked their way around the concrete, rocks and sludge. Shoppers navigated half-finished steps, avoided puddles and skipped across large sewage drains as though there was no danger of falling in. Before MG Marg had been closed to cars there had been complaints from small shopkeepers whose businesses relied on through traffic. These shops soon perished without passing trade, amid rumours that they were being forced out because the Chief Minister's son wanted to open entertainment venues (which he later did, adding fuel to the gossip). Rumours of this nature were common in Gangtok. I often heard murmurs about the corruption of the authorities, in particular the Chief Minister and his family, and all politicians – in the ruling party and in opposition.

There were also rumours about ACT members: that they were being paid by the opposition parties to disrupt the government; that Dawa and Tenzing were on hunger strike while holding out for a government payment; that there was 'hidden' money taken by others in the ACT executive; and that Dawa and Tenzing were 'eating' (although a quick glance at their diminishing frames would have refuted the rumour).

There was no evidence to support these claims however Gangtok was a 'whispering city', a place where 'vested interests' distributed 'malicious flyers'; where a rumour could take hold quickly, be passed on rapidly, floating on concrete dust through the half-built MG Marg, tripping across the gaping chasms that split the road from the pavement and into the shops and restaurants where it would become told and retold until it had acquired enough provenance that it was considered a fact. Rumours were a seductive narrative, rich with dramatic disclosure. Rumours were a protest narrative. Rumours were a political narrative.

'Were you disappointed that your hunger strike became so politicised?' I asked Dawa and Sherap the following day.

'I think we maintained our own stand and identity. We never really got involved [in opposition politics]. They had their own agenda, the political groups, but then they also at least helped make some noise that was not there before,' Dawa said.

'We always thought it was our issue first and foremost and we also had in mind that finally, we are the ones to make the decision ... We knew they would try to hijack our issue. We never let them take it away,' Sherap added.⁶⁵ Critical to the success of maintaining a consistent narrative that couldn't be appropriated and misused was the discipline and loyalty of the 'foot soldiers' – the young ACT members sitting on relay hunger strike. They faced the judgment of Tibet Road, exposed to the shifting support of their fellow Sikkimese – warmed by their initial embrace and later stung by their rejection. In June 2007 at the start of the hunger strike, BL House was a space of hope and idealism, fused with optimism. Tibet Road, before the hunger strike, was a busy thoroughfare but in December 2007 there were very few people passing by. A journalist friend half-joked that people had stopped walking down Tibet Road because they didn't want to be seen talking to the hunger strikers, and they didn't want to walk past without stopping. They were mostly worried, I heard, that the government would hear of their support. Their worries were well founded for the policeman from the Sikkim Vigilance Police, who sat on a small plastic chair in the street opposite BL House recording the names of the hunger strikers, also recorded the comings and goings of visitors.

According to the activists and their supporters, the government successfully stopped people from visiting the protesters by punishing those who were government employees, or related to government employees, with 'victimisation transfers': a transfer to a remote or undesirable location far away from family.⁶⁶ People who had business in Tibet Road scuttled past the hunger strikers and their banners, eyes averted. Raghav, a supporter, responded to the shift in support and posted a poem on the blog:

⁶⁵ Dawa and Sherap Lepcha were interviewed at BL House in Gangtok, 29 Dec 2007 by the author.

⁶⁶ The term 'victimisation transfer' is widely used in Sikkim to refer to someone in a government job who is transferred away from their family and support networks, presumably because they have said or done something that is anti-government. Many people I spoke to used this term, and many said they had not openly supported the activists for fear of being 'victimised'.

Shhhh

Everyone go pass down by the Tibet Road

Not a single heart beats seeing us blushing brow

We lay dead dumb no one to speak for us today...

weepingsikkim.blogspot 8 October 2007

~

The lack of passing people had brought a sense of isolation to the outside of BL House. Supporters, excited by the show of strength and rebellion six months earlier, had gone back to their own world. Even the 'milkmaid' – a woman who in June 2007, walked past every morning and clasped her hands in prayer – had stopped her daily spiritual ministrations⁶⁷. The movement had moved into a new phase. The 'shock and awe' of phase one had passed. On many levels it was considered a success for it brought attention to the issue, the promise of cancellation of plans for four hydro projects, and strength and confidence to the young Lepchas involved. However, ACT's demand that all the dams in Dzongú be stopped hadn't been achieved.

I wondered what kept the dozen or so relay hunger strikers there? Why didn't they resume their lives – at college, in their village, or playing sport? They had lost any chance of getting a government job, and employment in the private sector was hard to find. Plus, life at BL House must have been less tolerable when progress for the movement was less evident.

Yet they remained. Sleeping there, and eating there, playing cricket and watching TV. They slept on makeshift beds made from pushing chairs together, and cooked in a makeshift kitchen with a gas bottle for a fire. They hurled a tennis ball along a flat piece of concrete floor where it met a bat and an easy boundary, and huddled around an old television tenuously connected to the cable network via a spaghetti-inspired wiring system. Some wrote poetry and turned the poems into protest songs. All spent many nights out the front on hunger strike, shivering through the night. The office was a room with a lock on

⁶⁷ Those on hunger strike referred to her as a milkmaid as she collected milk each morning.

the door. Large meetings were held upstairs, next to where the Lingthem lamas had constructed their altar. The makeshift kitchen was in the basement, as was the toilet, with access via concrete stairs, long decayed from their abandonment halfway through construction. On the ground floor near the television was a table with a Carrom board: a player's skill at flicking the large weighted disks and pocketing the smaller disks in the corners of the board an indicator of who had been there longest.

These Lepcha youth, most aged in their 20s, inhabited BL House like Fagin's orphans. At night, they were dark bundles wrapped in blankets. At light, they emerged from shadowy corners, each day spent running around the city, collecting this, delivering that, finding help, sourcing food. They took turns out the front; minimum 24 hour 'sit' and each person who sat logged their name, address, age, sex, and occupation in a record book, along with the date(s) they sat. There were five of these books, filled with the names of hundreds of Lepcha youth who took their battle from the village to the city. The entries were administrative, functional, without reference to the emotion needed to make the decision to sit on hunger strike. They were almost too simplistic, but there was a grace in the sparseness of the entries that reflected how individuals are joined in a collective action. We are young, we are from Dzongú, we care about our culture, and we support our brothers and sisters – although this narrative was implied: to be read in between the lines of identity classification:

Mr Karma Lepcha, s/o Mr T T Lepcha, Tingvong, Upper
Age – 22, Sex – M, Occupation – student, 22/6/07 – 23/6/07

Mr Norbu Tshering Lepcha, s/o Mr Gyatso Lepcha, Hee-Gyatang, Lower
Age – 26, Sex – M, Occupation – Business, 27/6/07 – 30/6/07

Chotol Lepcha, s/o Ongyol Lepcha, Lingthem
Age 30, Sex – M, Occupation – Monk, 12/12/07 – 13/12/07

Mayelmit Lepcha, d/o Choden Lepcha, Hee Gyatang
Age 23, Sex – F, Occupation – Student, 26/12/07 – 27/12/07

Ongyal Lepcha, s/o Chazang Lepcha, Lingdon

Age 25, Sex – M, Occupation – Student, 27/12/07 – 28/12/07

~

Much has been written about what motivates protesters. In the case of the Adivasis protesting the Narmada River dam in India, there was (and remains) a similar ‘indigenous resistance to development, that challenged the authorities to act “on behalf” of the people’ (Baviskar 1997, p.47). From conversations with the young Lepcha protesters and spending time with them in Dzongú and Gangtok, it was clear they were deeply motivated by their love for their land, and the more they learnt about their culture, the more they wanted to save it. With education, came confidence and with confidence came the boldness and the skills required to fight for their land. They did not have a long history of resistance to development, although some had fought against an earlier suggestion to dam the Teesta. Their propensity for resistance wasn’t cultural, but their reasons for resisting were.

Discussions with 25 relay hunger strikers offered insight into their reasons for staying with the protest. Their comments revealed deeply emotional ties to Dzongú that were being expressed through their activism. They were declaring their pride in their ‘Lepchanness’ when they sat on hunger strike, marched through the streets of Gangtok, and walked from village to village trying to persuade landowners not to sell.

Most said the movement gave them a lot, and took nothing.⁶⁸ Through it they said they gained knowledge about the environment, their culture, constitutional rights, politics and development. Like activists elsewhere, ACT’s young members viewed the protest through what Gamson calls ‘an injustice frame’ (cited in Jasper 1998, p.414).

⁶⁸ My research assistant for this project was Tenzing Lepcha who asked the questions of young relay hunger strikers in Jan-Feb 2010. I asked three questions that directly related to their experience on relay hunger strike. I asked why they joined the hunger strike, if it changed them in any way, and what they had gained and lost from the hunger strike. They answered the questions 3-4 months after the relay hunger strike had ended.

'I came to know that education in democratic country is just for rich people.'
Inchung, male, 31, from Lingthem.

'It made me think for our own deteriorating culture being suppressed by
other people.' Dawa-Thendup, male, 21, Hee-Gyatang.

'I got knowledge about our custom and tradition and lost nothing,' said
Ongmu, female, 27, from Sangtok village.

'I gained friendship and lost nothing,' said Shezay, a schoolgirl aged 15 from
Lingdong village.

Their 'occupation' of BL House brought a new platform for community creation
where they bonded with each other, shared concerns, considered their dreams,
and planned their futures. At BL House they gained strength and power.

Their reaction to what they considered injustices against them served to bring
them closer together. If the Sikkim Government had thought ignoring (and often
patronising) the protesters would weaken the movement they would have been
surprised by the strength the protesters took from their marginalisation. The
government's decision to disregard the protesters may have served a short-term
political purpose but it had the effect of laying a strong foundation for a new,
strong, contemporary identity for Lepchas. This identity was borne out of politics
and raised by exploring culture through the lens of marginalised youth trying to
process the impact of modernity on their land and identity.

The disruption of the dams had exposed the fragility of what the protestors
thought was stable. They had not previously faced a future where their physical
past – the land they knew intimately - would be changed so dramatically.
Modernity had, as Bauman says, 'exposed the fragility and unsteadiness of things
and threw open the possibility (and the need) of reshaping them'. (2001, p.122)
The Lepcha protesters had been shaken by modernity's motion and it's
reshaping of Dzongú as a fragile and endangered land. They had gathered at BL
House to participate in this 'reshaping' of their future. In fighting the dams, they
were rejecting this particular outcome of modernity, but they were also
transforming their lives. Every day spent on hunger strike, which to observers

might have looked like a day they had lost, was actually a day they emerged from a little bit stronger. The group shared the challenges for an individual. No one had to suffer alone. Their vulnerability as a minority group was their strength as a movement.

Much of the strength of ACT was that its members did not distinguish their movement identity from their Lepcha identity. So any threat to the movement was considered a threat to their people, culture and beliefs. I heard stories of ACT members being offered jobs or money to leave the movement but none wavered. Their decision to stay and fight was common across the group. Polletta & Jasper note that group pride is a form of identity work and may be aimed not only at building solidarity but also effecting change that extends beyond the life of the movement (2001, p.296) The development of pride felt by the protesters for ACT's work as a protest group, also built pride in their identity. For example, being proud of Dawa and Tenzing's endurance during the first indefinite hunger strike, also brought pride in being Lepcha. In response to the government's hard-line tactics, friendships were strengthened and time was spent learning more about what they were fighting for: environmental issues, their culture, their language.

Polletta & Jasper's analysis of collective identity and social movements concluded that collective identity is not the same as common ideological commitment for 'one can join a movement because one shares its goals without identifying much with fellow members' (2001, p.298). However, I would argue that this doesn't apply to the members of ACT. Their movement identity was thoroughly enmeshed with their ideological commitment and that is what gave them strength. Their fight for Dzongú was a personal battle that became ideological. It was a profoundly transformative period.

All the hunger strikers who discussed their feelings about the movement (except for 15-year-old Shezay) said they had been changed by the experience. Many became politicised, but not radicalised, and their awareness of issues – environmental, cultural, and political – beyond their personal world was greatly enhanced, as was their appreciation of their culture. The fight for their land had

forced them to examine their relationship with Dzongú, to learn more about what it was they were fighting for. With the learning, came appreciation.

'It changed me a lot and I came to know the value of our motherland ... if we can protect our land then there is nothing to be lost.' Ongmu, female, 27, from Sangtok.

'It changed me, I started thinking more about our culture.' Princy, female, 21, from Passingdang.

They are the first educated generation of their people. They had wider exposure to the world outside Dzongú than their elders, and an education that gave them access to information and the skills to utilise it. Mayelmit Lepcha's answer to the question of why she joined the movement is an example of how her education enabled her to question the land acquisition, which remains a contentious matter that is subject to legal action.

I thought it was a genuine cause. It was the matter of land – the way the government were acquiring land was illegal. Instead of protecting the indigenous people, the micro minority community, we were exploited and misguided in the name of development.

Mayelmit's capacity as an activist drew from a convergence of education, confidence and belief. The enmeshing of these three qualities, underpinned by the energy and social drive that comes with youth, was a source of great strength for her and all the members ACT. Their stage of life was a perfect storm that came at a perfect time. Five years earlier, they would have been too young to recognise the risk early enough to participate in shaping the outcome with political action. Five years later, they would have been established in jobs and family life and the consequences from participating in political action would have brought more risk. Some would have had government jobs and lived the way of their fellow public servants who had given up their voice in fear of a victimisation transfer.

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The issue of membership maintenance is a problem for social movements (Loffland cited in Jasper 1996, p.21). Benson and Rochon in their research on trust and protest noted that the cost-benefit of protest participation is especially problematic because both the costs levied on participants and the benefits that might be expected from the protest are difficult to assess (2004, pp.435–457). The cost to the relay hunger strikers in front of BL House was high – they were unable to work, many stopped attending college, others left farms in Dzongú. However it was their emotional connections to Dzongú and each other that nourished their motivation, which was also fed by trust and respect, which have an enormous impact on political action (Jasper 1998, p.402). There was trust and respect for Dawa and Tenzing, for they had sacrificed so much during their indefinite hunger strike. Conversely, trust for the Government eroded as the movement wore on, fueling the sense of injustice felt by the protesters, which in turn increased motivation. As Coleman stated, a group whose members manifest trustworthiness and place extensive trust in one another will be able to accomplish much more than a comparable group lacking that trustworthiness and trust (cited in Benson & Rochon 2004, p.437). This may seem obvious, but when viewed in practice, as in the Lepcha protest, trust was the glue that held ACT together, giving members the strength to stay in the movement.

Perhaps one of the biggest threats to the motivation of the relay hunger strikers was boredom. They were young with an abundance of energy and resolve. Months lying out front of BL House were not only physically uncomfortable but also emotionally wearing. Their dedication was often tested but they never doubted their decision to take action. However, it was important that they were actively deployed and their energy used to further the needs of the movement. The monotony of the hunger strike action was punctuated by events, anniversaries and announcements – serving as spikes of interest that would bring purpose to the movement, garner wider support, serve as a reminder of the battle being fought and attract media attention. The 200-day anniversary of the hunger strike on the 6th January 2008 was such an event.

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I heard them before I saw them. The cries of *mútuncí róngkup, aachuley*, surged along Tibet Road, heralding the advancing troupe of Lepchas from West Bengal who had crossed the Teesta into Sikkim to mark the 200-day hunger strike anniversary in solidarity with the Lepchas from ACT. I stood opposite BL House, next to the officer from the Vigilance Police who was valiantly recording the event, despite the high numbers of people present. In front of BL House an offering of conifer leaves burned, the smoke twisting upward, spreading the scent of the smouldering incense. In the doorway, in Lepcha dress, stood members of ACT along with members of the youth group Concerned Lepchas of Sikkim (CLOS). Dawa was there, and Tenzing, and Sherap and their friends who had been with them on the hunger strike. Inside, members had prepared the upstairs room for an official function. There were banners behind the stage: *Dams shall be built over our dead bodies*, and *Save the Teesta* posters. Microphones had been set up and a space was allocated along one wall for the *bóngthíng's* ritual.

Lying out in front of BL House were the relay hunger strikers on duty for that day, buoyed by the energy of activity on Tibet Road. The visitors turned into Tibet Road in full voice, lifting their hats high, their Lepcha 'uniform' adding an official air to their arrival. *Aachuley*, they cried. *Aachuley*, returned the Dzungú Lepchas and Sherap wielded his Lepcha knife from its sheath and thrust it into the air to prove his point. *Khame-ri mo*⁶⁹, cried the West Bengal marchers. *Khame-ri mo* replied the Dzungú Lepchas their chant travelling along Tibet Road, guiding their West Bengal 'brothers and sisters' to BL House.

Once they reached the steps, the shouts grew louder and then, for a moment they were silent before singing a song that became an anthem for the movement. It was written several years ago by a Kalimpong-based Lepcha songwriter, Sukden Lepcha, but had gained renewed meaning in the context of the movement.

Rumlyang (God's Land)

It is God's land, this Dzungú land

It is where the Gods the Creators meet.

⁶⁹ Khame-ri mo or Khame-ri means hello/greeting

When the Dendrobium bloom in the rich green forest
When the white snow covers the Kongchen Peak
This Dzongú land is God's land, where the Gods the Creators meet.

River Róngnyú and Rungnyít, when we look with deep attention
The sparkle of the flint in these dark hours
This Dzongú land is God's land, where the Gods the Creators meet.

Seven houses of Mayel paradise when we think of them

Of the lakes and peaks where our souls will rest
This Dzongúland is the holy land where our ancestors souls rest
Yes it is God's land, yes it is God's land.⁷⁰

Many of the West Bengal Lepchas were the same Lepcha youth I had celebrated *Nambun* with in Manebumboo village a year earlier in Kalimpong. They hadn't known about ACT then. Their focus had been on preserving and celebrating their culture through festivals, cultural events and night schools that taught Lepcha language and arts. One of their long-term struggles – through the Kalimpong-based Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association (ILTA) – was to have Lepcha language taught in government schools in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal, as it was in Sikkim (see Chapter 1). But the hunger strike had brought them to Sikkim to another fight and awakened in them feelings about their Lepcha identity that linked back to the 'motherland' identified in their mythology. Just one of the young West Bengal Lepchas I spoke to had been to Dzongú before the protest, and that was Dorji Lepcha from Manegumboo who had taken the American clairvoyant there several years earlier (see Chapter 2). Yet their connection to Dzongú was genuine and intense. They had previously travelled there in their minds and their hearts, through stories told by their ancestors and through the cultural awareness programs and Lepcha literature created by their elders in the ILTA.

⁷⁰ Translated by Dawa Lepcha. Another translation of this song by Lepcha leader, Lyangsong Lepcha is published in *Aauchuley* magazine, April 2009, p. 38 under the title: 'the Lepchas' Holy Land.

The marchers stood in the doorway of BL House and sang with great heart. Many of the Sikkim Lepchas listened, for the song had not yet taken hold there. Some sang along hesitantly, with younger ones who had learnt it joining in. Their voices blended quickly, suggesting an inspiring harmony to the meeting ahead. There was an uplifting effervescence to the singing, what Durkheim describes as ‘characteristic of revolutionary or creative epochs ... where [man] is in moral harmony with his comrades, he has more confidence, courage and boldness in action, just like the believer who thinks that he feels the regard of his god turned graciously towards him’ (1965, p.210).

What did the Lepchas from Dzungú feel, I wondered, when they heard their West Bengal neighbours sing about their home and their villages with such love? I was watching the strengthening of a new friendship, the evolving of an anthem, a moment of shared identity that was a foundation stone of enduring strength and resilience. The visit by the West Bengal Lepchas provided ‘moral harmony’ and motivation for the ACT foot soldiers who had inhabited BL House for 200 days, and been ignored for at least half that time, however their support was unexpected. ‘Honestly, we did not think the movement would spread out wide,’ Dawa told me, reflecting on the scale of the protest. The West Bengal Lepchas and ACT had formed a Joint Action Committee for Protection of Holy Land Dzungú and delegates, including Dawa and Lyangsong Tamsang, President of ILTA, had travelled to Delhi a month earlier to make representations to the Central Government. The battle for Dzungú had gained an army reserve.

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The first official act to mark the 200-day anniversary of the hunger strike was a Lepcha blessing. An elder, P T Simick, a *bóngthing* from Kalimpong conducted *cí rum fat*⁷¹. He sat on the floor inside BL House, a Lepcha flag hung behind him with offerings of fruit (oranges, guava, bananas) and *cí* on a table before him. He waited for his microphone check and then chanted incantations to the Lepcha deities. He dipped his bamboo straw several times into the bamboo vessel of *cí* and after some time, lifted it, allowing the *cí* to sprinkle before placing the straw

⁷¹ The Lepcha ritual uses the drink made from fermented millet *cí*, which is the holy drink of the Lepchas.

back. When he finished everyone accepted some drops of the blessed *cí* in their hand and took it to their mouth. Then, the cheer, *mútuncí róngkup*, *aachuley*, and the meeting officially opened.

On the stage sat the members of the Lepcha Joint Action Committee, formed earlier between the Lepchas in Sikkim and West Bengal to present a united front in protesting to dams. There were many VIPs and therefore, many speeches.

Major Tamsang, speaking in Lepcha, Nepalese and English, talked about the importance of Dzongú in Lepcha tradition everywhere. To cheers and shouts of *aachuley*, he made an impassioned speech:

...I dare to say that all the Lepchas of the world, not only from West Bengal, not only Bhutan, not only Nepal, not only from Dzongú and Sikkim, those living in Delhi, in Calcutta, in London, in Australia, in Europe, in America – all Lepchas today are joining ACT, joining the Lepchas of Dzongú to fight against, to scrap, to stop the planned construction of seven hydro power projects inside ... It is our holy land. It is the source of origin of Lepchas ... Lepchas are politically divided into four regions but we are together because we speak the same language, we follow the same culture, we offer our prayers to mountains ... I agree with the sign over there, *Dams shall be built in Dzongú over our dead bodies*.

ACT and I, on behalf of all the Lepchas of the world, once again reinforce that all the Lepchas of the world are going to die for our holy land ... Under this Lepcha flag you must be ready to sacrifice, not only your sweat, not only your blood, but also your soul.

Those gathered applauded. Major Tamsang's goal had always been to strengthen Lepcha society by encouraging young Lepchas to value their culture. This protest movement provided a platform to energise the Lepcha youth in a way not previously available. The fight for Dzongú transcended religion, education and gender for the West Bengal Lepchas. It could – and it seemed then that it did – inspire the Lepcha youth to connect to their Lepcha identity with shared purpose in a way that cultural festivals could not. For a cultural warrior like Major Tamsang, the dams were a threat to Lepcha culture, but the *movement* to stop the dams was a gift.

He ended his speech with a rousing ‘framing’ of the Lepcha word *aachuley* and called on the audience to chant with him:

‘*Aachuley* means hail to the Himalayas – we are born at the base of the Himalayas, we are raised here, we live here and when we die we go to the Himalayas and when I do this incantation you will repeat *aachuley*.’

Mútuncí róngkup, said Tamsang

Aachuley, cried the crowd.

Ney, Mayel Lyang, called Tamsang.

Aachuley, cried the crowd.⁷²

Later, Dawa rose to speak and the cheers died down for he was a quiet man, not given to inspirational speeches. He spoke first in Lepcha, then in English, and read a summary of the events that led to the hunger strike and the 200-day anniversary starting with the 12 December 2007 meeting and the broken promise made by Sikkim’s Chief Minister. ‘Nothing of what he had said has been realised,’ said Dawa. He recounted the attempts made by ACT to engage government, the events that led to their hunger strike action, the promises made and broken since and the reasons why ACT would not accept the government’s review committee.

We have been on protest for 200 days, with the demand that the mega-hydro projects in Dzungú should be stopped. A question arises: how much do the 7,000 Lepchas of Dzungú consume the nation’s and the state’s budget? Why is Dzungú targeted to be ravaged and to be exploited by seven mega-hydro projects in the name of revenue and development. Revenue and development for whom?

Dzungú is the heart of the Lepcha world, the place of original Lepchas, and home of our stories and traditions. It is the only place our ancestors really defended. On the occasion of the 200th day of the protest against the implementation of mega-hydro projects in Dzungú, the last bastion of the Lepchas, I declare that dams in Dzungú be built over our dead bodies, and no other way.

⁷² *Mútuncí róngkup* – beloved children of Rong/nature
Ney Mayel Lyang - pure land of paradise

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The Lepcha landscapes of BL House and Dzongú at the time of the protest were dimensions where global themes of politics, identity and place met and often collided. There, the local met the global, and identity, belonging and ownership were debated and challenged. Doreen Massey talks of space being 'disrupted and a source of disruptions...[with] multiple trajectories, the sphere where they co-exist, affect each other, maybe come into conflict' (1999, p.283).

Massey could have been describing Dzongú. Before the dams, it was a community space with reverence for nature, tradition, spiritual beliefs and strength in kinship and mutual-ethnicity; a space where nature and religion were closely connected and the physical and cultural landscapes were wholly enmeshed. Dzongú before the dams was a space that was slowly affected by change brought by new disruptions. The disruptions had not come from new human settlement within Dzongú but by the change brought by modernity on the other side of the Dzongú check post, past the Sangkalang Bridge.

Change – or disruption – entered Dzongú with every child that was educated in nearby Mangan or Gangtok; with the increase in vehicles, the building of roads and improved transport to the capital; when seasonal workers came from Nepal every year to pick the cardamom. Change came with improved services: access to health, education and government sponsored training.

The change was gradual, almost invisible, for the landscape outwardly showed little sign of it. But when Dzongú became a site for a form of development that would dramatically disturb the landscape, the Lepcha activists rejected the imprint of globalisation. They had accepted the benign changes brought by modernity, indeed they welcomed them, but this disruptive development of the dams created an altered Dzongú where a sacred space collided with a political space. What was thought to be benign was, in light of the dams, considered to be malignant.

Massey's comment that the multiple trajectories 'maybe come into conflict' (1999, p.283) was realised in Dzongú in a significant way when there was disagreement in the community on whether or not the dams should be built. The

conflict came not just because Lepchas had different ideas for the future of Dzongú, but because for two decades before the dams a generation of Lepchas had for the first time been studying in Gangtok (and some outside Sikkim), being educated, gaining confidence, learning how to dispute propositions that they considered incorrect or inappropriate. These educated Lepcha youth were at BL House, using their education as part of their armoury in the fight for their land. And joining them were Lepchas from across the West Bengal border; themselves living in a space filled with chaos and unpredictability. Their chaos was the Gorkhaland separatist movement, which had dominated identity politics in the Darjeeling hills for decades. When the West Bengal Lepchas crossed the border to Sikkim, to support the Lepchas on hunger strike, they were contributing to the collective political space, which, in that space, formed collective political identity.

Underlying the disruptions, the politics, the chaos and other elements that had turned Dzongú into a political space, was what lived in the hearts of the protesters and defined their lived experience of Dzongú. It is what Feld and Basso call senses of place: 'The relation of sensation to emplacement; the experiential and expressive ways places are known, imagined, yearned for, held, remembered, voiced, lived, contested, and struggled over; and the multiple ways places are metonymically and metaphorically tied to identities' (cited in Chuang 2005, p 379–410). The Lepcha protesters' sense of place was intimately tied to identity. It was who they were.

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Later that night, there was another ceremony outside BL House conducted by the Lepcha youth. With the darkness came the lighting of candles to symbolise 200 days. A photo of Gandhi on the wall bore witness to the young friends who stood quietly in prayer, their faces luminous in the soft glow from the candlelight. Their chanting ended with the customary, *mútuncí róngkup aachuley* and the mood shifted from prayer to song and inspirational speeches.

They spoke of their love for Mayel Lyang, its importance to culture and to their hearts. Samden from Darjeeling rose and said: 'I want to clarify, I am a Christian, and we are here to preserve our holy land. Some ask, are we going for religion or

for environment first? I just want to clarify that to protect nature is to protect our religion for we are nature lovers first.'

Samden's words echoed those I heard the year before from SM and Rosa Lepcha in Darjeeling who encouraged Christian and Buddhist Lepchas to understand themselves as Lepcha first and then Christian or Buddhist. Samden reinforced ACT's protest narrative that Lepchas are nature lovers and went deeper by reflecting the feeling of collective Lepcha identity that was strengthened by the protest, which had empowered a collective Lepcha experience.

Tenzing Lepcha (who had told me he was once so shy he could never speak in class) stood on the step and after a faltering start found his voice. He further strengthened the connection to Lepcha identity sourced from lines of history, language and tradition, and he recognised its more recent compromise by modernity. 'Everyone knows we are here to protect Dzongú but more than that, it is not only for the Lepchas of Dzongú, Kalimpong and Darjeeling, but entire Lepchas of the world.'

He spoke quietly, referring to the issues of global warming and climate change, his narrative reflecting what he had learnt since his time in the movement.

'Yesterday I didn't know the value of our motherland. Because of this movement we came to know very well our homeland. And because of this movement we have learned many things, and gained much knowledge: environmental, cultural, traditional. I hope all our colleagues have the same fight against the implementation of the projects in Dzongú.'

The Lepcha youth from West Bengal planned a pilgrimage to Dzongú the following day. They were excited, their faces flushed, their happiness spilling into song. They sang and laughed together, playing singing games: boys against girls, Sikkim against Kalimpong and Darjeeling. That night, they reclaimed their authority over the patch of Tibet Road outside BL House. I left them and returned to my hotel nearby. The sounds of their growing friendship carried in the still night air and I fell asleep hearing their love songs to Mayel Lyang: *Rumlyang* – God's Land.

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Social narratives can help motivate deliberate, often risky action in pursuit of political change (Peterson 1996, p.30). The Lepcha social narratives of the protest work in part to shape group identity among young Lepchas. The Lepcha youth from Dzongú – many who may have lived for football before culture – were inspired by the sacrifice of their friends. During the two indefinite hunger strikes, their social environment was mostly at BL House and the hospital. They became enmeshed with each other and the movement through their shared purpose to stop the dams. Their protest narratives were, despite the activists' insistence that their movement was non-political, political narratives. But they were also narratives of identity construction. Spector-Mersel says 'each and every narrative we recount participates to some extent, in the endeavor of identity construction, yet *self-narratives* appear to be the principal site in which this project takes place' (2011, p.172). The activists – in particular Dawa and Tenzing – were reframing popular beliefs about Lepcha identity because their personal narratives and identities were at odds with their political action.

'We can't believe Tenzing sat on hunger strike,' said the Bhutia boy from a nearby guesthouse who had gone to the same school as Tenzing and Dawa. 'He was the last person we would have expected to do that.'

Mita Zulca, a prominent journalist in Sikkim who reported on the protest, believed the movement changed the image of the Dzongú Lepchas, starting with ACT's protest at the public hearing for the Panan hydro electric project in 2006.

I felt very hopeful to see this young group of protesters [a minority at the hearing] not afraid to get belligerent in spite of heavy police presence on the day.

They were unlikely warriors. All of them were so young and actually very gentle people – you know Dawa, Tenzing, Sherap – the last people one would expect to take on the might of the state in such a public fashion and with such quiet determination.

It wouldn't be overstating at all to say this protest was a dramatic metamorphosis in the way Lepchas of Dzongú have been traditionally viewed. They have nearly always been described as docile, timid and non-confrontationist in the past but this new breed of educated and aware young men and women turned that theory on its head,' she said.

Jasper says certain social movements aim at changing the broader culture of their society (1998, p.407). The change in confidence, image and identity for the ACT protesters was a by-product of protest rather than the intent, but nonetheless profound.

The rising confidence of the hunger strikers had a compounding effect on the success of the movement. As their self-image improved, so did their motivation, and their ability to sustain their protest. One protester told me that before the movement he would never had spoken to a foreigner, but now he could explain what they were fighting for. This rise in confidence was possibly in part collective and was most powerful when the protesters were together. But it was sustained after the protest, as many who were involved in ACT confirmed in their responses to my questions.

All of the 25 Lepcha youth who participated in discussions about their experiences on hunger strike felt they had gained from the experience. 'We have gained a lot of knowledge, confidence and people support from local, to national to international level. I lost nothing,' said Tenzing.

Norbu said he joined the hunger strike because 'everyone says Dzongú is backward, but we wanted to show them. And in order to protect our land.'

'It made me feel more social,' said Samdup.

'It changed me a lot,' said Gaymit.

'I came to know a lot of things which I had never seen and didn't know before,' said Chungzay.

'I became more responsible and proud for what I did,' said Lhakey.

How did the hunger strike change you? Karma, who had spent two years at BL House, answered, 'It made me feel like a man'.

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As the protesters' collective identity strengthened so did their solidarity. Gamson suggests that members of a movement may question whether the collective entity is worthy of personal sacrifice, and consider how much it should take priority over the needs and demands of everyday life, including survival (1991, p.45).

The young ACT members never doubted that their battle for Dzongú was worthy of their personal sacrifice. Their public statements, their protest narratives, their private stories (many of which I recorded) and their three-year hunger strike were proof of their solidarity and commitment to their land and to each other.

More than two years after my discussions with the 25 hunger strikers, I asked the same questions of many of the same people, expecting that their motivation for protest may have waned. It had not – they felt as strongly about the need to protect Dzongú as they had at the height of the hunger strike and remained convinced that they had gained from the experience. I asked how the movement had changed them.

'It changed me a lot, helped me to come back to our village and work for myself and our villagers,' Ongyal Lepcha, 32, Lingdong village.

'I built my will power and now I can stand on my own feet,' Mayelmit Lepcha, 26, Hee Gyatang village.

'To be self dependent and more strong about self-discussion,' Dawa-Thendup Lepcha, 25, Hee Gyatang village.

I also asked if they remained close to ACT – unanimously 'yes'. And if they would sit on hunger strike again? " 'Til death," said Ongyal Lepcha. "Yes, 'til death", said Mayelmit Lepcha '[saving] land is most important if we want to save our Lepcha culture and identity.'

These unlikely warriors had left their villages in Dzongú, their colleges in Gangtok, their family responsibilities and jobs, to sit on the concrete strip outside BL House for a short time and ended up there for 915 days. I usually visited in the colder months, when the harshness of winter revealed itself in the bitter morning chill. Their meagre comforts were removed when the Power Department cut power from the building claiming there was an unpaid bill for an exorbitant amount. This bill was never sighted by ACT but a power cut meant the television was gone, and the computer wouldn't work, and that meals would be eaten by candlelight. Perhaps these petty intrusions were designed to lessen the attraction of occupying BL House, or perhaps their purpose was to show who holds power – literally and symbolically. In reality, they strengthened the resolve of the hunger strikers, channeling more emotion into the 'them and us' frame and therefore more energy into remaining committed to the 'us' that was ACT. Jasper notes that 'emotions are present in every phase and every aspect of protest...they can help or hinder mobilization efforts, ongoing strategies, and the success of social movements (2011, p.286). The more the government tried to diminish the environment or influence the emotions of the protestors, the more the protestors' emotional connection to the movement and to each other grew.

The activists withstood the pressure, discomfort and threats that they experienced during the hunger strike because during that time they grew stronger. 'Movements transform cultural representations, social norms – how groups see themselves and are seen by others'. (Polletta & Jasper 2001, p.284) The was true for the young members of ACT, who defied the 'shy, timid, forest-dwelling' frame in which they were so often viewed and stared at the world with a different face – one that was confident and courageous – and when their fellow Sikkimese looked back, that is what they saw.

Chapter 5 – Pilgrimage and politics

DAY 2. January 7, 2008. Everyone was up early and excited. Around 9am we took vehicles and started off to Mangan. We stopped at Kavi to offer prayers. The President of the Prongzoom, Ren Dorjee presided over the rituals and briefed us about the historical event that had taken place there at Kavi. We reached the North District Headquarters around noon and walked down to Sungklong, the gateway to Dzongú . At the gateway we had to undergo the formalities of showing our passes and were thoroughly interrogated by the police. We hiked the distance of 7 km to Passingdang, on foot. Our first stop. We greeted everyone we met on the way, some would just stare at us while some acknowledged our 'khaamri' shyly. A loud burst of cracker greeted us as we reached Ren Palden's house where we would be staying for the night. We took a walk around the village singing 'lyang, Rumlyang Mo' and when we came back a hot dish of steaming tangdarbook chee was laid on the table for our refreshment. We had dinner and then called it a day. All slept like infants who sleep in the warmth of the blossom of its mother; after all we were in the Holy Land!

Aket Pemba Rongkup (2008, p.20)

January 8, 2008: There was a slight hiccup at the North District Collectorate in Mangan when I submitted my application for a permit to Dzongú. I was with Sherap's younger brother Pema, en route to their family home in Tingvong and the process for obtaining a tourist permit had become more difficult since the dam protest. The clerk closely examined my papers: two copies of my passport ID page, two copies of my Indian visa, two copies of my inner-line permit for Sikkim and two passport-sized photographs. He held my inner-line permit up to the light, frowned and declared ominously, 'double writing.' Pema and I examined the paper and yes, there was double writing on the expiry date on my permit extension but it was clear that the double writing was to clarify what was first written, not to change it. 'What's the problem?' I asked Pema who said 'no problem' before arguing with the clerk in Nepali. Pema shifted to English insisting that the permit was valid and that I required seven days in Dzongú (the standard was five), and the clerk reluctantly stamped my permit for three. Given

that the first day would be almost over when we arrived in Tingvong, and we would have to leave on the 8.00am jeep on the third day, it meant I had been given just one complete day. Politics had touched tourism due to the West Bengal Lepchas' pilgrimage and the State Government had decided that Dzongú should be off-limits to foreign visitors. The pilgrimage had spooked officials at the District Collectorate whose role, usually one of process, had become one where decisions could have political ramifications.

My permit was given reluctantly, Pema explained, because the clerk could not think of a good enough reason to withhold it, and because Pema had intimidated him by speaking in English.

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The group of Lepcha pilgrims from West Bengal had obtained permits well before their January 2008 pilgrimage but, despite their preparations, police at the Sangkalang checkpost closely inspected their papers and their bags. Gyatso Lepcha, one of the hosts from Passingdang, who frequently travelled through the checkpost, said he had never seen such security in Dzongú. 'The police checked us, checked all the individuals as if they were carrying bombs or arms.

Intimidation. This was the saddest part. I felt, I belong from Dzongú and I felt bad that our people, my guests had to go through that situation.'

Upon reaching the other side of the bridge, Gyatso formally welcomed the pilgrims: 'Some kneeled down, some cried ... some picked the soil up, some kissed the soil. I noticed one guy picked up the soil and put it in a small bag and said "I will go to my place and give it to my parents because they have a desire, a wish to visit". That was the most touching part I think'.

Gyatso would be moved many more times during the pilgrimage as he saw his home through the eyes of others who had a different relationship with the land. While Gyatso's relationship with Dzongú held the pragmatism of occupation – not every day was a sacred day – the pilgrims' experience in Dzongú was imbued by their distance from it. They visited places they had known initially through folklore and latterly through the protest. They fixed their dual lens (as insiders, for this was Lepcha holy land, and outsiders for it was all new to them) on the

landscape, souveniring soil from the earth, water from the rivers and shouting *aachuley* to the gods they knew to be residing in the mountains, watching over them. I followed their footsteps and caught up with them in Tingvong.

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More so than their Sikkim counterparts, the Lepcha community in West Bengal wore traditional Lepcha dress, sang Lepcha songs and told Lepcha stories that identified Dzungú as their motherland; a holy place, possibly more enticing because most had never been there. They might have been experiencing what Stuart Hall calls a 'hidden history ... the act of imaginative rediscovery which the conception of a rediscovered, essential identity entails' (1993, p.224). Perhaps they, more so than the Dzungú Lepchas, were overtly bound to their history because the Darjeeling district of West Bengal has become dominated by Nepalese culture. The Indian-Nepalese community's campaign for the northern tip of West Bengal to be annexed for a separate Gorkhaland state has, over the decades, served to fortify Nepalese identity in the Darjeeling hills. Where the political strength and dominance of the Gorkhaland movement has permeated every corner.^{73 74} At the time of this pilgrimage, the Gorkhaland movement was going through a resurgence with a new leader – demanding self-determination from the Central Indian Government, holding rallies and calling *bandhs* (strikes) which paralysed schools, shops, trade and transport.

The Lepchas' identity as the first people of the land is not part of the Gorkhaland narrative yet they are expected to support the movement. I am not suggesting that they feel like outsiders, more that they may feel they have to negotiate their own cultural and social landscape within the dominant Nepalese culture they live in. The Darjeeling district where they live is historically Lepcha land, but the threat of the dams gave the West Bengal Lepchas another place to long for and fight for: a cultural homeland. Contested Dzungú was another place where they could search for and negotiate identity, and their decades bearing witness to the

⁷³ Proposed Gorkhaland map: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Gorkhaland_map.jpg

⁷⁴ The term Gorkha comes from the Nepalese village Gorkha, the ancestral hometown of Nepal's former ruling royal family. Gorkhas are Nepalese nationals and the name has been adapted by the Indian-Nepalese Gorkhaland movement for a separate state in the West Bengal hills. The movement was very active in the 1980s and recently regained prominence. <http://www.m0q.net/Gorkhaland/encyclopedia.htm> for an overview and links to further reading on the Gorkhaland separatist history and movement.

Gorkhaland movement had provided them with a political template for a fight for identity and culture attached to land. The pilgrimage to Dzungú however, by the 40 Lepchas from West Bengal, was not intended or presented as a political act, for the politics were done with in Gangtok at the marking of the 200-day anniversary of the hunger strike. It was borne out of a genuine desire by the youth, who were supporting ACT, to step on the soil of their ancestors. The protest had led to their desire to experience the land they were fighting for and the pilgrimage was a personal experience of culture. They were partly corroborating Bauman's point that 'one thinks of identity whenever one is not sure of where one belongs' (1996, p.19). Their pilgrimage was an act of belonging that would entrench their Lepcha identity.

They were granted tourist permits for a pilgrimage and they had determined that their short time in Dzungú would be a sincere journey of homage and prayer to Mayel Lyang. But their intentions were tangled in the politics of Dzungú. Although their hosts (who were ACT members) welcomed them, they were walking through Passingdang, the home of the pro-dam Dzungú MLA and his supporters. It is not surprising that they were unable to 'quarantine' the week to be non-political, for there was too much political context surrounding it.

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In Passingdang, they were hosted at the home of Loden G Lepcha, who ran a small primary school in the village. Loden was a high profile member of ACT and a former President of the Lepcha Youth Association where he had campaigned for Lepchas' rights for many years. At Loden's house they lit a bonfire and sang songs. 'It was a good time,' said Gyatso who had invited a *mun* to give blessings to the group.

After the blessing, politics intervened with the arrival of the police who were responding to a 'noise complaint' about the singing and shouting of *aachuley*, which the police said was a slogan.

'The police officer was saying "you raise a slogan like *aachuley*". I said what the hell are you saying? This is not anti-slogan on government or somebody ... there is nothing wrong with this slogan,' said Gyatso.

This was the first sign that chanting *aachuley* was considered a political slogan and it was difficult to accept that the belief was genuine. The police, the District Collector and the political supporters of the Dzongú MLA would all have been familiar with the word. If they were Lepcha they would have used it. If not, and they worked in North Sikkim, they would have heard it. It is shouted at all Lepcha occasions; weddings, festivals and other cultural events.

When the pilgrims prepared to leave Passingdang, they shouted, *mútuncí róngkup aachuley*. Gyatso turned to the police officer and said: 'Do you feel these guys have come with the wrong intention? If we have the wrong intention in our heart to bring rage to this land, they wouldn't have done this slogan before you because they believe they are doing nothing wrong'.

According to Gyatso, the police officer agreed, and the pilgrims walked on towards Tingvong.⁷⁵

DAY 3. January 8, 2008. 8:00 hrs. *We denied the allegations and assured that 'aachuley' wasn't a political slogan and that it was a religious exclamation. Nevertheless we were warned against it and told to be careful lest we be pelted with stones! We would take the risk and so started our walk on the long and winding road. We reached Tingvong around 2.30pm. After resting a while at Ren Sherap's place we walked around the village and visited the 'Gomboo' above. Later at night we all sat around by the warmth of the campfire showing off our talents like singing dancing and staging a short play. High above us, the stars shone brilliantly in the dark sky.*

Aket Pemba Rongkup

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The first person I saw at Tingvong was Ongyal Lepcha, Dawa's brother, whom I had met 10 days earlier when he was on relay hunger strike outside BL House. He was in the garden, chopping chilli. Inside the house Pema's sisters were peeling a voluminous amount of vegetables. Bags of rice were extracted from under the house, large buckets of *cí* were obtained from a neighbour, and inside

⁷⁵ My discussion with Gyatso was held at Tingvong on 10 January 2008.

the house, blankets were taken out of storage, and sleeping spaces allocated for the pilgrims.

Pema and I walked towards the house, which was conspicuously free of the visitors, but we could hear them singing as they made their way back from nearby Kusong. They were singing Lepcha anthems – prayers to Mother Nature, Kongchen (Mount Kangchendzönga) and Mayel Lyang. When they reached the path that peeled towards Tingvong, they danced, before walking in a narrow line towards the house calling out, *Mútuncí róngkup, aachuley, Dzongúland*.

Singing the Lepcha songs was a form of practising Lepcha faith. In Lyangsong Tamsang's account of the history of Lepcha singing, the descendants of the first Lepcha couple, Fadongthing and Nuzaongnyoo, offered their prayers to their creator and guardian deity in the form of an *Apryá Vom*.⁷⁶

While singing *Apryá Vom*, which can last from two minutes to two days, a singer must observe and strictly adhere to certain rules. These include: standing, removing headgear and singing without musical instruments (for *Apryá Vom* started before musical instruments). The singer may compose his or her own song and express thoughts without restraint. The song must flow like a river, smooth, cool and non-stop. An *Apryá Vom* singer is a natural poet with an excellent command of Lepcha language. *Aachuley* is shouted at the end of an *Apryá Vom*.⁷⁷ (2008, p.64)

That evening I felt I was in a cultural paradox. Inside the house, Sherap's mother, wearing a Dilbert t-shirt emblazoned with the words 'Technology – not for wimps', sat wrapped in blankets with a grandchild under each arm, all mesmerised by the American cable television program, *Wrestlemania*. She could not be enticed outside to join the visitors, or watch their cultural program. When I invited her, she smiled, gave an apologetic shrug and pointed to the television.

Outside, under the stars, the young Lepchas built a bonfire and sang and danced around it.

⁷⁶ There are four types of *Apryá Vom*: Sawo *Apryá Vom* – a prayer; Ágo Ányit *Apryá Vom* – a joyous song; Ásyaot-Sam Kyao *Apryá Vom* – a sad song; and Dungeet *Apryá Vom* – a patriotic song. Tamsang L, (2008) *Lepcha Folklore and Folk Songs*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi p. 63

⁷⁷ Lyangsong Tamsang lists many other rules for singing *Apryá Vom* in his book. Tamsang L, (2008) *Lepcha Folklore and Folk Songs*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi p. 64

After dancing, they stood, some with their hands over their heart and sang the song that had become the anthem to the anti-dam movement – *Rumlyang* (God’s land).

They gave short motivational speeches on the importance of fighting against the dams. ‘This is an issue for all the people of the whole world,’ said Gyatso Lepcha. ‘For we all live under one sky.’

Four of the Lepcha youth from West Bengal performed a simple – and humorous, judging by the audiences’ reaction – two-act play. Pema described it to me:

Two of the men are landowners who got compensation for selling their land for the dams. They are having a discussion about buying things with the money – they both want to buy new vehicles. One of the landowners has been drinking too much *cí* and is very drunk.

Two men passing by discussed going to Gangtok, to visit BL House where the hunger strike is going on. What are we doing people, they said as they walked by. Why are we selling our land?

One of the landowners said: We have not sold anything, we have not sold our God, we have not sold our traditional culture, we have only sold our useless land.

The drunk said, I have got the money now, and I will not return it.

They stopped for a moment and considered what has happened. They slowly realised the hunger strike is very important. And they followed the other men, to go to Gangtok and join the hunger strike.

Their performances helped to bind the group. They had, as Durkheim said, the potential to substitute the world immediately available to their perceptions for another, more moral world (cited in Shilling and Mellor 1998, p.196). Around the campfire in Tingvong, that other more moral world was Mayel Lyang, the Land of Hidden Paradise, unthreatened by development. The short play, while providing humour was also a re-imagining of what was happening. In the imagination of the playwright, landowners were persuaded not to sell land. They were taking the right moral path to protect their culture.

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The morning after the Tingvong celebrations, Gyatso and I sat in the kitchen and reflected on the feeling for Dzongú expressed by the pilgrims from West Bengal. He was seeing his home through their lens and experiencing a different way to view the social significance of homeland.

‘How is it for you to be with them and see Dzongú through their eyes? Has it made you proud and lucky to live here when they are so appreciative of it?’ I asked.

‘Yes, definitely, going back some years, I was not aware of all these things,’ Gyatso replied and added:

As are all the Lepcha youths I was also lost; with the times, education, going somewhere. So when this movement rose I slowly began to feel like I want this place, my community and everything. Now I feel that. I feel lucky. I feel I am one of the most fortunate people. I feel lucky amongst these people. For all Lepcha people all over the world believe this place is sacred and this is the holy land of the Lepcha and I am born here.

Gyatso invited me to walk with them to the Lingza waterfall where some of the pilgrims would be ‘baptised’ and given Lepcha names.

~

DAY 4. January 9, 2008 [early morning]. *It was time to come back to Passingdang. We stopped at Linzay Falls about 50 mts in height. Four of the boys underwent the ritual of baptism and got themselves new rong aabrayaangs.⁷⁸*

Aket Pemba Rongkup (2008)

The road to Lingza was a steep, downhill trek. Pema and I cut through shortcut trails to keep up with the group that had walked the longer sealed road. When we could not see them we could hear their songs, their voices and shouts intermingling with the scent of the orange groves that lined the road from Tingvong to the village of 6th Mile.

⁷⁸ *rong aabrayaangs* = Lepcha names.

Lingza Falls, between the villages of 6th Mile and Lingza, is known by the *Aram Pazed putsho* [clan] of Tingvong as a significant place in the story of the creation of their clan. It was in the waterfall that a supernatural warrior from West Sikkim stopped to quench his thirst and found a golden hair in the water. He then travelled to Tingvong on a lover's quest to find the woman the hair belonged to and fought a battle with her father, the python king, to win her hand in marriage. After succeeding, he started the clan into which Sherap and Pema were born.⁷⁹

When we reached Lingza Falls, some of the pilgrims fanned in a semi-circle around the stream while others stood high on the rock face above. The water tumbled down in long thin strips, for it was the dry season and the annual monsoonal rain that gave Lingza Falls its grandeur was several months away. Dorji stood by the pool at the base of the waterfall and called the men over. He instructed them to lift their right arms in the air, then to bend down and reach into the stream and touch the river rocks. One by one, as he announced each man's name, they rose. Dorji addressed each in turn, dribbling water on each head and giving a blessing to the land. The ceremony recognised that before Buddhism and Christianity the Lepchas had their own beliefs and this naming ceremony did not replace the religion the men practised.⁸⁰ Their new names recognised that they were Lepcha in culture, and Buddhist or Christian in religion. As Dorji called out each new name, everyone shouted *achuley*.

'What is your new name?' I asked the first man 'baptised' whose birth name was Pemba. 'My new name is Aket,' he replied. 'It means peace.'

The sacred place provides the constant, material link between the past and present worlds (Rountree 2006, p.101). The performance of a traditional ritual in a sacred place is in a sense the 're-imagining' of all the sacred significances that the landscape and ritual have had through time (Johnson 2006, p.49). The ritual performed at Lingza Falls was not a new ritual created for this new occasion but an existing ritual – a blessing to nature – re-imagined as a baptism. Their bodies had been 're-experienced through ritual and symbolic activity'

⁷⁹ Longer versions of this story were told to me by three people – Sherap Lepcha, Pema Lepcha and P T Lepcha from Tingvong. Each version I was told was different, however the abstract outlined here is consistent across each.

⁸⁰ Pema Lepcha explained the ceremony as we watched.

(Rountree 2006, p.106). For the pilgrims, the sacred significance was in the nature of Dzongú and their relationship with it. What had previously been a landscape in their minds and hearts was now a place they could touch and feel. They washed their hands and faces in the water, some collecting it in jars and plastic bags, so they could take some of the sacredness back home.

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The pilgrims walked on to the next stage of their journey, the town of Laven, and Pema and I headed back to Tingvong. We walked slowly up the steep inclines of the hillside. Among the indigenous plants and trees there were banana plants, orange trees and the ever-present cardamom. We stopped frequently, mostly because I was too puffed to continue, but our pauses gave us a chance to absorb the layers of the surrounding landscape. A black eagle soared above us, surfing air currents as it searched for food, and we fruitlessly tried to watch its flight as it dipped in and out of sight. Pema picked berries and nettle and told me how they were used in Lepcha healthcare. ‘These berries,’ he said, ‘we take them if we have sore tonsils. These nettles we use for our nettle soup and they are good for reducing high blood pressure. This is for our teeth,’ he added holding up a yellowish ginger root.⁸¹

We arrived back to Tingvong to two pieces of news that indicated the widening divide in Dzongú society over the dams. In Tingvong, two youths had argued about the dams – one being for the projects, the other against. ‘The one who is against the projects, one of the drivers, hit the one who is for the projects on the head with a bottle,’ Pema explained. Then we heard the West Bengal pilgrims had been stopped at Laven and their permits cancelled.

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DAY 4. January 9, 2008 [late morning]...we were told to leave immediately and also denied to see the order paper. All forty-six of us were crammed into three vehicles. At a point called 3rd Mile, a crowd of people had gathered by the side of the road and as we reached the bend they started manhandling and verbally

⁸¹ An study on medicine plants of Dzongú can be found at <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2567294/> (accessed 9 April 2011)

abusing us. As the jeeps sped up they threw stones which broke the rear windows of two vehicles. We could not even stop to pick up our luggage. The mob was right behind, chasing us madly till we crossed the bridge.

Aket Pemba Rongkup (2008)

The action of the District Collector and the police (which was generally accepted to be at the instruction of the Dzungú MLA as the youths throwing rocks were his supporters), escalated the divisiveness over the issue, with the West Bengal Lepchas speaking out to the media and the District Collector T N Kazi, forced to defend his action. 'They were in Dzungú as tourists but they were shouting slogans,' said Mr Kazi to *The Telegraph* (2008).

Mr Kazi, as a long-term District Collector in North Sikkim, was well aware Lepchas chant *aachuley* to express joy, happiness, and welcome. I once asked Sherap's sister Lhakit what *aachuley* translated to in English. She thought for a moment then offered 'hip hip hooray'. Its literal meaning, explained by Lyangsong Tamsang in an article in *Aachuley* magazine in response to the removal of the pilgrims from Dzungú, 'is hail to the Himalayas' (2008, p.22).

By accusing Lepchas shouting *aachuley* of political agitation the Sikkim government gave the word deeper meaning in the context of protest. Like many of the songs about Dzungú, sung as anthems to culture by Lepchas for many years, *aachuley* was given a wider meaning and poignancy when linked to the protest. And, like other Lepcha words, songs, and stories, it became part of the 'glue of solidarity' (Collins cited Jasper 1998, p.399) that formed the collective identity of the protesters. If the strength of an identity comes from its emotional side' (Jasper 1998, p.415) the narratives from Kalimpong and Darjeeling – expressed in song, dance, plays, the baptism and shouting *aachuley* during their pilgrimage to Dzungú – are strengthened by their emotional and personal connectedness. The censorship of those narratives by the Sikkimese Government not only deepened their meaning but they strengthened the bond between the members of ACT, opponents of the dams and the West Bengal Lepchas.

In Tingvong an officer from the Sikkim branch of the Indian internal intelligence agency, the Intelligence Bureau, had watched us. He had come to the village, identified himself and said he was checking that nothing untoward was happening. He would have noticed that the Lepcha pilgrims called *aachuley* as an expression of worship, and happiness, and at the end of each *Aprýá Vom*. It would be impossible for the Lepchas **not** to call *aachuley*, as it is thoroughly embedded in Lepcha song, celebration and narrative.

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DAY 5. January 10, 2008. *Now it was time to head back home. A few of the boys volunteered to stay back and support the strike. We felt very bad at not being able to complete the pilgrimage. Though we returned with heavy hearts, we did manage to bring smiles on our sunken faces for having at least stepped on the soil of our HOLY LAND, Faokraam Takraam, the place of our origin.*

A small step of the youths ...

A giant leap for the Rongcups ... !!

Report submitted by Aket Pemba Rongkup
9th Mile Kalimpong (2008)

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Stopping this modest pilgrimage on political grounds served to strengthen the will of the West Bengal Lepchas to visit Dzungú. It also encouraged the leadership of the ILTA to use their political skills to confront the Sikkim State Government about who has rights to control access to Dzungú. They returned to Kalimpong and made plans to revisit Dzungú.

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No sensible Lepcha in this world can sit silently, their hands folded, and look at Dzungú, the holy land of theirs, being defiled, raped, disgraced and dishonoured today.

Lyangsong Tamsang-Lepcha (2007, p.7)

The disastrous end to the West Bengal Lepchas' trip to Dzongú in January 2008 did not thwart their dreams of pilgrimage. The ILTA immediately started planning for another pilgrimage – one that would involve significantly more people. As Indian citizens the West Bengal Lepchas did not require a permit to enter Sikkim, however, like everyone who is not from Dzongú, they did require permits to enter there and these permits are obtained from the Sikkim Government. Lyangsong Tamsang applied directly to the Chief Minister of Sikkim, Pawan Chamling, without mentioning the power projects or the protest. His letter first offered detailed information about Lepcha culture, language and rituals and then informed the Chief Minister of the visit. He did not ask permission for the march but, perhaps foreseeing an objection, chose instead to quote the Indian Constitution as a reminder of his rights.

Lepchas from different parts of the Indian Republic have decided to undertake a pilgrimage trip/tour to Dzongú Reserve, for the purposes of performing our traditional rites and ceremonies in the sacred, holy places located in Dzongú. The strength of the pilgrimage troupe would be in thousands men, women, *Muns* and *Boongthings*. We therefore request you, Sir, to extend your co-operation and direct the District Collector, North Sikkim, to issue entry permits for a period of ten days during the course of which we would like to associate ourselves with our holy places in ...we trust you will appreciate our sincere intentions and thus honour and uphold our constitutionally guaranteed rights and freedoms under Articles 19 and 25 of the Constitution (2008, pp.24–29).

Therefore the April 2008 pilgrimage was presented as a holy march and included Lepcha elders, lamas and shamans. It quickly became known as ‘The Long March’ and attracted close to 500 people who, believing Dzongú to be the ‘utopia of Lepcha culture’ (Foning 2003, p.261), had long thought of it as a hidden place and now, along with the Sikkimese activists, feared it might become a lost place.

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They had walked for hours, from Triveni in West Bengal on the banks of the Teesta River, to the bridge at Rangpo, at the border between West Bengal and Sikkim. As they set out, a *bóngthing* offered prayers. They were wearing

traditional clothes and carrying banners that paid tribute to Dzungú but, notably, none of the banners used the language of the protest. The marchers arrived hours later than expected, for the rain and wind had hampered their progress and also because, as one of the organisers told me when I phoned him from Rangpo to check their progress, 'we are Lepcha, we are always late'.

I had travelled to Rangpo early in the morning to watch the pilgrims cross the bridge over the Teesta River into Sikkim. Greeting them on the West Bengal side of Rangpo were some 300 Lepchas from Sikkim, also dressed in traditional clothes, also soaking wet – for the rain fell relentlessly and it was heavy, sleeting, steamy rain that tested their resolve perhaps, but not their kinship – for the welcome party had waited patiently for hours. An entrepreneurial *chai-wallah* had set up a stall on the bridge and offered me shelter from the rain. From there I watched the hundreds of wet but happy marchers cross into Sikkim. A lama, Lhazang Lepcha, who is the father of hunger striker, Dawa Lepcha, stood resolutely by the side of the road. An old man, he seemed impervious to the weather and the weight of his lama's robes, which were soaked through and fell heavily around him. Water streamed through the weave of his white wool cap forming rivulets down his face. He greeted everyone, his hands pressed together in front of his chest and he did not move from his post until the last pilgrim from West Bengal had crossed the bridge into Sikkim.

There a party of around 100 police greeted them. Although the police were armed, they were clearly not expecting any violence. They slouched and smoked nonchalantly in doorways to escape the rain before escorting the group onto the Singtam Road. The Lepchas from both sides of the border walked and sang together, punctuating their songs with shouts of *aachuley*.

Mayelmit Lepcha from Hee Gyathang in Lower Dzungú travelled to the border to meet the Kalimpong pilgrims. She described the moment she saw them approach the bridge at Rangpo. 'It was my biggest memory ... being a minority in Sikkim, when the majority of Lepchas from Kalimpong in their attire and all came marching, I felt very proud, very happy to see their smiling faces.'

Mayelmit was perplexed by the police presence at Rangpo.

I don't know what the Sikkim State Government thinks about Lepcha people, because we are the peace-loving people, we are the nature believers, we don't go for violence and all, but that day the number of police persons they kept for security, I feel they wasted their time. We are in the peace rally; our aim was just to go on a peace rally to Dzongú along with the Lepchas from Bengal.

A policeman I spoke to at Rangpo agreed that it was difficult to ascertain who was being protected from whom. Were the police there to protect local people from the pilgrims or to protect pilgrims from pro-dam advocates? Or were they there to give the impression that outsiders bring trouble? I asked his view on the hydro developments and he said he had no opinion: 'If I have an opinion different to the Government's then I will be transferred or lose my job'.

The marchers walked a further six kilometres to the large town of Singtam. The atmosphere was festive until they found that they had been locked out of their guesthouse and were left waiting in the street. Hungry, cold, wet, with their feet blistered from eight hours walking in wet shoes, it appeared they had already worn out their welcome in Sikkim.

'They [the West Bengal Lepchas] were our guests, they were walking all the way, almost 70 kilometres, old men, old women, elders were there but they had to face problems because the place was closed. People might have threatened the owner of that lodge. Some people wanted to upset our peace march,' said Mayelmit.

Eventually the marchers gained access to the guesthouse. They left Singtam the following morning with the intention of marching through Gangtok on their way to North Sikkim. Mayelmit travelled by car back to Gangtok to sit her exams. While juggling activism and education was at times a struggle she is certain of the importance of both: 'We are the first generation from our village in Dzongú getting a little bit of education ... I don't want the coming generation to point at us and say these sisters were there, these brothers were there when this was happening and they didn't do anything.'

This was a common refrain among the ACT protesters. They were aware of their role as stewards of the land and by extension, as stewards of their culture. Those

who were educated were acutely aware how this enabled their protest. Mayelmit was firmly committed to the movement, and kept her eye on the future. She wanted to complete her education, for she recognised that education leads to power and social change: 'With education, we can study, we can work, we can earn for ourselves, but education also allows us to explain to the people what is right, what is wrong.'

The next two days of the march were confusing and heartbreaking for the pilgrims. The Government decided at the last minute that they could not enter Gangtok and instructed them to walk towards Dikchu, outside Dzongú, which is the site of a recently completed 510 megawatt dam. The Government then took the unusual and extreme step of imposing a 'Section 144' ruling in Gangtok, to be enforced from 15 April for one week from the day the pilgrims were due to pass through the town. Section 144 is an old British law that restricts free assembly.⁸² It was drawn up in British India following the First World War in an attempt to put an end to the growing movement for Indian independence from British rule.⁸³ By imposing Section 144, the Government was ensuring the pilgrims could not legally enter Gangtok. This also labelled them as outsiders who would cause trouble in Sikkim. The outsider label ignored Sikkim's history and the fact that the Lepcha-occupied Darjeeling district of West Bengal was once part of Sikkim. The Lepchas who crossed the bridge at Rangpo were well versed in their Lepcha history. They knew that the land they walked from and the land they walked towards, once shared sovereignty. From their perspective, the march might have been seen as a pilgrimage across 'occupied' Mayel Lyang.

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Modern state making in India emerges out of the intersection of colonial forms of knowledge and the specific rationalities of postcolonial socialist state formation (Sivaramakrishnan 2000, p.449). In Sikkim, modern state making has its roots in

⁸² Section 144 of the criminal procedure code empowers state-level authorities to declare a state of emergency, restrict free assembly, and impose curfews. Officials occasionally use Section 144 to prevent demonstrations. Ref: http://www.freedomhouse.org/inc/content/pubs/fiw/inc_country_detail.cfm?country=2949&pf (accessed 15 Sep 2008)

⁸³ <http://www.derechos.org/saran/bhutan/28.txt> (accessed 15 Sep 2008)

plurality management (Phadnis 1980, p.1238) and a post-democracy desire to rid the state of monarchical policies that disadvantage the dominant Nepali-Sikkimese in favour of the minority Lepcha and Bhutia tribes. Furnivall wrote that plural societies 'mix but do not combine'. Each group 'holds by its own religion, its own culture and language, its ideas and ways ... [a] plural society, with different sections of the society living side by side but separately within the same political unit' (cited in Malik 2008). The Sikkimese appear to shift both towards and away from Furnivall's definition depending on the context. When the context relates to 'rights' – particularly relating to taxation, property, compensation and ethnic representation in government, social cohesion is compromised by political advantage.

Both the State Government and advocacy groups with various and competing platforms frequently exploit Sikkim's political history, which fosters suspicion of outsiders and reinforces ethnic plurality. When people enter Sikkim from outside the State it allows everyone living within the State to be 'insiders' and use the insider/outsider frame to discredit the opposing views of those from outside Sikkim. The 'dangerous outsider' threat is often invoked and the State Government painted the West Bengal Lepchas as 'outsiders who spread false and misleading propaganda' and who 'risk the peace and tranquility of Sikkim' (*Sikkim Reporter* 2008).

Within Sikkim many see the movement against the dams as a 'Lepcha thing' or a 'Dzongú issue' and do not examine a wider context by asking whether mega hydro-development is appropriate for Sikkim or India.⁸⁴ A pilgrimage by Lepchas to Dzongú is enmeshed with the movement against the dams. The West Bengal Lepchas' attempts to present the march as cultural and not political did not outwardly recognise that culture shapes social movements or its importance in almost every aspect of social movements (Zhao 2010, p.33). The Lepcha activists and pilgrims when talking about Dzongú do not separate their identity from their land. Conversely, dam supporters, including the State Government, do

⁸⁴ This was relayed to me by the editor of weepingsikkim.blogspot, a Nepali-Sikkimese businessman who supports the movement against the dams because he believes the size of the developments will be bad for Sikkim. He is frustrated by his unsuccessful attempts to engage his social group, mostly educated Nepali-Sikkimese.

not separate the Lepcha pilgrimage from the activism and therefore viewed the march solely as a political rally. This view is understandable as there had been little in the way of mass pilgrimage from West Bengal to Dzungú before the movement to stop the dams. Even so, it is the Lepchas' democratic right to protest peacefully.

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The pilgrims adhered to the conditions of the Section 144 and circumvented Gangtok. However this did not appease their adversaries who ensured the shops along the road were closed so the marchers could not buy food. The rain continued and they entered Dikchu, wet, tired and hungry. There, having silently endured all attempts to thwart their journey, they were met by pro-dam agitators (many of them Lepchas who support the Dzungú government representative and therefore the dams) and 'rent-a-crowd' Government supporters who threw rocks at them and, according to Dorji Lepcha, 'used provocative and filthy language' (*The Telegraph* 2008).⁸⁵ Not wanting to clash with their fellow Lepchas, the marchers turned back and began the long march home. The police escorted them back over the bridge at Rangpo, which just two days earlier they had crossed with so much hope and enthusiasm.

Dam supporters resented the involvement of the West Bengal Lepchas. The head of Dzungú *Gram Panchayat* 3, felt they 'were being spoken for by people from outside ... who view [Dzungú] as a site of pure and traditional Lepcha culture and want Lepchas to remain faithful to traditions while they lived comfortable lives elsewhere' (McDuie-Ra 2011, p.95). However the Lepchas from West Bengal reject the 'outsider' frame for they relate to Dzungú as traditional owners. They view Dzungú as a Lepcha place first and a Sikkim place second. (Indeed, they view Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong as Lepcha first and Gorkhaland second). When Arthur Foning first visited in 1946, he remarked on the similarities between the Lepchas (who Foning had heard were 'culturally and

⁸⁵ 'Rent-a-crowd' support is common in Sikkim among Government and Opposition parties who bring people in from outside to swell numbers and show support for their position. I have been in Sikkim several times when rallies are held and seen jeeps packed with people brought into areas where a show of support is needed. After the Dikchu incident I was told many of the people who were brought into the town were not aware of the reason, just that support was needed for the Government.

otherwise supposedly unadulterated and unspoilt kinsmen') and the Lepchas from his home in West Bengal (2003, p.60).

Some 60 years later, in a contested Dzongú, the differences between the West Bengal Lepchas and their 'kinsmen' in Dzongú who support the dams are political. The West Bengal Lepchas' anti-dam stance meant their common identity was attached to the ACT members. However, their rejection by the pro-dam Lepchas was confusing and distressing.

These differences played out in Sikkim during the two pilgrimages in how the West Bengal Lepchas were received by those with different beliefs for the future of Dzongú; and also in how the West Bengal Lepchas approached the discourse about the dams. By asserting their political identity as 'traditional owners' from elsewhere, they enabled the government and its pro-dam supporters to label them as unwelcome outsiders.

After the abandoned pilgrimage, Lyangsong Tamsang wrote of the incident in *Aachuley* magazine. His report is a disturbing account of the pilgrims' three days in Sikkim. He described the moment he had to tell the pilgrims that it would not be possible to cross the Sangkalang Bridge into Dzongú because 'hired' Lepchas from outside Dzongú were being brought in vehicles by the ruling party to oppose and deter the Lepcha pilgrims from entering into Dzongú.

Lepcha youths filled with deep emotion and tears in their eyes became vocal and started to protest and very explicitly expressed their intention to cross Sungklong irrespective of the outcome.⁸⁶ Although the Lepcha pilgrims were well equipped with their proper documents to enter into Dzongú to pray and offer their salutations and ovations at the sacred confluence of Rongnyoo and Ronggyong, they had to face many unnecessary and incomprehensible obstructions and hindrances during their pilgrimage (2008, pp.46–51).

When Bauman said, 'one thinks of identity whenever one is not sure of where one belongs,' (1996, p.19) he referred to the uncertainty someone may experience when are unsure where to place themselves. 'Identity, is a name

⁸⁶ Sunklong is an old Lepcha spelling for Sangkalang Bridge, the check point. Lyangsong Tamsang when writing about Lepcha matters uses the original Lepcha words which are often not in wide use.

given to the escape sought from that uncertainty' (1996, p.19). The young members of ACT who were born in Dzungú hadn't talked about their identity until they thought it would be compromised – or lost – when the dams were built.

However, the West Bengal Lepchas had foreseen the fragility of their culture decades earlier and much of the work of the ILTA was devoted to preserving and strengthening it. They were confident in their Lepcha identity but concerned about the loss of Lepcha culture. The narratives of their pilgrimage were about Dzungú and their constitutional and moral right to observe the Lepcha rituals there. They used words like 'holy', 'sacred', 'culture' and 'tradition'. Identity was something they easily defined. Yet their Lepcha identity – if you view identity in a modern frame that is troubled by, quoting Bauman once more, 'how to construct an identity and keep it solid and stable' (1996, p.18) – in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal had been fragile for decades, not because of lack of definition but more from the overwhelming influence of other cultures. Bauman's explanation of the post-modern problem of identity suggests a new challenge for the Lepchas which 'is primarily how to avoid fixation and keep the options open' (1996, p.18).

The two pilgrimages strengthened identity among the West Bengal Lepchas and connected them physically to Dzungú. The first pilgrimage created ties between the visitors and their hosts that will bind for a generation – it also gave the young visitors tangible evidence of what they were fighting for. Ironically, but unsurprisingly, being evicted from Dzungú just made them want to fight more to protect it. The second pilgrimage – stopped at the border of Lower Dzungú – strengthened ties to Dzungú, even though the pilgrims could not visit. The blockade at Dikchu served to enhance the mystique and importance of Dzungú and to reinforce its imagined future as a 'lost place'. It was at that time a 'lost destination', which for those on the pilgrimage would remain so until they could touch the soil and drink the water of the land.

From Bauman: 'Destination, the set purpose of life's pilgrimage, gives form to the formless, makes a whole out of the fragmentary, lends continuity to the episodic'

(1996, p 22). These threads remained in Dzungú – like missing strands of identity to be picked up at another time by the West Bengal Lepchas. They returned to Kalimpong and Darjeeling and made plans to do so.

Chapter 6 – Finding the spirit of the Gods

Passingdang, Upper Dzongú, January 2008

A young Lepcha *mun* sat cross-legged before an altar, offerings of fruit, vegetables, flowers, *cí*, chicken and rice before her. Amidst a thick curl of incense smoke, she chanted quietly. The family of the house sat cross-legged around the wall, wide-eyed children on their mother's lap. The priestess did not return the subdued gaze of her audience for her eyes were tightly shut. After a few minutes her voice rose and her chanting quickened. She cried out:

Where are they? Where are bows and arrows? I had asked you all to prepare them.

'Here they are,' said a woman and placed them by the priestess's side.

I had asked you all to prepare them and they are ready. This is good. Father and mother be ready with your bows and arrows.

She clasped the bow and arrow by her side and her body shook in time with her chanting. She threw rice at the altar and then grappled with the bow until she felt the arrow in place. She circled the arrow above the offerings before throwing it at them. She called to a man who knelt before her and received her blessing. She made demands of him and he looked concerned. Her voice rose – assertive, instructive and insistent.

You are father of land and vast family. You have no choice but to stand up for the cause. But you all who are leading from the front have not prepared your weapons. You have not listened to my bidding. It is shameful and sad.

Now you are the leader, give me the day and time. I will take you men to the big forest. I will separate you all. You will have to make a pool of blood. You have to take and give life. Tell me fast when will you call me?

'Two weeks' he replied. 'We will let you know in two weeks.'

You will have to go to a big forest. I will choose you all. No women or girls should come. Only men. ... It has been months now, but nothing much has happened You

are not heeding me. I have said what I have said. Still, if you all are listless, then they will step all over you and all will not be well for the land. Be careful.

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This ritual, performed in a village in Upper Dzongú, was both a spiritual and a protest narrative, spoken by the Lepcha gods through a young Lepcha priestess named Phurkit, known as the Sakyong *Mun*⁸⁷.

Phurkit was asked to conduct the ritual to protect from harm those living in the house who were members of ACT. They were concerned that their battle against the dams would bring harm to their household. The deities that spoke through the Lepcha *mun* implored the activists to act with more assertiveness to protect the land. She called on the spirits of the past Lepcha chiefs, *Mensalong*, *Thekongtek* and *Aginthing*, and it was their voices heard by those crammed into the prayer room, seeking guidance and protection.

Phurkit's rituals for ACT members, which she conducted in Dzongú and over the border in Kalimpong, were very specific to Lepcha culture and pre-Buddhist (and pre-colonisation) beliefs. Her ritual narratives aligned with ACT's protest narratives that Dzongú was a sacred land and that the dams should not be built there. Her rituals reiterated ACT's environmental argument that the land is ecologically fragile, and that the gods will be angry if it is disturbed.

The inclusion of Lepcha ritual in the ACT protest helped to affirm the reasons for the protest and strengthened the collective identity of the ACT members.

Munism and *Bóngthingism*, and the rituals of these practices, are prominent casualties of modernity, with fewer shamans who can practise the rituals and fewer reasons to enlist the help of someone who has 'the spirit of the Gods'.

James Kurth, when discussing globalisation as a revolution, noted, 'all revolutions disrupt the traditions and customs of a people. Indeed they threaten a people's very security, safety, and even identity' (cited in Radhakrishnan 2004, p.1404). It is fitting to consider the decline in the function of the Lepcha *mun* and *bóngthing* alongside globalisation's disturbance in Dzongú. The familiarity of

⁸⁷ I attended and filmed the ritual. It was translated by Inchung Lepcha who also attended.

ritual performance provided assurance at a time of change that held the prospect of further change.

Deploying ritual – through *bóngthíngs* and *muns* – by the members of ACT brought both a reconnection to their cultural beliefs and an antidote to globalisation. After the hunger strike the young protesters more readily sought out and participated in Lepcha shamanistic beliefs. Ritual narratives brought evidence to the sacred place narratives of the movement and played an important part in strengthening the protesters’ connections to their Lepcha identity.

My interpretation of the rituals is less about identifying the deities and whether (or how) the *mun* and *bóngthíng* interacted with or appropriated them, and more about the relevance of ritual in modern Lepcha society – in particular its role in the battle for Dzungú. Like Taussig’s exploration of narratives of terror in the rubber trade in Colombia in the early 20th century, I observe the ritual and listen to the stories ‘neither as fiction nor as disguised signs of truth, but as real’ (1987, p.75).

I made two journeys to Dzungú in the late Indian autumn of 2010 where I observed the annual rituals of Phurkit Lepcha, the Sakyong *Mun*, and Kuncheot Lepcha, the Puntong *Bóngthíng*.

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It was during the long, backbreaking days of the 2006 millet harvest that Phurkit Lepcha discovered she had ‘the spirit of the Gods’. Her mother explained: ‘She was crying “everything is going to be destroyed, the bad thing will be coming”. People thought she was joking, having fun, but every time she is saying “our place is going to be destroyed, we must save it”’.⁸⁸

Phurkit’s matriarchal clan line had a rich history of *Munism*. Her great-grandmother was a *mun* as was her great-aunt. On her grandmother’s side there were five sisters, all *muns*. Phurkit’s sister was also a *mun* but was ‘no longer

⁸⁸ I spoke to Phurkit’s mother in Loden Lepcha’s house in Passingdang in December 2009. Loden Lepcha translated.

performing since she married'. Phurkit's mother, who was not a *mun* told me an old story from her mother's clan, *Tung Teddi pucho*, that involved a competition between the five *mun* sisters to learn who among them was the most powerful. One brought a star down to earth, another brought food from Mayel Kyong and another filled a bamboo mat with rice through meditation.

'After that time, we haven't had real *muns* with that much power,' Phurkit's mother explained.

But Phurkit is gaining real power. This year she completes four years of being a *mun*. At her ritual she performed *Sogee rumfát* – the *mun* ritual – and she asked her gods, *Thekongtek* and *Nyookungnyu* to see our problem, that most of the people are destroying our own land. They are destroying the peaceful land and those who are destroying it, please look for them and punish them. *Thekongtek* and *Nyookungnyu*'s spirit came to Phurkit and they said "We don't do like this, we have to do awareness to those who are favouring destroying the land. We have to tell them it is wrong".

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Lingza, Upper Dzongú, November 2009

We all are doing preparation of rituals for the rumfát and she has especially instructed only the boys to get involved. Seniors from the village are teaching us young boys how to make bamboo basket and all. Ongchuk, Norbu and Dawa-Thendup had done it but I hadn't.

Tenzing Lepcha⁸⁹

The annual ritual Phurkit's mother spoke of had occurred one month earlier in Upper Dzongú at Lingza village. Through Dawa, who was filming the ritual, I was invited by Phurkit to attend. We left Passingdang early morning in a jeep emblazoned with the words SAVE MOTHERLAND on the windscreen, owned by a driver who was against the dams. Phurkit had become known for her support of ACT and her highly visible rituals during the hunger strike at BL House, at the

⁸⁹ Tenzing Lepcha explained and translated the ritual to me soon after when we watched my video recordings of the event. It is his narration in italics that is threaded through this section.

sacred grove, Kabi Longchok and with the West Bengal ILTA members in Kalimpong. Her narratives of protest were spoken through the Lepcha deities who protect Sikkim and it is their voices heard during Phurkit's rituals. We had travelled to Lingza to connect with the gods.

We arrived there mid morning just as the sun was warming the earth. The house where the ritual was being held stood beside a field of rice that had recently turned yellow, ready for harvest. About 10 villagers worked in the middle of the field, cutting and threshing the waist-high rice by hand. It's golden grasses spread from the road to a nearby monastery school, where young lamas leaned over the balcony, curiously observing our arrival. In another time the entire village would have been at the house but this ritual was conducted when there was conflict in the community between anti-dam and pro-dam factions. Also, as Phurkit's mother explained, it is expensive to host a large crowd: 'We are very poor and cannot do it on a large scale. Last time we did the ritual in Sakyong and invited everyone ... but we don't have enough money to invite them [all the village] so we invited just our colleagues who are interested'.

There were faces familiar to me at the house. The President of ACT, Athup was there, as were Gyatso, Tenzing and Ongchuk. Tenzing's friends from Hee Gyathang: Dawa Thendup and Norbu (once famously arrested and jailed for belting a couple of hydro company workers who were trespassing on their land), were also present, along with other young 'foot soldiers' from BL House who had finished the relay hunger strike a month earlier. The Passingdang women were in the kitchen boiling wild yams to offer to the deities and Dawa was seemingly everywhere, his camera capturing each stage of the ritual.

The men sat in the garden making offerings for the ritual. This was strictly men's business and seniors guided the young men in crafting tiny hand-woven bamboo baskets filled with *ci* and *ciboo* and *cibok*⁹⁰. These offerings and others – some made from flowers, corn, ginger and bamboo – were threaded onto long sticks of bamboo, making a *tamling* that was then attached to a frame. They also made lamps from long bamboo strips filled with oil and wicks.

⁹⁰ The grains are fermented to make these ceremonial Lepcha drinks

The process of making the offerings was precise and therefore time consuming. The many young ACT members participated enthusiastically, diligently responding to instructions from their elders.

The annual rituals of the village *mun* or *bóngthing* are important communal ceremonies in Lepcha society. In small-scale societies such as the Lepcha, rituals develop maintain and renegotiate a whole series of social relations (Spielmann 2002, p.196). They are commonly deployed to negotiate with the hunting gods, to encourage an abundant harvest and to safeguard the village community. They also serve to reinforce Lepcha belonging for 'identity affirmation occurs when practices being celebrated are both customary and already invested with a high level of sacredness' (Hermanowicz and Morgan 1999, p.200). Rappaport (cited in Spielmann 2002, p.196) suggests that the ritual cycle defines and gives meaning to social, political, and ecological relations. Phurkit's annual ritual invested meaning in all three. Her rituals had created a space where the activists could merge traditional knowledge and their contemporary learning and apply both to their understanding of the impact of the dams. It was a space that co-opted the wisdom and power of their deities against the money and power of the dam developers and the state government.

Phurkit's stepfather, who guided her rituals and worked as her assistant, offered instructions on how the offerings and the frame for the *tamling* should be made. The number and order of the offerings was important for each deity had to have their own. All the while Phurkit supervised the work, asking that it be done exactly as the deities expected. She walked around the garden 'disguising her gender' by wearing Lepcha men's clothing, her long, thick hair gathered and tied in a loose bun because, in order to talk to and speak for the gods, she had to represent a man for the gods would not speak through her female form.

She had asked Tenzing and his friends to help with the ritual when they arrived at the house the day before. Ongchuk threaded the 20 or so offerings onto the *tamling* and carefully counted them: flowers, ginger root, corn, banana leaves filled with rice, bamboo baskets with *cí*, before handing it to Gyatso who took it to the garden and fixed it to the frame for the ritual.

An altar was rigged from bamboo and on the altar were more offerings: a plate with rice and millet, some dried and pressed white flowers, mini bamboo vessels filled with *cí*; all placed on a bed of banana plant leaves and bordered by *khadas*. Nearby, a table overflowed with offerings of fruit and vegetables. This was the space where Phurkit would conduct her ritual.

This was a socially constructed sacred space, transformed in just 24 hours by the men and women she had called on to participate in her ritual. What was previously a garden was now a temple and, because of Phurkit's activism through her rituals, (and the recent political history of her guests) it could also be considered a political space. Phurkit's insistence that the young men learn the technique of preparing the rituals from their elders was a departure from the usual custom of elder men assisting her. She extended the role of the ACT members in her ritual by enlisting their help.

Tenzing, Dawa Thendup and Norbu changed into the Lepcha *thókro-dum* just before the ritual began and sat where Phurkit instructed them.

The mun told us before to sit here, sit there – she gave us instruction, told us to sit in this position. In my basket there were some grains that I had to count. The others, Norbu and all, had to pour the tea. And Dawa-Thendup had to throw those grains. I thought she had 12 deities because she had told us to count 12 times.

I observed from the other side of the mesh-fenced enclosure along with the women. Inside, the menfolk stood around, observers standing back a little while those helping the *mun*, stood near her, waiting for guidance.

She sat cross-legged on the ground in front of the altar surrounded by offerings. The smell of smoke and incense infused the air. Tenzing, Dawa-Thendup and Norbu knelt next to her, and her stepfather stood nearby. Pink and white flowers dangled prettily from the bamboo sticks placed arbour-like above the *mun*'s head.

She took a breath and closed her eyes and started to shake. Then her body tensed and she held her hands in front of her, first squeezing her fingers then flattening them. Her chest heaved as she spoke the words of the Lepcha warrior deities.

She called Athup Lepcha to her side and he knelt before her. She placed her hand on his head and gave him a blessing. Other men also knelt before her and were blessed.

Now the deities are coming, she is asking the ox for sacrifice: 'If you give that sacrifice I will look after you but you first have to give me the blood of the ox.' She is asking for all her things, she is asking one of her messengers Athup and all, she is asking him 'Where is what I asked for, if you give me then I can do. If you give me then I will handle everything.'

On the other side of the barrier, we women watched. Even the little girls, who usually ran around noisily were silent, their faces pressed against the mesh. The *mun* sat on the ground rocking back and forth. She laughed, then chanted breathlessly then she laughed again. She turned away from the altar, her shoulders and hands squeezed tight; she turned back and relaxed those muscles and fluttered her fingers through the air. Her body then contorted, shifting from one emotion and action to another; her eyes rolled back. She cried, she convulsed, she held her head in her hands and her chanting became agitated, desperate. She screamed and shook so hard her hair fell from its bun and cascaded down her back, falling well past her waist. She tore arrows out of their sheath. Then she cried, a wailing really, followed by chanting and more cries. Her misery was palpable. She took an arrow and switched it around her in anger, causing her assistants to lean away.

Now she is asking, 'are the people of my clan ok?' Now she is very angry and she is asking for dry rice, fruits and all the deities. It should be kept in a certain way but she says all things are in a mess so now she is asking 'where are my seven brothers?' She is crying and asking for her seven brothers. 'Why have my guides not prepared the offerings in the right way? Why did you all submit this?' Everything has to be kept orderly. The offerings in red khadas are messy; they should be in seven orderly lines; one for each brother.

Her guides threw rice towards the mountains in an effort to appease the deities. Her mother threw rice and sprinkled water and the others followed. The rice attracted the chickens and they clucked and pecked the ground. The *mun's* chanting became measured. Then the laughter returned and with it a new voice, the voice of the Lepcha deity *Deampundi*.

Her mother is sprinkling the rice. In order to please her, she sprinkles it and her anger goes away. The seven mountains are the main mountains like seven brothers.

She is asking us all that we should give the name of the seven brothers. She is saying you should not separate us. Now the Deampundi spirit is coming. 'If you give me that offering I will be satisfied.' Now Deampundi is speaking and saying 'I have some people belonging to my clan and they are here.' A woman and her son come forward who belong to Deampundi's clan. She is saying 'I have some relatives belonging to my clan and I want to see them'.

The *mun* instructed Tenzing and Norbu to give her grains. She took them in her hands and then threw them up into the air. Norbu sprinkled *cí*, and Tenzing counted out the grains – 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12.

The other men threw rice towards the mountains.

A man and an old woman knelt before her.⁹¹ The man bowed his head and she held it in her hands, giving him her blessing, then the old woman. 'You are all about to vanish,' the *mun* warned. 'We are from the same mothers, sons, daughters. You all should still grow maize and rice.'

The old woman walked away from the altar and the *mun* stood and walked around in circles. She took rice in her hands and made an offering by throwing it.

When she sat down she was quieter.

She may no longer be Deampundi. Her clan is Songkyong Pucho. She said 'have you all offered everything in a proper way or not? I hope everything is arranged in a proper way for my sister's clan, Songkyong pucho.' Now she is asking for a sacrifice – the chicken.

⁹¹ The old woman was permitted to enter the ritual. This was not properly explained to me other than to explain that she was old, and related to Phurit.

Ongchuk and the man of the house walked around to where the chickens were feeding and caught a rooster. It protested loudly, squawking indignantly as it was placed on the *mun*'s lap. She took it in her arms and it fell silent. She stroked its feathers, her fingers dragging along the bird's back. She grasped it under its wings and with her right hand, held it aloft moving it in circles towards the mountains. Curiously, the rooster made no sound nor offered resistance. She scattered rice over its head and called for water. She plunged a bamboo straw into a bottle of water several times and sprinkled the drops around the altar. All the while the rooster was helpless in her grip. Incongruously, a mobile phone rang and its owner hurriedly answered it.

The *mun* traded the rooster for a little brown hen, which also came to her protesting. She grabbed its neck from under its wings, held it aloft and it slumped like a fluffy toy. She handed back the hen and the man of the house took both birds away, but he hovered close by with one in each hand, perhaps in case she asked again for them. Tenzing said she didn't actually kill the chicken – she did so symbolically because 'she did not want any more bloodshed'. She sat cross-legged in front of the altar and allowed *Deampundi*'s voice to come.

She is saying 'I am Deampundi, don't make me sad, I will come'. She is tasting the offerings, mostly she does with wild fruits and all. Wild yam, fruit like that. She is searching for wild yam, fruit.

This part of the ritual drew to a close. Ongchuk swung a censer of burning leaves; Norbu, Tenzing and Dawa-Thendup scattered rice and drops of *ci*. And the *mun*, singing softly, rocked back and forth.

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After a short break the ritual continued inside the house, in a crammed prayer room, filled to the brim with offerings to the gods and Phurkit's congregation.

Children squeezed into spaces between the legs of adults. Tenzing, Dawa-Thendup and Norbu knelt in a line alongside the *mun*, hands clasped in prayer, ready to assist her. She berated them because things were not done in the proper way. 'You all have not kept the things in a proper way; my instruments

are not kept properly. Is everything here?’ she asked and then began to weep because offerings were not there. Tenzing told me that some of the fruits she was used to eating were not provided. Her mother spoke for the boys, who by this time looked quite despondent. ‘Please don’t be sad,’ her mother said. ‘The boys are inexperienced young boys, please don’t be sad.’ Later Tenzing told me he was wondering what they had missed. ‘I was saying sorry from inside. If we have missed things, next time we will not repeat this. We are sorry.’

She is offering to all the deities, Mt Kangchendzönga, Kongchen deity. Now she is saying to the spirits: you all should come and protect all my people, you should take messages and news to the people. We won’t see the deities but sometimes they will send a message – like a landslide or other things, in a natural way. And in another way, they are sending a message to the people that we are here and this is how you will know.

Phurkit’s language came from long ago, from the deities and deified ancestors of the Lepcha. Through her they talked of destruction of the land by the forces of nature such as floods and landslides. Her ritual and narratives were from traditional culture, invoking spirits that have protected Mayel Lyang for centuries. But the context, her youth and how she performed them – using inexperienced, young, protesters – signalled a modernising of ritual performance.

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Phurkit’s decision to be an active participant in the protest as a *mun* played a significant role in promoting ritual as a relevant cultural trope for the young Lepcha men. The ACT foot soldiers that attended her annual ritual were just one month on from their 915-day relay hunger strike. Outside BL House, on and off for that period, their narrative was anti-dam and anti-globalisation. Participating in this most traditional form of ritual shared by no other ethnic community, was an antidote to the 915 days. It was also, by extension, an antidote to globalisation, for Lingza had been touched by the ‘friction’ Anna Tsing describes as ‘the awkward, unequal, unstable and creative qualities of interconnection across difference’ (2005, p.4). The ritual was conducted on what

was then contested land, for it was just a few kilometres from the Lingza hydro-electricity site, transformed by its development as a 120-megawatt dam. It was no longer a small part of the natural world, flanked by immense forest, where the tributary Ringpi River flows to the Rangyong River. It had become a global space where decisions about where, how and whether the Ringpi will flow, had created conflict between those who lived there. At Lingza the Lepchas inhabited a place that had become a cross-border, multinational, globally connected land. A place that Tsing might have spoke of when she asked: Who speaks for nature? What kinds of social justice make sense in the twenty-first century? (2005, p.11).

Who speaks for nature? On Lepcha lands it is often shamans who speak for nature. Most *mun* and *bóngthing* are elderly and they present as inhabitants of the world of the elders, the old world of the Lepcha. They experience nature as culture. To them, there is nowhere that must be called 'nature' in distinction from that which could be called 'culture' (Harvey 2006, p.151).

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The day after Phurkit's ritual, at Loden's house in Passingdang, I asked Tenzing, Norbu and Dawa-Thendup if they would have attended a ritual like this before they got involved with ACT and the movement.

'I think we would have been in our own world. We had feeling for the community but not like we are having now,' said Tenzing.

'It's come to, let's protect our own culture. Before then [dams] we don't have such an idea, we had our own life. Before then, there was nothing, there was no sign of danger,' said Dawa-Thendup.

Tenzing said the main turning point for his reconnection with the ritual aspect of Lepcha culture was the movement. 'Most of us young people, our mind wasn't consistent. We had the feeling, but these rituals and all came slowly. When we got involved in our movement we came to know these things. Then we attend some puja then slowly, slowly, day by day.'

Tenzing explained a message from Phurkit the year before when she had forewarned of flooding: 'For example, last year there was a big flash flood so

while we can't see them [deities] still they are helping us to protect the place. There was no rain that day, I heard that day was full moon day and suddenly there was a flash flood but there was no rain. It was on 16th August last year.'

I asked the three men if when they were assisting the *mun* at the ritual the day before, they had felt a certain connection to the rituals as Lepchas. 'Were you feeling an emotional connection?'

'Yeah, yeah,' they answered and nodded and Tenzing remarked on their inexperience as assistants to the *mun*.

'Suddenly, it struck me that we have to do something and to some extent I feel some regret also. At a certain point we were not doing things properly, at certain points we were not understanding [the ritual] properly.'

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For nature to continue to have a strong presence in Lepcha society, young people need to participate in the rituals and beliefs that revere it. Phurkit in her ritualised form is a convincing, respected – and because of her youth – contemporary spiritual leader with people of all ages. Among the ACT foot soldiers she is also an enabler of this aspect of Lepcha culture. Her insistence that the young men assist at her annual ritual, even though they were inexperienced, encouraged them to engage intimately with Lepcha shamanism. I am not suggesting that they are engaging in the same way their elders would, for they have long been exposed to contemporary influences. They are comfortably shaped by conditions of colonisation: technological, demographic, environmental, economic and cultural (Gray 2004, p.218), and they are negotiating their modern, cosmopolitan identity – as Lepchas, as advocates, and as educated youth attracted to, and participating in, the transnational public domain that thrives outside Dzongú.

The ACT protesters are indigenous to their land but they also, through the fear of losing it and the conflict this has brought in their community, inhabit an uncomfortable space – the 'borderlands of incommensurable contradictions – an interstitial zone of displacement and deterioration that shapes their identity'

(Gupta & Ferguson 1992, p.10). This space influences their actions as protesters and as participants in the *mun's* ritual in Lingza.

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Ritual was an important form of protest and an important spiritual experience for the members of ACT. Szerszynski argues, 'environmental protest movements draw on strategies of ritualisation in order both to help bind the movement together, and also to communicate to wider society' (2002, p.51). This is partly the case with the Lepcha protest, which ritualised events by creating symbols, such as the Lepcha flag, and protest songs, the relay hunger strike, and by repeating events and behaviours where symbols were used. However, they were already bonded by their shared identity and shared upbringing in Dzongú. They observed rituals to support their protest narrative and to motivate supporters and they also participated in cultural ritual as part of their spiritual nourishment. The twice-daily prayers by lamas at BL House, (see Chapter 4) were, in a sense, a ritualised ritual. The ritual itself – which contained drumming, chanting, prayers, lighting of candles, and showing respect to Buddha – was usually conducted at Lingthem monastery in Dzongú; however, by bringing a 'satellite Lingthem monastery' to BL House and conducting prayers there, those prayers became part of a ritualised protest against the projects. The Lingthem lama, Chotol Lepcha, who was active in the movement and a frequent relay hunger striker, had a dual role in his community; he was a respected lama and religious painter, and an active protester and general secretary of the monks' anti-dam action group, the Sangha of Dzongú. The Buddhist rituals he performed at BL House were also narratives of identity, protest and sanctity. During the relay hunger strike I asked ACT Secretary Dawa Lepcha whether he thought the rituals would help them to stop the dams. 'We use everything,' he replied. 'We have the protest, legal action, negotiation and ritual. It is all part of the mix, all important.'

The anthropologist Terence Turner has worked with the Kayapo society in Brazil for decades, including a period of resistance against mega hydroelectric projects under conditions similar to that faced by the Lepchas. He said the Kayapo understood the importance of overtly representing themselves as a group of

distinctive identity, capable of acting independently in defence of their cultures, lands and environment (2006, p.10).

The Lepcha protesters deployed their distinct culture and identity as protest tools. Appealing to the deities to protect Dzongú was part of ACT's protest strategy for fighting the projects, along with hunger strike, legal action, and broader community engagement with other tribes in Sikkim. Before the Sakyong *Mun* made her way to BL House in 2007, the Tarang *Bóngthíng* had performed a ritual there at ACT's request. He also performed a ritual at the inauguration of the Dikchu hydro project. I asked him if the deities were angry because of the dam and he said 'when I perform that puja, the deities leave that place, otherwise the deities are there and harm will come.' His grandson told me the ritual was done to protect the people of Dikchu.⁹²

The Tarang *Bóngthíng's* ritual at BL House in the early days of the hunger strike was done in front of protest banners and hunger strikers but it would be wrong to assume that the Tarang *Bóngthíng* is a protester. Most Lepcha festivals or cultural events would include a ritual from a *bóngthíng* so it could be argued that events related to the protest – 100 days, 200 days, hunger strike beginning and ending – were cultural events as well as major milestones of the protest.

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Phurkit conducted many rituals as a crusader for the sanctity of Dzongú among the anti-dam Lepchas in Sikkim and Kalimpong. Her mother knew when Phurkit received the 'spirit of the Gods' that they would support ACT. 'We are going two paths, whatever the gods and goddesses recommend we are taking those paths. That's why we support ACT.'

Phurkit's mother explained that once her daughter had the spirit she wanted to go to Gangtok [to BL House] but that her nephew had said the family should be in favour of the projects.

⁹² I interviewed the Tarang Bongthing Atuk Lepcha in his home in Tarang, Lower Dzongu on 7 January 2009. His grandson Thendup (Henry) Lepcha translated.

I refused to join with them because the gods and goddesses were saying that we should protect our land and we should walk on the good path. They [her nephews] are saying sometimes we can't hear the god's language. Maybe sometimes gods will fail and gods are not on the true path. They do not believe the gods. But I think we should protect our own land so still I am protesting against the projects because when my daughter got the spirit of the god she said we should protect the land. I believe in my daughter and I believe my daughter's god.

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Puntong, Upper Dzongú, November 2009

A week after the Sakyong *Mun's* ritual at Lingza, I attended the Puntong *Bóngthing's* annual ritual in Puntong in Upper Dzongú.

To reach Puntong you first drive to the village of Bey, where the road ends and a walking path begins. Our jeep passed the dam site at Lingza, where 43 ACT protesters had been arrested in January 2009 charged with vandalism.⁹³ Three of those arrested were Sikkim's most dedicated hunger strikers and also my travelling companions – Dawa, Tenzing and Ongchuk. It had been five months since they withdrew from their indefinite hunger strike and they were surprisingly energetic considering the trauma their bodies had endured. Aprilmit Lepcha from Passingdang, a staunch supporter of ACT, was also with us.

Puntong is a long walk from the road through an old growth forest that stretches from the hills to the Talong River, a tributary of the Teesta. After two hours we were rewarded by the sight of farmhouses snuggled into a valley, bordered by mountains along one side, the jungle on the other, threaded by the Talong River, which separates Puntong from pretty Sakyong, the village on the other side. Lingza, Puntong and Sakyong are buffer villages for the Kangchendzönga Biosphere Reserve, home to 1687 plants, 45 mammals and 203 birds.⁹⁴ The reserve is a survival habitat for many threatened species; where the Red Panda (extinct in many of its former habitats) roams from dusk to dawn without fear of

⁹³ The charges were later dismissed by a magistrate

⁹⁴ Information about Biosphere Reserve <http://www.icimod.org/hkhconservationportal/PA.aspx?ID=2> (accessed 10/9/11)

poachers and the massive plant-eating Takin feeds on the high forested bamboo. The Asian Golden Cat lives a solitary life there preying on the Himalayan Goral, safe from hunters who covet their fur. It is also home to the Snow Leopard - thought to number between 200 and 600 in India, and near extinction across the globe.

We travellers were supporting Dawa who was making a short film about Kuncheot Lepcha the Puntong *Bóngthíng*. Our visit was timed to coincide with his annual ritual, which, because the entire village were of the same clan, *Atheengdem pucho*, was celebrated by everyone in the village. Dawa wanted to show four generations of one family and how their lives differed. His script called for an examination of Kuncheot's world as an elder who rarely left his village; of his son, Yangkut, who was a schoolteacher at the Puntong school, and of Yangkut's four sons. Laden the eldest son, was attending teacher training in Gangtok; Palden, the second eldest, lived between the village and Mangan where his three young boys went to school. Sonam, the third son, lived and worked as a lawyer in Gangtok and the youngest son, Baichung, lived in Kolkata and studied finance. Yangkut's daughter Oongmu, who taught at the nearby Sakyong primary school, lived at home. Yangkut's grandsons (Palden's sons) were at boarding school in Mangan in North Sikkim – continuing a migratory pattern that started when their clan migrated to Puntong from West Sikkim many generations earlier.

I was interested in Dawa's cultural examination of Kuncheot's family but also in how my travelling companions might participate in the ritual, given that it was not their clan, nor their village. They told me that they had visited before, when ACT members had walked from village to village to garner support for the movement. But on this trip we would not be talking about the dams. Our sole purpose was to film Kuncheot, who, because of his advanced age, may not have many more annual rituals to perform.

Kuncheot was 81 when we met and had been a *bóngthíng* for 30 years. He said his first people came from inside a cliff in Ting Gyathang in West Sikkim and

slowly moved to the Samtam area of North Sikkim and then to Puntong where they settled and the clan spread.

Kuncheot's transition to *bóngthíng* came suddenly and like other *bóngthíngs* I spoke to he described the experience as one of madness. 'When I was mad I started to say whatever came to my mind. Then I started saying predictions. I couldn't stop. I started chanting.'

Kuncheot said other *bóngthíngs* in the village are not able to do the things he does. He has to roam around everywhere, including to Lingza and Sakyong, helping people.

Early in the morning the village men went to the jungle to appease the hunting god. There they prepared the clearing for the ritual and made offerings. They drank *cí* and relayed hunting stories, the young men listening to Kuncheot's stories. Kuncheot sat before an altar made from ferns and banana leaves, heavy with offerings to the hunting god. During his ritual he said:

Since the time of our creation as padim, shaman, and by the power bestowed on us, I now propitiate and make these offerings to you all the deities who help in hunting and ensure the safety of the hunters. I offer you chicken, yams, fruits and flowers. I offer them to you, the hunting deities. You are the owners of the animals, when the hunters come, you must give them the lame and the extras from your herd. I now request you all for food, do not fail me.

After returning from the jungle the men sat in the sun near the fields behind the house and prepared offerings for the ritual that evening.

Similar to the preparation for Purkit's ritual a week earlier, the men threaded bamboo for little baskets and made offerings of flowers, *cí*, and rice. There was a garland of flowers made for Kuncheot's head along with a flower-topped bamboo stick that he would use during the ritual. Kuncheot's son placed the headdress on and amused the group by mimicking his father performing a ritual. Young women pounded grain to make flour and Kuncheot's granddaughter diligently plaited his hair into neat and narrow cornrows, in preparation for the evening. The community worked in the fields and made the offerings for the ritual.

Yangkut taught at the primary school, and his wife, Lhakit, worked harder than anyone – collecting fodder, feeding animals, preparing food and drink for the celebration. Tenzing and Ongchuk sat cross-legged on the ground, beside the men in the family, helping to make the offerings as they had done at the Sakyong *Mun's* ritual. Aprilmit had spent the earlier part of our visit inside the house watching Hindi soap operas on television until the power went out. All the while, Dawa moved throughout the village, watching and filming.

When the light faded the villagers arrived at the house. They first drank *cí* and then filled the prayer room in Yangkut's house to witness the ritual.

The altar had been carefully prepared earlier and the offerings were meticulously arranged on *tamlings* suspended from the ceiling. Kungcheot's other son and his stepson assisted him with the ritual, as did his granddaughter. The men had participated in a hunting ritual in the jungle earlier that day. This ritual in the evening was to protect the entire community from angry *múng*. The chanting, now quite familiar to me as I had heard it so often, started. At first, the usual pleas for protection:

All you deities, your children have gathered to pay respect to you. Hear me now you, all you deities; the white snow has arrived and the grasses have lost their colour. Now you all who have taken care of us and have protected us, here now accept the offerings...

To be an outsider in the same room as a *bóngthing* who is appeasing furious deities can be a disconcerting experience. Soon after starting, Kungcheot flew into a rage. He threw the garland from his head and took the form of the main deity *Agenthing*, who was angry that while preparing the flower garland, someone had fooled around with it and made jokes. He turned to the son who had earlier worn the headdress and mimicked his father and shouted: 'Why were you all disrespecting it? Now you all take care of yourself'.

The crowd, some who laughed nervously, shuffled towards the back of the room. The sons assisting their father tried to calm him down but it was some time before he settled. I heard that the son who mocked his father would not be continuing his father's ritual, nor would his other son, Yangkut. Kungcheot's

stepson will learn the rituals although he will not have the same powers as an inherited *bóngthíng*.

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I met many *bóngthíngs* and few *muns* during my visits to Lepcha lands. All played a significant role in the society of their village as conductors of ritual and interpreters for the deities.

While some *bóngthíngs* were optimistic that the rituals they conducted would continue, others were concerned for their community if the rituals weren't performed. Modernity, in particular access to education, brought opportunities to the current generation of Lepchas that their parents and grandparents could not have realised, but these are gained against the loss of the beliefs and rituals that have been an important part of community life in Lepcha society. *Bóngthíngs* and *muns* are local models of culture, who perform a key role in anchoring what White, referring to Gudeman's book *Economics and Culture*, described as;

the continued importance of local constructions ... a people's model is their life and history, their historical consciousness, their social construction; such models are essential in understanding the course of environmental, social, and economic change even under capitalism (1990, p.1113).

There is widespread acknowledgement that the future role of the village *bóngthíng* is in danger, and the advanced age of most of the *bóngthíngs* points to a future without many of the village rituals currently practised. This presents a challenge for village communities, where ritual, culture and collective identity are intertwined. It is the village *bóngthíng* who presides at recurring religious ceremonies and seasonal festivals and may heal acute illness. The *mun* ... is a healer who exorcises demons, helps to heal illness and guides souls to the afterlife (Plasier nd). Their rituals characterise the community by collectively sharing symbolic knowledge (Wulf 2010, p.x). A future without the rituals performed by *bóngthíng* and *mun* would compromise many village ceremonies and the Lepcha community has acted to ensure the rituals continue. In some communities (like Kuncheot's family in Puntong), a family member may be

taught how to perform the rituals. These *bóngthíngs* are sometimes called 'learned *bóngthíngs*' but while they may perform rituals, they are unable to channel or communicate with the spirits, or heal the sick.

The creation of learned *bóngthíngs* came from necessity. Most of the *bóngthíngs* I met were elders. For many, they had reached old age and did not expect to live many more years. The educated youth had mostly left the village and even if the deities called upon the youth who remained in the village, they had little interest in life as a *bóngthíng*.

None of the *bóngthíngs* I spoke to were formally educated. Their lives had been spent in the village, their wisdom and power shared for the benefit of their communities. Because they did not speak English I was always accompanied by an interpreter when I met them – often a family member or someone from the same village and in most cases (with few exceptions) a member of ACT. On many occasions my questions to the *bóngthíng* were superseded by the conversation between the *bóngthíng* and my interpreter. I was forgotten, for the youth who were there to explain to me what his elder did and said, became involved in the stories. My interpreters would lean forward and ask their own questions. Others often joined the conversation and my research questions about culture and tradition were superseded by other meaningful and, often livelier, discussions. Pema once joked that interpreting for me was a 'non-traditional' way of handing down the stories. Dawa has always known the value of elder wisdom and for many years has filmed his tribal customs. Tenzing became so interested in what he was hearing he began recording stories and rituals.

ACT, through the movement to stop the dams, has had a role in modernising ritual through including it in the protest. Their engagement with ritual contradicted the view that ritual is traditional and backward looking in values and goals (Csordas 1999, p.4), and I have mentioned how the movement propelled young Lepcha protesters to learn more about their traditions.

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The loss of rituals conducted by the *bóngthíng* and *mun* presents a challenge for the Lepcha youth who want to straddle two worlds – that of their village culture,

where distinct Lepcha identity is still strong; and the wider world where greater prosperity and opportunity may be found.

The young members of ACT inhabited a shared but transitional space with their elders that honoured old beliefs. It was a kind of virtual place, a spiritual and cultural space where they could be educated, aspirational and enjoy social and cultural events outside the Lepcha community. In this space elders and the young can make decisions that reflect modernity while respecting traditional beliefs. If someone in the village is sick they may call a *bóngthín*, but it is also acceptable and common to visit a doctor. Of course this is not new. When Buddhism came to Mayel Lyang it was embraced alongside the shamanistic beliefs; and Lepcha rituals were incorporated into Buddhist practice (see Chapter 2, 'Guru Padmasambhava's visit to Sikkim'). The community found space for both belief systems, made easier because of Buddhism's tolerance for other beliefs. A similar transition is in play now, with education and aspiration being the trigger for new beliefs and values, and a diminishing pool of *bóngthíns* to keep the role of ritual relevant. The pragmatic solution of creating a learned *bóngthín* may ensure the Lepcha rituals survive in some form in the villages; however, the desire of ACT members to engage with their elders was possibly more a reflection of their reconnection to their culture as protesters.

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In Puntong, Dawa had filmed Kuncheot and his son Yangkut talking about the fragility of their tradition. Yangkut, despite working as a schoolteacher, acknowledged that education had contributed to a breakdown in culture:

Due to the necessity of modern education, children are sent away to school from a very young age. In that process, we tend to forget our language. As they progress further, a whole lot of our own ways of life, rituals, custom, tradition and indigenous knowledge are neglected and forgotten. But if all are at least able to attend important family rituals then there is a good chance of learning lots of things about ourselves. Of course we cannot do without education. It is important.

Kuncheot lamented the lack of interest in his knowledge exhibited by his grandchildren:

My grandchildren hardly ask any questions. When it is time for them to leave they say their farewell. That's it. We hardly interact. Their venturing into the jungle is out of the question. Even when we ask them to go, they won't. While I am around they should ask about our history and traditions, but no, they don't. [They should ask about] our clan, from where we originated and so on, but they are not bothered. They stay in their own world.⁹⁵

There is an awkward scene in Dawa's film, shot in a house in Gangtok, where he asks Kuncheot's grandsons, Sonam and Laden why they didn't attend the ritual. Laden said he wasn't there because he went to Darjeeling for a vacation. Sonam said he couldn't make it. Dawa told them their grandfather had said they have moved away in their own world. There is an uncomfortable silence broken by the wife of one of the men who jokes that she too has moved away.

It would possibly be more notable if Kuncheot's grandsons **were** socially invested in the village life and rituals of their grandfather. One practises as a lawyer, the other is training to be a teacher and the third brother studies commerce in Kolkata; most of the jobs in the fields they are working in and training for are outside Dzongú. Their lives and ambitions might reflect those of many of the ACT members (particularly those who went to college) before the movement propelled them to learn about their culture and re-engage with rituals and those who perform them. Life had become unsettled for the ACT members and as a result ritual acquired greater significance (Swidler 1985, p.279). Sonam and Laden's life in Gangtok is a natural transition from the past to the future, enabled by education and modernity. It contrasts markedly with Dawa, Tenzing and Ongchuk's experience of and engagement in village rituals; and their connection to the narratives of the *bóngthing* and *mun*. But by understanding the old ways, the activists are able to create a vision for the new and defend Dzongú in a meaningful way. The ritual narratives present an alternative vision of the future – what Pederson called the 'utopian' and most powerful dimension of

⁹⁵ The description of the rituals and translations of comments are from Dawa Lepcha's film *Seasons*, which he filmed during our time in Puntong.

narrative. She said: 'narratives often motivate activism not primarily because of their vision of the past but rather because people find a projected future appealing. To be compelling, of course, a vision of the future must be coherent with people's understanding of the past' (1996, p.30).

The members of ACT appropriated ritual in two ways for their practice. The first was by overtly deploying ritual as part of their protest toolkit; what Dawa previously described as 'part of the mix.' The second was by learning the rituals and the old stories of their people. This was at times done in a structured ACT environment, but often done independently, in their villages where they sought out information from village elders. By doing this they were further defining the place they were defending, bringing evidence to their narrative that Dzongú is a sacred place and that the gods were working with them to protect it. They were reinforcing the reality of Mayel Lyang as the land of hidden paradise – their utopia – and making a case for a future there where traditional knowledge and modern ideas coexist. Pederson said narratives have an ability to present an alternative vision of the future, and that a utopia that is truly 'no place' cannot motivate people, at least not many, to struggle for its realisation' (1996, p.31). Phurkit's ritual narratives, spoken in defence of Dzongú, breathe new life into old beliefs, and give the members of ACT access to 'the spirit of the gods' in a context their protest can relate to and benefit from.

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The last ritual I watched Phurkit conduct was soon after her November 2009 annual ritual. On the way back from Puntong I asked Dawa, Tenzing and Ongchuk if we could stop in Lingza to visit Phurkit to ask her to perform a ritual for a sick friend in Australia. My friend Leone had been diagnosed with brain cancer and before leaving Sydney for India, I had suggested a Lepcha *mun* might say a prayer for her. Leone had liked the idea and was connected to Lepchas through a donation she had given to help a Lepcha primary school in Passingdang. Her attitude was 'why not try everything, go for it.'

We doubled back to Lingza through the old growth forest that links Puntong and Sakyong to the small village of Bey where the road begins. The driver of the *SAVE MOTHERLAND* jeep was waiting to drive us to the *mun*.

Phurkit's powers challenge my beliefs – or perhaps my lack of belief. The week before, her trance-like transformation into Lepcha gods was mesmerising and by the day's end, after hours of her giving offerings to the gods and those gods speaking back through her ('Do not worry,' they said to the 50 or so Lepchas who had gathered. 'We are not dead, we are everywhere. If you need something you can call on us through this *mun*.'⁹⁶) I wanted to believe that there might be some places in the world – some sacred landscapes – where nature dominates social order and affects 'other-worldly' outcomes.

It was with this thought in mind that I returned to Lingza to ask Phurkit if she would give a blessing for Leone. Tenzing spoke to Phurkit on my behalf and explained Leone's illness. He asked if she could pray that the remainder of Leone's life be filled with love, happiness and comfort. I offered a card that had belonged to Leone, a photo of her on the day of her book launch (which she had told me was the happiest day of her life), her date of birth and 500 rupees (A\$10).

After some time I was called to the prayer room of the house. It was a small, dark room, dominated by a Buddhist altar and lit with brass butter lamps. The *mun* was wrapped in the *thókro-dum* and sat in front of a small table that contained a bowl of water and a small plate of rice. Tenzing and I knelt to her side and the others in the household knelt behind us. The *mun* chanted and soon her voice changed to that of the deities she sought help from. She picked up small handfuls of rice and scattered them around the room. Through her fingers she ran a strand of prayer beads and after consulting the deity for some time she turned to me and placed her hands on my head. She then blew air down the front and back of my shirt before returning to the ritual.

Her attendant placed the 500-rupee note in the plate of rice. He then brought her some butter and she mixed some of the rice with butter and water. She

⁹⁶ From my transcript of Phurkit's ritual translated by Tenzing.

dipped the prayer beads into a bottle of water and after some further chanting she stopped. Her face, which had been contorted for much of the ritual, returned to its usual form and she rose and left the room. Her attendant wrapped the buttery rice in paper and handed me the water.

‘Your friend must drink this water three times every Tuesday and three times every Saturday,’ Tenzing informed me. ‘And she must add it to her bathing water on those days also.’

He handed me the paper-fold of rice and advised that Leone should keep this somewhere on her body at all times. ‘The *mun* has extended your friend’s life for about 12 months but she said treatment would not help. If you come back in 12 months she may be able to extend some more,’ he said.

As we left the house my companions bowed their heads to receive the *mun*’s blessing. She wound her arm around my waist and I walked with her to the road.

When we reached the car Tenzing whispered to me that the *mun*’s stepfather had asked her to extend Leone’s life by 10 years but that this was not possible.

But you can extend, Tenzing said faithfully. ‘You can come back next year and extend.’

Chapter 7 – Back to the village, Tenzing’s journey

In winter, our clan the Affimoo would graze their cattle alongside the river in the Rang Rang area next to where they had a hut. On the other side of the river at Hee Gyathang, lived the Hee Youngmingmoo clan who would cross the river in winter, walking over a cane bridge to meet our people.

When summer approached the Affimoo would leave Rang Rang and return to their home at Kabi, but one summer one of the men stayed back. He had fallen in love with one of the girls from the Hee Youngmingmoo clan and he moved to Hee Gyathang to be with her, building a small hut at Sudur.

Since he was a very clever person he was made a leader of that village. There he married that girl and he had his children. He sent his son a long way away to study Buddhism.

The son returned to Hee Gyathang and built a small monastery and this was how Buddhism was spread in our area.

Story told by Tenzing’s father, Netuk Lepcha

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Between its mossy floor and high, arching canopy, the forest around Hee Gyathang holds the life force of its earliest people, the Affimoo and Hee Youngmingmoo. Unlike neighbouring villages in Upper Dzongú, Hee Gyathang does not offer a view of Mount Kangchendzönga. Instead, the visible connection between the community and the place they settled is sealed in the smooth trunk of the bamboo, which grows in abundance, mingling with the scrawny, knobbly branches of orange trees, and the rice, cardamom and vegetable crops that provide food and income for the village. The geography is a patchwork: rocky uncultivable areas alongside lush vegetation, large fields, jungle, forest and grazing land. Like other parts of Dzongú, it is a vertical world, where everything and everyone are linked by steep journeys, some by road, some by steps and some by a scramble through the trees, rocks and shrubs crowded in the space

between the 16 hamlets that make up the Hee Gyathang revenue block.⁹⁷ In the quiet of late afternoon when the roosters have quietened, the chickens are settled and the goats are in their pens, and the light is thinking about fading; you can just about hear the whisper of devotion cast into the breeze from the prayer flags lining the pathways that lead to the monastery on the top of the hill, connecting every household to Buddhism.

Hee Gyathang is the birthplace of Tenzing Gyatso Lepcha: college graduate, footballer, social activist, hunger striker, diarist and farmer. In Hee Gyathang he lives his post-hunger-strike life, a life he optimistically made plans for while lying in hospital. He remains an activist but the anti-dam movement has shifted into a new phase, what Guha (2000, p.197) calls a 'social movement after-life' where the tools of the protest were less provoking, but no less important.

Activists who participate in social change are informed by their experiences and, when the protest winds down, have to shift their focus to their own future. Their post-protest future – their 'after-life' – is created by people remaking their lives after a potentially life-changing experience. During the protest period they have a movement identity, a platform of principals and morals that are supported by their activism and the group. But what happens when the protest stops, or the movement winds down and gives way to this next phase of their lives? What are the consequences of activism? And how does the part of a life spent as an activist affect the part of a life that comes after?

Some media commentators on the 1960s protest movements in America suggested former radical activists came out of the 1960s and joined (and profited from) the capitalist culture they had previously protested against.

This is contradicted by Doug McAdam (1989, p.744) who says the view is largely due to the amount of media coverage afforded the few who did turn away (in particular former 'Chicago Eight' member turned entrepreneur Jerry Rubin, and former Black Panther leader turned conservative Republican Eldridge Cleaver)

⁹⁷ Revenue blocks are local sub-divisions of the various districts of the states of India. They are governed by Revenue Division Officers (RDO), who undertake key administrative roles including tax revenue collection.

from their anti-war/anti-capitalist platform and to enjoy a social movement after-life that was replenished by what they formally fought against.

McAdams draws a different conclusion; that there has been a 'remarkable continuity' in the lives of activists decades after their activism and they have 'continued not only to voice the political values they espoused during the 60s, but to act on those values as well they have remained active in movement politics' (1989, p.757). McAdams' conclusion is supported by other studies into the lives of former activists (Braungart & Braungart 1980; Fendrich & Lovoy 1988; Hoge & Ankney 1982; Maidenberg & Meyer 1970).

Participation in protest movements can profoundly change people, 'marking their personal identities even after the movement ends, whether or not this is an explicit goal,' and continuing to 'shape an individual's sense of self' (Polletta & Jasper 2001, p.296).

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It may be too soon to comprehensively examine and draw conclusions on the long-term social movement 'after-life' of the members of ACT, however more than five years after the end of the relay hunger strike, they remain together as a group, continue to advocate for a dam-free Dzongú and some have used their activist skills as advocates on another project. There are early signs that their movement identity has become part of their personal identity and that the hunger strike will have a lifelong influence on the way they live their lives.

During the hunger strike years of the protest, the members of ACT formed a collective identity that brought a shared perspective about how they attempted to make sense of external events, experiences and the context of the movement (Whittier 1997, p.762). After the hunger strike, when the protesters dispersed from Tibet Road to other places to pick up the threads of their lives, it would not be surprising if their collective identity changed, possibly became fragmented, more easily influenced and distracted by events and responsibilities not connected to ACT and the battle for Dzongú. However, the bonds formed during the hunger strike were strong enough to withstand competing demands of 'normal' life, and Tenzing and his friends remain as committed as always to ACT.

Tenzing's pre- and post-activist life provides insight into themes of post-protest motivation, which are revealed in how Tenzing and his fellow activists transitioned from the intensity of the protest, and adjusted to a 'normal' life back in the village.

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Tenzing is the middle child of 12, born of a mother who had 15 pregnancies in 27 years and a father who won an award from the Indian Government for his work as a schoolteacher. Tenzing came into the world quickly and without fuss. His mother Songmit remembers his birth as uneventful. After a day planting millet she returned home and cooked dinner. After dinner she felt ill and knew she was in labour. Two hours later Tenzing was born in the bedroom, his birth assisted by Songmit's cousin. Songmit cut the umbilical cord and bathed him. There was no doctor, no fuss and his childhood was also mostly uneventful, with one notable exception that occurred when he was six or seven, described by Tenzing:

One day when I was very small, I died. I was going to school around 8.00am and I had to go to the toilet. I told my friends and my seniors who were there and walked off the road. I remember seeing something; I don't know what and then everything going very black. After some time, my friends came looking for me and saw I was lying flat on the ground. They couldn't wake me up. Everybody was crying, my parents, my family. Then at 5.00pm a bǒngthǐng was called to do a puja, which he did. And then I woke up.

Tenzing's parents could not have foreseen that their middle son would again face death in his youth; that he would one day be lying in a hospital bed with a feeding tube attaching his nose and his gut. They could not have imagined that he would crawl out of that hospital bed to berate Sikkim's Chief Minister for building dams in Dzongú and admonish government officials who dared to question his motives and right to protest. His mother said she was proud of him, but could never have imagined it – that she thought he would just study. In fact no one I spoke to could believe it. 'Tenzing?' they said, eyes wide, incredulity in their voice. 'Tenzing? Not Tenzing?' But Tenzing's seemingly improbable route to activism was, in fact, good training for his hunger strike. He left home young to go to the TNA boarding school in Gangtok. He was a gifted footballer who

played for North Bengal University and represented the State of Sikkim. He was good enough to be considered for the Indian National Football League, an athlete whose skills on the field required persistence, teamwork, decision-making and tenacity. When he was four or five he did not own a football but he improvised by using a bicycle pump to fill a bull's bladder with air and kicked it around the village. 'It used to last quite well,' he said with a grin so wide I wondered about the veracity of the story. He would run up and down the vertiginous tracks through the jungle at Hee Gyathang, building lung capacity and body strength, developing the kind of endurance he later needed to play top-grade football. Football and school gave him friendships outside his tightly held circle of family and neighbours in Hee Gyathang. Tenzing said when he was on hunger strike his friends visited him in hospital and wanted him to play again:

I have a lot of friends out here in Gangtok because I used to play football so most of the people they know me. Most of my friends after football morning practice they used to come to the hospital and we used to talk together and they used to tease me, are you not going to play league this year?

When we spoke the indefinite hunger strike was over and the start of the football season was four months away. 'Are you going to play football again?' I asked. He laughed and didn't answer. 'Will you play this year?' I persisted.

Tenzing said he would not play until and unless the dams were finished. His priorities had shifted, and education had gone higher up the list. 'Actually what I feel is I will study further. I am currently studying and my sister also finishes college this year along with me and I want my sisters and all to study. I don't know. Because there are many brothers and sisters to study,' he said.

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Karl Mannheim's argument that the 'likelihood of a generation developing a distinctive consciousness is seen to be dependent on the tempo of social change' (cited in Pilcher 1994, p.483) could be a template for Tenzing's social awakening and that of his friends in ACT. Unlike students participating in the frequently examined social movements in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, (Fendrich & Lovoy 1988, p.780-784; Whittier 1997, pp.760-768; Braungart

1980) the Lepcha youth were not politicised at university, although many were studying at the time of the protest. Their pathway to activism was tracked in the rural enclave of Dzongú, where they walked from village to village, explaining their opposition to the dams. The tempo of change was due to the social and cultural milieu of educated youth, a backlash against political underrepresentation, and a growing awareness of indigenous rights, which enabled ACT to attract youth, such as Tenzing and his friends, to the movement.

Their emergence as social activists had much in common with the ‘newer’ rural social groups in the US, Europe and the UK, which did not have a formalised set of policies, or lists of bargaining points, but were motivated by the defence of their identity (Woods 2003, p.313). Their apolitical stance supported Kumar’s shift towards non-governmental organisation-oriented mobilisation: ‘Non-political and non-partisan ... part of an ‘ever-expanding world [in India] of new metaphors such as “social activists”, “resistance”, “social justice”, “progressivism”’ (2008, p.77).

The values they held and articulated in defence of Dzongú, related to the protection of identity, culture, environment and sacred land, were values that strengthened throughout the hunger strike. Tenzing and his fellow activists shared a transformational experience that constructed a collective identity that has persisted (Whittier 1997, p.766) years after the hunger strike, despite the change in tempo of the movement.

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Tenzing and I first spoke about the impact of the movement on his life on New Year’s Day 2008. It was during a period of calm between the two indefinite hunger strikes. The relay strike continued in front of BL House, while ACT and the government negotiated the terms of a promised review. The night before we spoke, Tenzing and his friends enjoyed a muted new years’ celebration at BL House, playing guitar, singing songs and calling it a night quite early.

He was reflective, possibly due to the marking of a new year, which closely followed the Lepcha *Nambun* festival season, or perhaps it was because four months had passed since he and Dawa stopped their 63-day hunger strike. He

spoke with a new-found confidence, gained through the rigour of the anti-dam movement. This was the new **confident** Tenzing who had so confounded his friends, which he acknowledged when he referred to his school and college years where he was teased because he was from Dzungú:

Before, I was very shy. From my school days I used to talk the least with people. I was a quiet student and used to stay at the back of the class but because of this movement I have started talking to people. I have started talking with everyone. Before, mostly I used to talk with the boys, I never used to talk to girls but because of this movement it became something I could do. Not only me but also most of our friends have changed a lot ... today we feel proud, that we people, from very far away places – instead of the people from Gangtok – *we* people, *we* are opposing the government and trying to help the environment ... Now they [school and college cohort] know Dzungú has courageous people and even though we don't have much knowledge about the environment we are fighting this thing.

Did this gain in confidence translate to other areas of Tenzing's life? Had the movement changed his ambition? Did he want to live in Dzungú? Would he be a farmer? Or would he enter politics? A government job was not possible while the SDF party remained in power, due to his advocacy against the dams, but perhaps his experience as an activist had changed his ambition. Studies of activists in the USA in the 1960s and 1970s revealed that many had maintained their liberal political interests and pursued occupations involved with knowledge and human services ... jobs that would allow them to work towards their humanistic and/or radical commitments (Braungart 1980, p.239). I asked Tenzing about his hopes for the future and he replied:

I realised while involved in this movement, that most of the people in Sikkim study for only one thing, for the sake of government job only. But how can the government give a job to all the people who have studied? It is very tough. I've seen many of our friends who studied and didn't get a job become frustrated. Some of them drink and spend the time like that.

He talked about Sikkimese who have government jobs who will not stand up for what they believe in because they say the government will sack them. It is a

genuine fear and there is much to lose. Turning away from a government job in Sikkim is like handing back a winning lottery ticket. Government jobs bring a secure salary, prestige and paid holidays. Senior government workers have drivers and enjoy other perks.

‘I don’t want to do any government job,’ said Tenzing. ‘I’ll be independent if I do a private job and I’ll have time for my friends and for our people.’

Tenzing’s awareness of the loss of freedom in a government job was insightful, for a government job can, if you speak out against the government, be used as a threat to family life. A ‘victimisation transfer’ to a remote place can throw family life into chaos particularly if the spouse also has a government job but is transferred elsewhere. The prospect of a victimisation transfer silences voices of dissent because the cost of speaking out is so high: Where will the children go to school? Where will the extended family live? How can they afford to run two households? A government job offers financial security, but not social freedom.

Tenzing’s activism had converted his aspirations. In rejecting the common ambition among educated people in Sikkim, Tenzing and his fellow activists showed the experience of their hunger strike and participation in the movement had radically transformed their lives ... It is too early to know if the conversion is permanent, however Tenzing’s intention to work back in his village producing organic vegetables is a commitment to a different future than the one he had previously aspired to.

‘If I do farming, I’ll employ village people and that will benefit me to have the labour, and it will benefit the people who work for me. I want to do some organic farming because right now, there is demand for organic things. I’ve realised that in Dzongú we can grow anything. Food like rice and vegetables grows so well, and there’s plenty of water also so I want to utilise it,’ he said, and then laughed a little, perhaps slightly self-conscious about his ambition. ‘Now there is demand for organic vegetables and if I do it, then I want to set some example and I hope for my people from our village that they can copy my style and also do that same thing.’

The need for new agricultural practices had become urgent due to the decline of the cardamom crop, which Tenzing attributed to the loss of soil fertility following many generations harvesting cardamom without resting the soil. Unlike many in the community he saw a positive outcome from the loss of cardamom as it forced more sustainable practices:

I realise our people (our father and grandfather) when there was cardamom, had a lot of money but they didn't utilise it properly. They spent it lavishly, so today there is no cardamom and they are facing that music. But I am analysing that most of the people don't have cardamom but they are working agriculture. Instead of cardamom they are growing ginger and vegetables. All the concepts of people have changed. I don't know what my future will be, but because of this movement I have started to think about this.

Becoming an activist changed Tenzing's outlook on his land, his people and his future. His education had provided him with greater 'political efficacy and tolerance for political expression' (Jenkins & Wallace 1996, p.204) and enabled him to reflect on the cost to his community of a lack of education. When he considered the outcome of educational disadvantage in the context of the dam development and its associated land acquisition processes, he saw catastrophic consequences for some uneducated villagers who sold their land.⁹⁸

If you go to our place, you have to cross the dam site... I have seen a person out there who belongs to our Lepcha community but for the greed of money, he sold his land and has nothing. Today he works as a labourer breaking stones. I know our people will be in that same state because they don't know how to utilise money. Most of our people are uneducated and have not been exposed to all that credit and all. If they have 100 rupees today they will spend 100 rupees and the day after they will be left with nothing. Parents, they will lavishly spend the money but what about their children and all. Same thing has happened in Stage V hydel project.

So I don't want the thing [hydro dam] to be in our place. The government says you have to study ... but another point of view says if you all study it is

⁹⁸ This example is not meant to imply that the outcome for all landowners was catastrophic. There were also people who sold their land who have not suffered.

good but after that they say it's not easy for us to give you government job. But if we have land, if we are educated, we can go back to our villages and work there.

~

When entering Hee Gyathang from the west, the 510-megawatt concrete gravity dam at Dikchu known as Teesta Stage V, warns travellers that they are almost upon it. The warning comes in the form of white concrete dust covering the roads and shops leaving little powder puffs in your hair and on your clothes. It is evident in large cracks, big enough to put your fist into, that have sliced the walls of homes along the road and riverbank leading to the dam site. In June 2008, warning came from the twice-collapsed dam protection wall, caused by 10 metres of silt brought in by rain and a rising Teesta river that defied the desilting chamber. And the sight of green, still, water – a lifeless pond where a river once ran – is a continual reminder that a dam is round the next bend.

This is the dam where the Tarang *Bóngthíng* conducted a ritual to appease the angry deities who might take revenge for the disruption to their place. The disruption is almost 100 metres high and has a 17-kilometre horseshoe shaped headrace tunnel. It is not surprising that Tenzing does not 'want this thing' in his place – or **another** of these things. His focus is on the dam being built from the eastern entry to Hee Gyathang, the 280-megawatt Panan project at Sankalang, which, when complete, will place Hee Gyathang and the other Lower Dzongú villages, in the cold embrace of two mega-dams.

It was in December 2011, more than two years after the end of the relay hunger strike, when I last drove past the Dikchu dam site. The dam was complete then, but remained controversial for there were rumours that the earthquake that had occurred in September that year had caused damaging cracks to the dam walls. The earthquake's epicentre was in Mangan and there was significant damage throughout North Sikkim; the roads had crater-like cracks and in some places were impassable; the sides of the mountains were scarred by landslides with bare patches where trees once were; and the people were scarred by the loss of life in their communities.

I had travelled to Dzongú to attend ACT member, Karma Lepcha's wedding and a family reunion at Sherap and Pema's family home at Tingvong. Many ACT members were there, having moved back to their villages to carve new lives, while staying closely connected to the movement.

Their reintegration into their own lives did not mean they went back to how they were before they joined the movement. Like the 'non-alienated and active reformists' identified by Demerath, Marwell and Aiken's (1971, p.238) study of former civil rights volunteers, they remained committed to social change, but unlike more radical former protesters, they were not alienated from society and they worked hard to repair fractured relationships in their villages. Their political awakening had changed them and the views they formed during the earlier stages of the protest stayed with them.

Maidenberg and Meyer's (1970, p.101) study of the Berkeley Free Speech Movement revealed that activists were more radical five years later than before joining the movement and that more than half continued to participate in some form of protest. This is also true of the young Lepcha activists, the majority of whom were not radical, or political, prior to the movement.

Their focus remained to stop the dams, but they were also focussed on reclaiming their lives. Some had married and had children; others had found jobs or started small businesses in Gangtok and Mangan. Dawa had resumed his old job at The Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, where he worked with the research coordinator making ethnographic films in Sikkim. Sherap was the General Manager at a casino and Tenzing's life back in the village included trying to save his local monastery from demolition, while 'building bridges' in his community.

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When I first visited Hee Gyathang in January 2008, I stayed at the home of Tenzing's elder brother, Ugen and his family. The first snows had fallen in Upper Dzongu, turning the distant mountains snowy white and the twilight sky indigo. We huddled around the kitchen fire, occasionally checking on the hen in the next room that was sitting on hatching eggs. Tenzing's uncle, Choden, who was known

to be a man with great knowledge about the Lepchas, came to visit with stories from the past. One of his stories was about Tenzing's father, and as Choden related it, Tenzing heard it for the first time.

It was when your father was two years old and our aunt and uncle were looking after him. It was around April or May and there was a full moon. Uncle, who was an artist, had gone to the *gonpa* to do some painting and when he returned home he drank lots of *cí* until he was drunk and fell asleep. Our aunt was tired and she also fell asleep. So Uncle was asleep in one place and Aunt was asleep in another place and they forgot to bring your father close to them. He was in the same room but sleeping apart from them. The *Mulanmúng* came into the house and took your father. He woke in the forest and had a vision where he could see everyone looking for him but they couldn't see him.

Early in the morning, before light, his aunt and his great aunt realised he was gone and they began to search for him. They took lamps into the jungle and searched everywhere. The next day all the village joined the search but without success. His grandmother who was a *mun* did a puja all day and it was after then, at around two o'clock, they found him sitting under a big tree where people had previously searched but not found him. When they found him he first felt he didn't want to see anyone. Then he was brought here and given a bath and *cí*, and only after another puja could he talk again.

I heard many stories of supernatural abduction in Dzongú. They were part of old family stories, part of Tenzing's threaded social history woven between the traditional past (where village society was imbued with pre-Buddhist beliefs and rituals presided over by *bóngthíng* and *mun*): his rural upbringing that revolved around agricultural cycles where village social and religious life centred on the Hee Gyathang monastery; and the generation he was part of: educated, exposed to popular culture, fanatical about football and, because of the movement, politically aware and worldly. The old stories were an important link to Tenzing's relationship with his ancestors. He trod the land they trod; he worked the fields they worked and the stories provided a link with the past that reinforced his stewardship of the land. And with that stewardship, came an obligation to protect it.

The following year Tenzing and I asked his father Netuk about his abduction. Netuk explained there are two *múng* that take children. The *Jumpimúng*, also known as the Yeti, is found in the colder region and the *Mulanmúng* in the hot region. It is mostly found in a place called Salimpakyong above Passingdang on the side of the village of Leek .

Netuk was taken by the *Mulanmúng*. He explained and Tenzing translated:

Mulanmúng is similar to us. It comes to the house and if the mother and father are not there and the children are alone, it changes its appearance as if it is the mother or father of that child. Then it takes away the child to a very high place, very high rock or cliff and keeps the child in a cave. If that *Mulanmúng* is male it takes a female child and if it is female it takes a male child. If the male *Mulanmúng* sees the male child it will kill it. If the female *Mulanmúng* sees the female child then it will kill it.

So they hide the children from each other and sometimes the child is lost and never comes back to the house. Or sometimes it teaches them tantras and mantras and the child comes back three or four years later to his house and becomes a powerful *bóngthíng* or *mun*. After a child stays with *Mulanmúng* the very first day when he is back in his own house it feels very strange. When he sees the crowd and other people he runs away but slowly, slowly he comes back.⁹⁹

I asked Netuk if he had gained any special powers as a result of the abduction and Tenzing replied saying his father is the astrologer of the village. Whenever there is a birth people come to him to ask him to name the baby and tell them the future for the child.

Tenzing's father was taught astrology by a lama, who, incidentally, was the father of Sikkim's first hunger striker, Lama Sonam Paljor.¹⁰⁰ I asked Netuk to consult his astrological texts to tell me whether my nephew's baby, who was born on my birthday, at the same time I was born, would have a special connection to me. I

⁹⁹ I interviewed Netuk on 9 January 2009 at his home in Hee Gyathang

¹⁰⁰ Sonam Paljor went on a 28-day hunger strike to protest a proposed dam on the Rathong river, near Tashiding monastery in West Sikkim in 1995.

was looking for meaning in the coincidence as I handed Netuk a piece of paper with my date and time of birth and that of my nephew.

We sat on the veranda with the sun warming our backs and Tenzing's father consulted two books to calculate the probability that my nephew and my joint birthdays had special significance. His books were similar to those found in monasteries, with accordion-style folded pages that flipped horizontally. The first book was a reference for the date and time, the second a cross-reference with the year. While his father worked Tenzing pointed to the land below the house and told me which organic crops he planned to plant and where. 'There will be ginger, garlic, oranges.' I followed Tenzing's finger and imagined his vision – an organic vegetable crop being sold in the market in Singtam, directly by the growers to the buyers. Tenzing's vision included building a guest room with an attached bathroom for tourists seeking a genuine homestay experience but with a 'Western-style' toilet for foreigners. He wanted to create a future in the village, a sustainable future that didn't rely on government handouts. Tenzing's future, post movement, would be informed by that experience, by a recognition of his rights and by a desire to know Lepcha history, culture, written language and rituals. His pathway would be modern, enabled by modern agricultural knowledge that would assist him to produce a sustainable livelihood for his family.

Netuk completed his assessment and told Tenzing who translated. 'My father said you and your nephew will be similar in the way you think.'

'That's all?' I asked.

'That's all,' Tenzing confirmed.

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A few days before Christmas 2011, I followed Tenzing up the narrow path from the main road through Hee Gyathang to his house. All but one of the puppies that were born during my previous trip had been rehomed, and the remaining pup and its mother jumped ecstatically around us as we walked under the arbour towards the kitchen. On the way there, Tenzing told me about his farming during

the 20 months I had been away. He described an abundant orange grove, and fields with garlic, onion, ginger and the deadly fireball chilli. His oranges had been voted best in the north-east at the Siliguri market the year before, he mentioned with pride. He described how he had been selling them direct to buyers and how, with each trip to the markets in Singtam and Siliguri, he learnt more about how to sell, how to price, how to distribute. Slowly, slowly, was his mantra. Start off slowly and learn, then expand when the business model is right. He also spoke of the devastating impact of the September 2011 earthquake: 'Everyone now understands what we were saying about the dams,' said Tenzing. 'They believe the work on the dams caused the earthquake and damage and they are now wishing they had supported us.'

The damage caused by the earthquake was more severe at the dam sites and verified the warnings ACT had made during the protest about the environmental impact of the dams and the impact on their sacred spirits. ACT President Athup Lepcha's warnings that the projects would anger the gods (see Chapter 2), resonated throughout Dzongú, when the loss of life and damage to property was revealed to be situated at or near dam sites. Young ACT members, including Tenzing, Dawa-Thendup and Norbu from Hee Gyathang, were involved in the rescue as government rescue workers were slow to respond, and were not used to working in such inhospitable, mountainous terrain. Tenzing told of going to the village of Bey, where all the houses on one side of the river were destroyed and the walking track to Puntong and Sakyong was so damaged by the earthquake and ensuing landslides it was impassable. He and his friends pulled bodies from the rubble while dodging rocks and debris caused by landslides. They cremated the deceased where they found them, so the families would have the comfort of knowing their loved ones had been given last rites.

There was lively debate about the relationship between dams and earthquakes; Indian media quoted experts who speculated about the role of the dams in inducing the earthquake (Hindustan Times 2011). The government's usual control of information was thwarted on Facebook, where group discussion about the earthquake, the damage, government response and the dams thrived. The

disaster provided ACT a renewed voice in the community, reignited debate on the dams and invigorated their protest.

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Tenzing and I walked along the pathway that ran by the back of the house, following it until we reached a field. He had leased the land from a neighbour and grew onions, garlic and spinach as well as his cash crop, oranges. His garlic field was on its second planting and he held a high volume of organic garlic seeds. 'The government wants Sikkim to be an organic state, and I have organic garlic. I will sell it to them,' he said, clearly enjoying the irony in a possible future where the government he had been fighting against, would rely on him for organic seeds. He employed a woman to work in his field and on market days employed his friends to help him pick, pack and transport his vegetables. His dream of working in his community was being realised.

He also grew a little cardamom, for even though the halcyon days of plentiful cardamom in Dzongú were over, Tenzing and other growers were working to re-establish the crop in rested soil. 'It would have been good if our elders had done this,' said Tenzing. 'But they didn't so now we have to, but at least it is being done for the next generation.'

Tenzing has also built a homestay comprising two double rooms, linked by a long verandah, with a nearby toilet and bathroom. 'A Western toilet,' he pointed out and added that he had taken all the advice people had given him and followed that which he thought was the best.

A tourist visiting Tenzing's homestay would enter a home that reflects generational change and acceptance of multi-generational ways of living. In the outside kitchen, cooking is done over an open fire and with a gas cooker. Netuk is regularly sitting in the corner teaching astronomy to a monk while Songmit is nearby, squatting on a low stool stoking the kitchen fire. Social life comes and goes from this kitchen, which is visited by brothers, sisters, in-laws, uncles, neighbours and friends. Tenzing's youngest brother spends nights in the jungle with his school friends where they hunt birds with a slingshot and cook them

over a fire, surrounded by the night-noises of Dzongú. And Tenzing's sister, who works in Gangtok, watches movies in her room on a laptop.

When I was last there in January 2012, Tenzing's youngest sister was home from Bangalore where she studies nursing. She brought the world into the kitchen with her stories about her fellow students from elsewhere in India, Africa, the Middle East and other Asian countries. She is participating in the global trade in education, benefitting from her nursing studies and her access to information and society from other countries.

Theirs is a microcosm of family life in transition, oscillating across globalisation's variable focus on space and time. The geographical remoteness of their home slows the progress of a world where space is progressively dominated by time (Sheppard 2002, p.309) so they have some time to adjust to the potential elimination of the difference of space brought by globalisation (Martin 2004, p.148). The family is shaping a future that gives them access to the 'global bazaar' (Reicht 2001 cited in Martin 2004, p.149) of trade and information, while valuing and expanding the local currency of village economy and society.

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Tenzing's post-protest image was something he managed carefully in the village. Opinion on the dams was divided in Hee Gyathang and he wanted to heal the wounds caused by the protest while staying true to his anti-dam position. The protest had given him a new awareness of injustices, particularly in relation to Lepcha culture. One example of this was his work with fellow ACT members to save the Hee Gyathang monastery from demolition and replacement. We visited the monastery to attend the annual *Cham* – a Buddhist ritual and masked dance intended to remove obstacles and protect the monastery and the village from misfortune.

Tenzing's interest in saving the monastery was personal. His grandfather was village *Mandal* (headman) at the time the old monastery was built and had been instrumental in getting the monastery funded and constructed. He worked with the Lepcha community in Dzongú who contributed to the cost of the build.

Tenzing raised the broader significance of the building when advocating for the

monastery's restoration. 'This monastery was built by all the people from Dzongú. They made the tools, they contributed money to buy the materials and they carried the stones. It is a significant community building,' he explained.

Tenzing and fellow villagers who wanted to save the monastery discussed alternatives with neighbours, the *panchayats* (elected village representatives) from Hee Gyathang and neighbouring cluster villages, the contractor/builder and with Dzongú's Member of Legislative Assembly. As the cost of demolition of the old building wasn't included in the budget for building the new, they negotiated that the new building could be constructed alongside the old – an approach that appeased those who wanted to keep the old building and those who supported building a new monastery. They lobbied for funds to stabilise the old monastery, which were spent on steel scaffolding erected one month before the 2011 earthquake, thereby saving the building.

Tenzing and his ACT friends, Dawa-Thendup and Norbu, formed a committee to work on the restoration. They were sensitive to community feelings that ACT members 'protest everything' and said that they didn't want to be known as the group that says 'no' all the time. To garner support they formed a coalition with others in the community including the head of one of the village *panchayats* who acts as head of the committee for, as Tenzing pointed out, 'it would be better if they could bring the village with them.'

At the *Cham*, I asked to take a photo of Tenzing, Dawa-Thendup and Norbu in front of the monastery, but they insisted that the head of the village *panchayat* and other villagers should be included in the picture. They wanted to present a unified and shared sense of responsibility for the monastery and help to strengthen the coalition. They had transitioned from protesting to influencing but remained equally committed to protecting Dzongú from overdevelopment. Only now they were doing it in a less confronting way, using moderate tactics and strategies of negotiation and diplomacy.

This *Cham* would have been the last held at the old Hee Gyathang monastery but for the foresight and perseverance of Tenzing, Dawa-Thendup and Norbu who extended the life of this old stone and timber building.

The work of Tenzing and his friends to save the monastery verified McAdams' view that 'activists will be drawn into subsequent activist episodes, thereby deepening his or her commitment to activist values and perpetuating the process of personal change that initial forays into activism have set in motion' (1989, p.754). They told me that if they had not been part of ACT and had the experience of the protest movement to preserve Dzongú and Lepcha culture, they would not have fought the demolition of the monastery. Their propensity to get involved in community activism (and that of other ACT members) also reflects Fendrich & Lovoy's (1986, pp.780–784) study of adult political behaviour of former radical American 1960s student activists who, 25 years after graduating, were highly likely to work with others on social problems and protest local issues.¹⁰¹ Their activism had led them to think differently about all development and its impact on Lepcha land, history and artefacts.¹⁰²

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Mark Rudd, founding member of the American high profile 1960s protest group, Weather Underground, ruminated on what he missed about his activist life of 30 years earlier. 'I guess I'm missing the positive contribution we made, namely, an example of people willing to risk everything for our idealistic beliefs' (Rahmini 2006, p.125).

Many key players in Weather Underground remain politically or socially active: Rudd is a retired teacher who writes and speaks about his experiences, Naomi Jaffe supports women's activism, Bill Ayers is a school reform activist and university professor and Laura Whitehorn supports a range of progressive causes. The former figurehead of Weather Underground, Bernadine Dohrn (who is married to Ayers), is an associate professor and director at Northwestern University's Children and Justice Centre.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ The study identified radical civil rights activists as those who engaged in non-institutional protest politics, using the tactics of political confrontation to radically change the racial practices of southern institutions. ACT's confronting hunger strike, and the impact it had on the state government, is comparable in context of the usual political passivity of Sikkimese people.

¹⁰² Fendrich & Lovoy's study results included: work with others on local problems (83%), contact local officials on social issues (87%), go with a group to protest to a public official (83%).

¹⁰³ Excerpts and transcripts from the film, *The Weather Underground*.
<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/weatherunderground/today.html>

Twenty-five years on from the peak of the movement, Dohrn and Ayres say they would do it all again (Brackett 1996). More recently they addressed the Occupy Wall Street protesters. Ayers said: 'I get up every morning thinking, today I'm gonna make a difference. Today I'm gonna end capitalism. Today I'm gonna make a revolution. I go to bed every night disappointed, but I'm back again tomorrow, That's the only way you can do it.' Dohrn used the platform to call for the disbanding of NATO. 'It is the world's largest multinational military coalition ... a private police force, military force of the global one per cent. It is not our friend ... it is for the very rich' (Chicagoist.com 2012).

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On Boxing Day 2011, Dawa, Tenzing and I sat in the morning sun at Dawa's house in Lingdong. Dawa had bought a packet of pasta as a Christmas gift for me and another scholar who was visiting from Switzerland and Tenzing was in and out of the kitchen, making pasta for the first time. Between discussions on making the pasta sauce, we reflected on the past few years, and the current status of the dams and the movement to stop them.

I asked what the impact was for the movement, given the ACT members were doing their own thing and not held together at BL House where they had been 100 per cent focussed on the struggle.

'Everyone is getting on with their own work and life. This is important because everyone has to build their life and of course the profile of the movement has come down. It hasn't completely died, we are still working; it's just that we are not as high profile as before. We are still working in the villages; we are still trying to coordinate people. Especially after the earthquake, we do have a lot more advantage and we are working on that. There are a lot of people who in the beginning were very much pro dams but there has been a change in their thoughts,' said Dawa.

Tenzing pointed out that 18 September (the date of the earthquake) was exactly five years after the public hearing at Namprikdang, which was ACT's first public protest and a precursor for the hunger strike nine months later.

'When you went to that public hearing exactly five years before the earthquake could you even have imagined the five years that followed? Rallies, hunger strikes court action?' I asked.

They laughed and Dawa replied: 'We didn't know it would be like that, but had we known, we still would have done it, because that was the only way out. ...I think in a way we were prepared for all that. And we would have done what we did because the feeling [to save Dzongú] was there.'

Dawa discussed how the movement had changed the members of ACT. 'Our friends have changed their attitude, the way they think. That might not have happened without the movement. All of us might have been trying to get a government job. We may not have thought of struggling, making our own effort, building up our own personality. We would have been just like stereotypes, standing in the line ... it did change our opinions and mindset.'

If, as Anna Tsing says, mobilisation refigures identities even as it draws from foreign connections and comparisons (2005, p.214) then Tenzing, Dawa and their fellow activists have benefitted from the movement's impact on their identities. Their old selves, the stereotypical Sikkimese described by Dawa, may have stood in line, waiting for a government job, but their new selves, proud of their independence and their ability to make their own way and create their own work, has enabled them to stay true to the movement. They remain mobilised; sometimes dormant, other times active, but always ready to fight for the Teesta. Their ACT identities are as strong as they were when they sat on the hunger strike.

Dawa said the young boys and girls in ACT learnt to ask questions. 'They don't accept things just like that and they speak up when something is wrong.' He described one change in how their Lepcha identity is viewed as 'the Lepchas will not take things lying down which is what we had been doing for ages'.

I put my hypothesis to Dawa and Tenzing that before the movement, young Lepchas were moving away from a Lepcha identity to a more generic Sikkimese identity very heavily dominated by Nepali culture, and were also influenced by global and national television, Hindi movies and soap operas. And that, because

of this movement, for various reasons, they had to learn things about their culture.

I asked if, without the dams, would most of them be doing exactly what we talked about earlier: in Gangtok, working in a government job, playing Nepali-language pop songs and only coming back to the village for *Namsoong* and *Tendong rumfát* festivals.

Dawa said: 'Your analysis is correct. We do agree with that. Maybe it would have been just *Namsoong*, or maybe just *Tendong rumfát* and that's it I guess. And *Namsoong* also, we're not there for the real thing, just to have fun, more for the *mela* [funfair]. On the one hand we should say thank you for the dams.'

Tenzing laughed in agreement: 'It was an opportunity for us.'

The opportunity that had transformed the Lepcha youth while they sat outside BL House in Gangtok, was manifest in their lives in their villages. They met frequently. They looked out for each other, referring work when possible, helping in the fields, and at family events such as weddings. Dawa said the movement had become a kind of addiction. 'What's addictive?' I asked. 'Is it the relationship, the bond, the friendships, the knowledge that you are part of a group?'

'Yes, yes, yes, and yes,' he replied.

He seemed happy, happier than I had ever known him to be.

'I guess we have to be happy,' Dawa said. 'Though the dams are not really declared as stopped, they are stalled and I still feel that we are going to stop them. We are still working on this quietly.'

I asked about a possible future if the dams were truly cancelled. 'Will ACT stay together as a different sort of organisation with a wider focus?'

'I think so, we are together now,' said Dawa.

'Are you ever going to go on a hunger strike again?' I asked.

Dawa and Tenzing exchanged a look. 'Well, I guess...' Dawa started the sentence and Tenzing completed it '... if the situation arises.'

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In May 2012 I posted on Facebook to ACT members asking them if there was anything about the time of intense protest that they missed. Would you do it again? I asked. The replies I received show continued solidarity with ACT and its members and a willingness to continue the protest.¹⁰⁴

I am very thankful to our leaders that they start this ACT movement...during the movement we young generation got lots of ideas, experiences and we met lots of people and become close.

So these things i will never forget in my whole life.

So we r still working on it as u r working. We will fight until our last breath.

Luden Lepcha.

ACT movement is great ... why? coz gains lots of idea, knowledge, experience. people from different corner we know each other ... became good friends. I think this issue is not only for Lepcha community, it's for whole community. Lastly, I'm very thankful to all ACT leaders, supporter n friends ... movement is not yet finished ...

Sonam Dupden Lepcha

ACT movement brought up many changes in the lepcha community, brought up unification among the Lepcha community, especially youth. we got self confident, we got to know what is the fundamental right of human being, what is environment, social life and I saw and I noticed in Dzongú, those who are involved in movement (especially young educated or unemployed) we are doing something for survival we are not dependent on government we are self employed, and we are not fear with government for our right, and we know our own capacity or ability. Likewise many youth started homestay, guide, farming doing something compare with those who are not involved.... We are not yet finished still we have to do for Sikkim and for our community and we will do again if time comes again.

¹⁰⁴ I edited these posts to improve clarity.

Kachyo Lepcha.

Kachyo Lepcha's response highlights the impact of the movement on how the Lepcha youth created their own pathway to employment. Their ability to survive, to work, to marry, have children, is in one way an act of defiance. Look at us they seem to say, look at what we have made of ourselves. You can have a voice, you can do something.

~

Affected Citizens of Teesta. 20TH June. We continue the struggle.

Banner outside District Court, 20 June 2012

While it is perhaps too soon to say with certainty whether the members of ACT will remain committed to the movement, or to activism when they encounter social injustice, it is clear they remain close to the movement and each other. Though the intensity of the hunger strike days has subsided, they still gather on anniversaries and important milestones.

On 20 June 2012, ACT gathered outside the District Court in Gangtok for an eight-hour dharna (sit-in). In the photos posted on Facebook I saw the same faces I had gazed at five years earlier on the blog¹⁰⁵. This time the banners spoke of the earthquake and corruption by the hydro companies. There were Americans there, making a film and thereby making the officers from the Sikkim Vigilance Police nervous. Dawa's email the next day told of a successful sit-in: 'I think we had record visits by intelligence people yesterday. Antennas pricked up again. And with an American filming us it became more spicy. He was asked to leave after a brief discussion. They visited their hotels and checked their IDs. Anyway now he is out of Sikkim, as his flight is today. Anything to do with ACT is sensitive!!!'¹⁰⁶

Preventing foreigners from filming a protest won't stop word getting out of Sikkim on this issue for Facebook has given the activists a direct voice to the

¹⁰⁵ weepingsikkim.blogspot.com

¹⁰⁶ Dawa Lepcha's email to me dated 21 June 2012

world and smartphones a way of recording and sharing their protest narratives. It is a powerful addition to their protest toolkit, what Tsing calls the 'charismatic packages ... that speak to the possibility of making a case heard' (2005, p.227), where narratives – stories, poems, photographs, videos – appear on blogs, websites, Youtube, media and posters. For those with access, technology has widened the location of the protest from the streets of Gangtok, Jantar Mantar in Delhi and the villages of Dzungú and West Bengal, and given it global coverage. And the people accessing this medium are just as likely to be citizens of Sikkim.

Since the five-year anniversary of the hunger strike, the posts on the Facebook group Affected Citizens of Teesta have spanned different times in Lepcha history and show a desire to connect and share narratives from the past and present.¹⁰⁷ Samten Lepcha posted historical photos – an 1895 photo of Lepcha soldiers at Gangtok palace during the reign of Chogyal Tashi Namgyal; a second photo, showing Lepchas carrying a European woman in a palanquin; a third, Lepcha soldiers standing to attention behind the Chogyal, his son the Prince, and the Prince's wife, Hope Cooke. These historical photos, which demonstrate the importance of Lepcha soldiers in the Sikkimese kingdom, are interspersed by contemporary photos posted by Luden Lepcha that relate to the protest.

~

Like other protesters years after their activism, ACT's members remain politically aware, socially active and true to ACT's non-violent approach to activism. The protest was not a transitory event and it has provoked long-lasting values (Hoge & Ankney 1982, p.370). Jasper talked about moral sensibilities as one of the most lasting accomplishments of social movements.

Just as they form the background conditions for reflex emotions, they are also one of the most lasting accomplishments of social movements... Just as one movement may leave for future movements such advantages as knowhow, social networks, frames and other carriers of meaning, it may also leave a way of feeling about the world that other movements can build upon (2011, p.297).

¹⁰⁷ ACT facebook group <http://www.facebook.com/groups/228657403831726/>

The moral lessons learnt by the members of ACT are accompanied by feelings of solidarity and perhaps that is where their real strength lies – in their commitment to each other.

Sherap Lepcha, who has employed many ACT members at the casino he manages and before that, at the WaiWai noodle factory where he was a manager, told me he can count on them, that they are hard-working loyal and honest workers. Prior to the movement (and after his football career), Sherap was a building contractor. His first public relations job was partly made possible because of the work he did with ACT liaising with media and government. Sherap said he would always trust an ACT member. 'Whenever there is a space and I need trusted people I always think of ACT people, those who have capacity to be in the post, and I call them and give them a job. I gained a lot of trust [through the movement]. I can trust them with anything. People who cheat and lie won't be in ACT as ACT was purely a group of like-minded people who think for the good of our land and our culture.'¹⁰⁸

We cannot yet know if the change brought by the movement will be lifelong, however, it is possible that the Lepcha activists will follow the patterns of behaviour of former US student protesters who continue to be a distinctive generational unit in terms of their ideology, political attitudes and behaviour 20 years after their activism (Fendrich & Turner 1989, p.1056). They may do this in organised ways – through advocacy or activism for example – or they may react to modernity in less overt ways. Tenzing's response (shared by many of his friends), to embrace the parts of modernity that can enrich his community – like education and ecotourism – while rejecting the parts that do not – such as overdevelopment – is a personal model of resistance that is both thoughtful and sustainable. Every tourism dollar in Dzongú that goes to a local owner-operator, and every export of organic agricultural products, is an antidote to the mega dams and the prosperity they promised but have not delivered.

Lepcha groups on Facebook that help to spread and reinforce Lepcha news and culture, demonstrate a positive outcome from modernity where the access

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Sherap Lepcha in Gangtok, December 2011

enabled by social media, helps to reinforce Lepcha culture and, in some cases, communicate Lepcha activism. ACT's Facebook page posts frequent updates on dams, protests and policy along with ACT news. Also on Facebook, the FB Rong Census group is a Lepcha-only community group providing a forum for ideas, discussion, culture and notices. A call out for Lepcha language tutors can be found there, plus videos of Lepcha songs and dances that showcase new works that are written, choreographed and performed by Lepcha youth. There are modest language lessons and translations, song lyrics are shared, and mini-census questions asked on topics such as language skills. It is an effective method of building collective identity, unhampered by remote geographies and expensive transport. Young Lepchas, with access to social media, are together here, working to defy the 'Vanishing Tribe' tag long attached to them:

*We have Love Songs, Patriotic Songs, Harvest Songs, Prayer Songs ,
Naamssoong Songs , Songs for mother Nature ... who the hell is vanishing??? I
know who hahaha*

Like · · Follow Post · December 22, 2012 at 7:29pm.

Technology and social media are emerging as positive enablers for Lepcha culture, particularly among the youth who have quickly adopted new media. The improvement of wireless connectivity and the availability of cheap smart phones has had a major impact on the way Lepcha youth in Dzongú communicate and share information. When I first visited in April 2006, you had to be standing on the highest point of Tingvong village to get a mobile signal, and internet connectivity there did not exist. This has improved immeasurably in the past few years, helping to bring the city and village together, and enabled ACT members to create and work in Dzongú-based ecotourism businesses which can be accessed online. Sherap Lepcha's home in Tingvong was one of the first homestays in Dzongú and his home in Gangtok is also open to guests.

<http://sikkimhomestays.com/index.html>

ACT member Gyatso Lepcha's Mayal Lyang Homestay has hosted more than 100 guests (including members of the Danish Royal Family) and has, like Sherap's homestay, provided work for his family and Dzongú youth who work as drivers

and guides for tourists. Gyatso's website for the homestay explains the genesis of his business was the battle against the dams in Dzongú and ecotourism as sustainable economic development for Dzongú. <http://www.mayallyang.com/>

Tenzing's homestay is also attracting bookings and his friends, Dawa-Thendup and Norbu, work as trekking guides for his guests. His journey from the city to the village has been profound. The movement has changed him and his friends from ACT. It has returned them to their language, their culture and allowed them to aspire to a future they didn't know was possible. They have negotiated a modern way of 'being Lepcha' that takes its unique place in modern India.

On 3 February 2013, Dawa Lepcha resigned as general secretary of ACT and announced his candidacy for a new political party in Sikkim called Sikkim Krantikari Morcha (SKM)¹⁰⁹ led by a renegade minister in the current ruling party, Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF). SKM has attracted thousands of people to rallies across Sikkim and already proving to be the most effective opposition to SDF in 19 years. Dawa opened a campaign office in his village of Lingdong and is campaigning on environmental issues. He told me is feeling alive again, after the post hunger strike slump. He will run against the current, pro-dam Power Minister, S G Lepcha in the state election in 2014.

Tenzing is getting married soon to Dawkit, a girl from Dawa's village, who is also a member of ACT. He will first participate in a groom recognising ceremony to be officially acknowledged by the girl's family and relatives as their future son-in-law. He will take offerings to her family to pay the 'bride price' – possibly traditional offerings like the left leg of a bull, a chicken and certainly *cí*. Tenzing and Dawkit will make their life together in Hee Gyathang and, like others in ACT, because of the movement, will celebrate, protect and modernise their relationship with their land, culture and the environment.

The final words in this chapter are his.

¹⁰⁹ Krantikari Morcha means revolutionary front.

Before the movement I was totally in another part of the world but it has changed us a lot. We used to think of our own selves, and we used to go here and there but not concentrate on our culture and tradition...we should keep it in our minds and we should preserve it...then we can pass on to coming generations (2008).¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Interview at BL House, 16 January 2008

Conclusion

Everything is held together with stories. That is all that is holding us together, stories and compassion.

Barry Lopez (1988, p.62)

It is in the margins of a book that we learn the reader's thoughts; fragmented musings, little scratches, scribbled notes, questions and connections to the text. In this concluding chapter of my thesis, I consider the fragments of my exploration; the 'big' narratives of globalisation and the smaller whispers that glide around the story, making its heart beat more strongly. These narratives, while limited by my outsider's perspective, a scholar's process, and my interpretation of the 'truth' I witnessed and heard, unite to tell a new story, perhaps a future Lepcha folktale of young warriors fighting the establishment to save Mayel Lyang.

Throughout the six years of my research I collected fragments of knowledge: newspaper clippings, emails, photos, conversations, press releases, maps, blogs, text messages and songs. Through these fragments I 'immersed myself in the contests and engagements of the present' (Tsing 2005, p.227), while learning about the contests and engagements of the past. I was looking for the threads that linked time and space in Lepcha society.

I started this journey by meeting Lepcha elders and collecting old stories – the Lepcha myths of creation, clans, hunters and shamans. I hoped they would signpost symbols of Lepcha culture and provide a doorway into the stories that, as Barry Lopez says, 'hold everything together' (1988, p.62).

I wanted to learn how the youth absorbed education, global media, technology and global pop influences while participating in their culture. I asked: Can they embrace modernity without compromising their identity? Is there enough room for old Lepcha stories in a cultural arena dominated by Hindi and Nepalese voices? Is there contemporary meaning in, and interpretation of, Lepcha culture and traditions?

My early investigations revealed that the Lepcha youth were shifting away from the cultures of their elders and that Lepchas who lived outside Dzongú were less likely to speak their language. In West Bengal (and to a lesser extent, Sikkim) many were Christian and had little or no spiritual connection to traditional Lepcha beliefs and customs. In Sikkim the youth from Dzongú were the first educated generation from their villages and their withdrawal from customary Lepcha belief systems was, in part, a consequence of leaving home for schooling.

Their education introduced them to a broader society and with it exposure to modern influences such as popular global culture explored via movies, music videos, television and the Internet. Education has also developed the abilities to question and analyse, informed by access to information not available to the previous generation.

After meeting the activists from Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT), my singular focus on whether Lepcha youth were moving away from their culture broadened. The protesters had created a new coda to the proposition that modernity had disconnected the Lepcha youth from their culture, for the activists appeared to be moving towards it. In the process of fighting for their land they were re-examining the meanings of their sacred stories, places and rituals. They were retrieving the fragments of their culture and drawing them together in a manner that served both their political purpose and their desire for a contemporary Lepcha identity that resonated with the reasons for their protest. The outward signs of this reconnection could be seen in the narratives of the protest: in folk songs remade as protest anthems, in Lepcha jackets worn with jeans and Che Guevara beanies, in Lepcha youth on social media and in group pilgrimage to sacred sites. However, the real work was corporeal; not shared in language, but felt in the grammar of their bodies (Shouse 2005, p.1) where desire for and belonging to their place, their language, their people and their beliefs had caught the rhythm of their breath and the beating of their hearts.

~

When viewed through a global lens, the Lepcha movement appears as another small, village-based protest against development that was no match for the

global tsunami of progress. Dzongu had entered the geography of globalisation, 'a geography of power' (Massey 2013). The Lepcha protestors shouted into a headwind so strong that by the time their voices crossed Sikkim's border they had turned into whispers, lost in the air currents of the LPG model – liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation¹¹¹.

I just opened my web browser, typed the words 'indigenous protest, dam' and found 4,200,000 search results in 30 seconds.¹¹² Anti-dam protests are in every corner of the world including Namibia, Brazil, Panama, Malaysia, Honduras, Laos, Cambodia, Taiwan and India. Some anti-dam movements attract worldwide attention, such as the 30-year campaign against the massive 11,000 megawatt Belo Monte Dam in the Xingú river basin in Brazil. Others are less known, perhaps because the projects are smaller, or the protesters less able to attract attention. They are stories of global demand for energy and the lack of places to source it; of environmental compromise and crisis; of human resistance and human rights abuses.

The stories behind these large and small protests have much in common with the Lepcha protest, and are contained in big global themes enabled by what Kumar describes as 'a situation wherein capital seeks to penetrate the boundaries of nations and create a global market enabling its free movement' (2008, p.81).

When writing about the Narmada dam the Indian writer and activist Arundhati Roy said:

It's possible that as a nation [India] we've exhausted our quota of heroes for this century, but while we wait for shiny new ones to come along, we have to limit the damage. We have to support our small heroes. (Of these we have many. Many.) We have to fight specific wars in specific ways. Who knows, perhaps that's what the twenty-first century has in store for us. The dismantling of the Big. Big bombs, big dams, big ideologies, big contradictions, big countries, big wars, big heroes, big mistakes. (2002, p.48).

¹¹¹ The new economic reform, popularly known as Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation (LPG model) is aimed at making the Indian economy the fastest growing economy and globally competitive. <http://www.fibre2fashion.com/industry-article/8/738/impact-of-globalization1.asp>

¹¹² <http://www.google.com.au/> search conducted on 15 February 2013

Roy's recognition in 2002 of the importance of 'small heroes' fighting the 'big' is as relevant 10 years on. However it is important to note that the Lepcha protesters were not anti-modernity, for they recognised the advantages modernity had brought to their community, in particular through education and exposure to contemporary global affairs. They were not opposed to development per se; they were opposed to what they considered over-development. They supported construction of small, low impact dams that served immediate and nearby communities. The tension they felt was site specific and was a response to their desire to ensure their culture and nature were not compromised.

The Lepcha story of the dam protest is also a story of how progress assisted the young, modern members of a tribe to fight globalisation. While the two sides of the story might appear contradictory, I believe they are also harmonious. The Lepcha experience illustrates how an educated generation had the confidence to decipher the positive and negative impacts of globalisation on their community, and the ability and resources to respond.

At the time I entered the world of Lepcha youth from Dzongú, they had been at the tipping point of shifting away from their culture, but were disrupted by a crisis that returned them there. I started my exploration with a question – does their transition to modernity have to be a transition away from their culture? The answer for the Lepcha youth activists was no. However without the threat of the dams, which were the catalyst for their action, and re-engagement with their culture, it may have easily been yes.

~

A thesis is a proposition that is proven by argument. It usually starts with a question that is explored, discussed, argued and reasoned. As I explored my question of whether modernity displaces their culture for Lepcha youth and was drawn deeper into my argument I also asked, does it matter? Does it matter that a small group of people from a remote place do not want dams on their land? Who will it help to disseminate their stories? Who will care whether they win or lose their battle for Dzongú? Questions like mine are often asked of people who

live in the development zones that have been created out of wild rivers. They are called on to justify their rejection of the proposition that large-scale hydroelectric power is a solution to the global energy shortage and a gateway to prosperity.

My conclusion is that it matters because this small story from a small place has currency in the conversation about the impact of globalisation on minority peoples. Globalisation has travelled from the cities to remote places and inhospitable lands, propelled by market drivers, cost, government policy and competition. It does not discriminate between the big and the small for it seeks to amalgamate them, as part of its 'increasing integration of economies around the world, particularly through the movement of goods, services, and capital across borders' (IMF 2008). The Lepchas of Dzongú, as citizens of the global village, are impacted by cross-border movement of capital, labour, resources and culture.

The Lepcha stories told in this thesis explore the challenges many minority people face to keep their identity and connections to their culture. They document the ways in which modernity has impacted the Lepcha people, by recounting narratives from a pivotal moment in their history – the battle for Dzongú. The protesters' experiences, and their reactions to the intrusion of the dams on their land, amplify the significance of space, identity and the role of the sacred in determining the impact of change on cultures.

~

Earth's outer layer is broken into fragments called tectonic plates, which are about 100 kilometres thick and are constantly moving towards, away from or past each other. An earthquake occurs when the rocks break and move as a result of stresses caused by plate movements.¹¹³

An earthquake could be a metaphor for a culture in crisis. An outer layer of identity is stressed by the pressure of more dominant cultures and its 'plates' –

¹¹³ <http://www.ga.gov.au/hazards/earthquakes/earthquake-basics/causes.html>

language, narrative, ritual, land – and moves towards the plates of other cultures and away from or past each other. A cultural earthquake occurs when all or any of language, narrative, ritual and land are lost, or no longer valued.

For the Lepcha youth in ACT the dams, like the earthquake, have disturbed Sikkim geologically, politically and spiritually. Yet out of the disturbance they found strength in something previously considered frail – their Lepcha identity. They contested the fiction that Lepchas were peace-loving, shy people, unlikely to stand up for themselves and their beliefs.

After the hunger strikes Sherap Lepcha told me, ‘All the historians, all the writers, they used to say the Lepchas are timid, introverted, shy people, but after the ACT movement, all the people in Sikkim have come to know that ACT’s Lepcha people – if they make up their mind – can fight for a long time. We fought for land for 915 days and still we are fighting.’

I attended the wedding of a friend of Sherap’s in Mangan in November 2011. The invitation was extended to ‘all of ACT’ who had recently created a new way of showing respect, usually the giving of a *khada* to the bride and groom. ACT members had sewn several *khadas* together, signed them and wrapped the long scarf around the newly married couple several times. This unusual method of presenting *khada* was a ritual created by ACT members after the hunger strike as a sign of respect given at the weddings of those who had supported them. In their post-protest life, ACT members remained defined by their movement identity and protest experience, and bonded as a group.

They refer to themselves as the ACT Family. And perhaps because of the dams – or more accurately, the fight against them – the ACT Family has recreated a modern Lepcha identity that resides comfortably alongside and within the Nepali, Hindi and Western influences they cannot – and do not attempt to, nor wish to – avoid.

Their approach to living is shaped by the effects of colonisation and globalisation and both conditions inform how they negotiate their cosmopolitan engagement in society. They are attracted to and participate in the transnational realm outside Dzungú, while mediating between old and new models of living to ensure

they and their children can participate in a broad-spectrum prosperity that recognises culture as legitimate currency. Their journey is at an early stage and there is potential for future research; perhaps an examination of post-protest lifestyles that would complement existing studies of how youth activism influences adult career and life choices. There is also scope to explore pro-dam narratives and to gain a broader picture of why close communities can fracture in times of change. A longer-term study into what motivates the ACT Family to stay together would benefit social movements and other groups that struggle with member motivation.

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Like a snowball rolling down a steep mountain, globalization seems to be gathering more and more momentum. And the question frequently asked about globalization is not whether it will continue, but at what pace.

(IMF 2008)

The snowball of globalisation that rolled through Mayel Lyang between 2005 and 2012 disrupted and divided a community, yet it empowered many who live there. When Taussig said ‘there are occasions when to travel through a landscape is to become empowered by raising its meaning’, (1987, p.335) he was referring specifically to the Indian medicine men of the Putumayo who ‘arouse the slumbering meaning of space long colonized by the white man...’ The meaning of Dzongú was raised by globalisation, and defended by Lepchas who lived there, and by Lepchas who had been there in their imagination.

The success of the movement may presently be measured by the number of dams cancelled and, the increased scrutiny of government and developers involved in the projects. But in the future its contribution to how Lepcha youth value and respect their culture may be ACT’s greatest achievement. Perhaps it will be remembered, as Dawa Lepcha suggested, as a ‘dam that did a damn good thing’.

Appendices

Glossary of Lepcha and Indian words

Lepcha words are in italics.

Adivasis – collective name for the ethnic and tribal people Indigenous to India

aachuley – hail to the Himalayas, also used as exuberant ‘hooray’

baku - Bhutia women’s dress

bandhs - strikes

Ba-yul Demojong – Bhutia name for Sikkim meaning hidden valley of rice.

Bhutia – Sikkimese of Tibetan heritage

bóngthín - male shaman

bóngthínism – the practice of Lepcha rituals, also known as Lepcha religion

cú - mountains

dâ - lakes

dal bhat – lentil soup with rice

Dzongú – the Lepcha reserve in North Sikkim. Considered the motherland of all Lepchas.

Fadongthing - first Lepcha man/god. Also known as *Tukbothing* or *Tasheything*.

gonpa (Buddhist monastery)

Itbu-mu - mother creator of Lepcha race

Jongu - old spelling of Dzongú

Láso múng puna

lee rumfát – ritual to protect the home

Lyang - land

Lyang rumfát – ritual to protect the earth

Mayel - paradise

Mayel Lyang – land where Lepchas live. Known as land of hidden paradise

Mayel Kyong – mythical village in Dzongú where the Lepcha people of Mayel live

Marlavo Tyangrigong (last day of 12th month of Lepcha calendar)

mela - funfair

mun - female shaman

múng - spirits or demons

Munism – the practice of the *mun*

mútuncí róngkup, aachuley (shout/cry)

Nambun – Lepcha New Year

Nunglen Nue and Kathongfe - boy and girl child offspring of *Fadongthing* and *Nuzaongnyo* from whom Lepcha race began)

Nuzaongnyoo - first Lepcha woman

panchayat – local village administration

Pang Lhabsol (festival)

Pucho - clan

Puja – ritual

Reep Lee – Sherap Lepcha's house in Tadong meaning Flower House

Rong – the first name given to the Lepcha tribe. It is still in use in Lepcha communities but not officially. Some Lepchas use it as their surname along with, or instead of Lepcha.

Róngnyú and Rungnyít – rivers flowing from the Teesta River

rumfát – Lepcha ritual

Tendong Lho Rum Fát – Lepcha festival in memory of a great flood.

Thekong Tek - Lepcha chief

thokro-dum – Lepcha tunic worn by males.

Zóngú or Zónggú – old spelling of Dzongú

Dates of field trips and locations visited

APRIL 2006

West Bengal

- Darjeeling
- Kalimpong

Sikkim

- Gangtok, East Sikkim
- Upper Dzongú, North Sikkim
 - 4th Mile
 - Lingthem
 - Upper Sangkalang

DECEMBER 06-JANUARY 07

West Bengal

- Darjeeling
- Kalimpong

Sikkim

- Gangtok
- Kabi, North Sikkim
- Rinchenpong, West Sikkim
- Upper Dzongú, North Sikkim
 - Tingvong
 - Passingdang
 - Lingza
 - 6th Mile

DECEMBER 2007-JANUARY 2008

Sikkim

- Gangtok
- Upper Dzongú
 - Tingvong
 - Lingza
 - Passingdang
- Lower Dzongu
 - Hee Gyathang

APRIL 2008

Sikkim

- Gangtok
- Upper Dzongú
 - Passingdang

JANUARY 2009

Sikkim

- Gangtok
- Upper Dzongú
 - 4th Mile
 - Tingvong
 - Passingdang
 - Ruklu
- Lower Dzongú
 - Hee Gyathang
 - Tarang
 - Sangdong

NOVEMBER 2009 – MARCH 2010

- Gangtok
- Ganyap, West Sikkim
- Upper Dzongú
 - 4th Mile
 - Tingvong
 - Passingdang
 - Bey
 - Puntong
 - Lingza
- Lower Dzongu
 - Hee Gyathang
 - Lingdong

JANUARY 2011

- Gangtok
- Upper Dzongú
 - Tingvong
 - Passingdang
- Lower Dzongú
 - Hee Gyathang
 - Lingdong

DECEMBER 2011-January 2012

- Gangtok

- Upper Dzongú
- Upper Dzongú
 - Tingvong
 - Passingdang
- Lower Dzongú
 - Hee Gyathang
 - Lingdong

List of Interviewees

West Bengal

- **Kalimpong**
 - Cecilia Edwards and Noeline Foning – Lue’s aunts
 - Dorji Lepcha – Lepcha youth organiser, ILTA
 - Albert Lepcha – Lepcha youth organiser, ILTA
 - Nahalon Lepcha – Lepcha youth organiser, ILTA
 - Lawrence Sitling and Kate Sitling – Lue’s uncle and aunt
 - PT Simick – Lepcha elder, office bearer ILTA
 - Major Lyangsang Tamasang – Lepcha elder, President, ILTA
 - Azuk Lepcha – Lepcha youth organiser, ILTA

- **Darjeeling**
 - Dawa Lepcha, *bóngthíng*
 - SM & Rosa Lepcha – Darjeeling office bearers ILTA
 - Lue and Renu Tripp

Sikkim

- **Gangtok**
 - Miss Keepu Lepcha – founder of NGO, Lepcha Cottage
 - Pema Namgyal Bhutia – Bhutia elder and former activist
 - Renzino Lepcha – tourism NGO operator
 - Sonam Rinchen Lepcha – biologist
 - Naresh Shresta – businessman, blogger
 - Pema Leyda Shangderpa – journalist
 - Karchoong Diyali – photographer, art director, blogger
 - Pema Wangchuk – Editor, *Now Daily*
 - Mita Zulca – filmmaker, journalist, Editor *Talk Sikkim*
 - Lama Sonam Denjongpa – Lama and former activist
 - Tseten Lepcha – Working President, ACT

- **Dzongú**
 - 4th Mile
 - Chungden Tuzed Lepcha, elder
 - Loden Tsering Lepcha, former MLA, former hunter
 - 6th Mile
 - Den Tsering Lepcha – Tingvong hunter’s grandson
 - Hee Gyathang
 - Ayon Lepcha, *bóngthíng*

- Choden Lepcha, elder and Tenzing's uncle
 - Dawa Thendup Lepcha, ACT member
 - Mayelmit Lepcha – student, ACT member, Tenzing's cousin
 - Nethuk Lepcha – astrologer, schoolteacher, Tenzing's father
 - Norbu Lepcha, ACT member
 - Tenzing Lepcha, student, footballer, ACT member
- Lingdem
 - Dawoo Lepcha, *bóngthíng*
- Lingdong
 - Dawa Lepcha – Filmmaker, ACT general secretary
 - Ongyal Lepcha – student, ACT member
- Lingthem
 - Lingthem *bóngthíng*
- Linkoo
 - Meryak Lepcha, *bóngthíng*
- Passingdang
 - Athup Lepcha – ACT president
 - Choden Lepcha – elder, Mayelmit's father, Tenzing's uncle
 - Chotol Chompo Lepcha, Lama and ACT member
 - Dupden Lepcha – schoolteacher, former hunter
 - Gyatso Lepcha – ACT member, homestay owner
 - Inchung Lepcha, student, ACT member
 - Kachyo Lepcha, ACT member
 - Loden G Lepcha – ACT member, founder of primary school
 - Ngacho Lepcha – Lama
 - Sakyong *Mun's* mother
 - Yangthang Lepcha – elder, Loden's father
- Puntong
 - Kuncheot Lepcha, *bóngthíng*
- Ruklu
 - Lobden Lepcha, former hunter
- Sangdong
 - Norphay Lepcha, *bóngthíng*
- Tingvong
 - Lakpa Tshering Lepcha
 - Ongdu Lepcha – former hunter
 - Pema Lepcha – lawyer, ACT member
 - PT Lepcha – retired schoolteacher
 - Sachip Lepcha – school worker, storyteller
 - Sherap Lepcha – ACT member
 - Tingvong *Mun*
- Tarang
 - Atuk Lepcha, *bóngthíng*
 - Henry Lepcha, schoolteacher, Atuk's grandson

- Upper Sangkalong
 - Achen Lepcha – Phurba’s mother
 - Chindemu Lepcha – elder, Phurba’s grandmother
 - Gora Lepcha – former hunter
 - Phurba Lepcha – student and guide
 - Tashi Tshering Lepcha – former hunter
- **West Sikkim**
 - Ganyap
 - Mingur Lepcha, *bóngthing*

Many young ACT relay hunger strikers shared their stories while at BL House on hunger strike and completed short questionnaires including; Luden Lepcha, Karma Tshering Lepcha, Chungtuk Lepcha, Ongchuk Lepch, Ongyal Lepcha, Shezay Lepcha, Lakden Lepcha, Tsheringmit Lepcha, Ongmu Lepcha, Samdup Lepcha, Gaymit Lepcha, Likden Lepcha, Chungzay Lepcha, Princy Lepcha, Lhakey Lepcha, Samten Lepcha, Loden Lepcha.

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