
Lepcha Worldview Versus State Development Discourse: The Lepcha Resistance to NHPC in North Sikkim ¹

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This paper explores the epistemological conflict between indigenous ecological knowledge systems and modern developmental paradigms through a sociological analysis of the Lepcha tribe's resistance to hydroelectric projects in Dzongu, North Sikkim. The Lepchas, who are acknowledged as Sikkim's original inhabitants view nature as their God, totem and holy being embedded in their cosmology, myths, and everyday practices. This clash embodies a deeper epistemic tension between bioregional consciousness which values ecological reciprocity and modern developmental rationality (one-dimensional approach) which prioritizes market profit. Drawing upon different sociological theories to understand the context sociologically, this paper argues that the Lepcha movement is to protect and preserve an entire worldview that intertwines ecology, culture and sacred spirituality around their space. Their conflict is a confrontation between two conceptually different knowledge systems. This paper examines this epistemological conflict, highlighting how local ecological worldviews challenge the dominant developmental discourse against National Hydro-Power Project Corporation. The ethnographic study technique is the main aspect of the qualitative research design that have been used for this research. Key respondents (such as healers, elderly people, youth leaders etc.) are chosen for in-depth knowledge about place and the space.

Keywords: bioregionalism, epistemological conflict, NHPC, and indigenous knowledge

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India's contemporary development trajectory, particularly in the domain of green or sustainable energy has been significantly shaped by an increasing reliance on large-scale hydropower projects across the Himalayan region. Within this national framework, the state of Sikkim and more specifically, the sacred Teesta river basin has emerged as a focal point for intensive dam construction. These projects are mostly governed by the National Hydro- Power Project Corporation (NHPC) that is embedded within a broader discourse of universal development that primarily includes energy security, economic growth and infrastructural modernization (Government of India, 2019). However, these techno-economic narratives clash with a drastically different indigenous worldview in the Dzongu region, an officially recognized ancestral homeland for the Lepchas, where rivers and mountains are alive, holy, and essential to collective cultural identity. From sociological perspectives, however these dominant development narratives are deeply contested and intertwined within structures of power, knowledge and inequality. Drawing on insights from political ecology, it becomes evident that environmental governance is intrinsically linked to questions of access, control and the distribution of resources (Robbins, 2012). Hydropower development in the Himalayan region exemplifies what scholars describe as the "resource frontier" (Tsing, 2005), where peripheral landscapes inhabited by indigenous communities are incorporated into the circuits of capital and state-led development. In this process, local ecologies are reconfigured into sites of extraction, often marginalizing the voices and life worlds of indigenous populations.

This paper situates the Lepcha resistance within a framework of epistemological conflict: between indigenous ecological knowledge and modern scientific knowledge. It explores how contrasting epistemologies produce divergent assessments of risk, value, and legitimacy in socio-ecological governance. Development projects in ecologically fragile zones often create not only environmental disturbances but also epistemological ruptures along with Lepcha's emotional and symbolic meaning towards their sacred ecology and Lepcha's savior and guardian Mountain Kanchanjungha. The Lepchas of Dzongu, North

Sikkim, have long resisted the NHPC projects on the grounds that these threaten both their environment and their cultural-spiritual identity. Dzongu traditionally considered a *Mayel Lyang*, the holy land of origin of the Lepcha community is a living landscape of myths, memories, and ecological harmony. The conflict between the Lepchas and NHPC represents more than a political or economic disagreement; it is a confrontation between two extremely different knowledge systems: one that views the river, forests, groves and mountain as sacred and life-giving, and another that sees it as a resource to be harnessed for economic and commercial benefit. This paper examines this epistemological conflict through a sociological and anthropological lens, highlighting how local ecological worldviews challenge the dominant developmental discourse. It can be seen that Lepcha tribal movement, in this context, one of the important examples of academic and sociological discourse and debate around post-development philosophy versus universal model of development. The debates between two ideologies deal with different approaches and perspectives to trace the concept of development, without looking at the regional disparities and tries to impose the one-dimensional approach of development. In this way, only Lepcha people or other minorities suffered in terms of loss of their indigenous knowledge tradition, culture, and their environment that is the means of their subsistence due to the state-sponsored development initiatives. The mainstream literature on 'development' mainly ignores tribal culture, their folklores and their identity related to the distinct geography. Here the role of 'bioregionalism' is very significant to understand the Lepchas perception of development in the context of their regional based knowledge. The concept "bioregionalism" basically emphasis on placed based knowledge that helps to provide cultural survival, inclusive economic growth (through farming and agriculture like millet and other local products) and environment sustainability to protect regional place and space. In against to the state-sponsored development homogenization project, basically this research has attempted to explore tribal interpretations of their own narratives, stories and ecology to their everyday life through different practices, and also their perceptions

of development along with cultural and emotional connection of ecology.

Resistance has been analyzed with counter-questions, and alternative development models based on place-based/geographical-based knowledge have also been explored. In addition, the transmission of traditional and indigenous knowledge across generations has been explored. The idea of bioregionalism has emerged as a key paradigm in ecological philosophy and practice in response to the increasing problems of environmental degradation, climate change, and modern society's alienation from its ecological ecosystems. Bioregionalism, which stresses localism, ecological knowledge, and cultural identity, is based on the concept that sustainable existence necessitates a symbiotic interaction between human cultures and their natural areas. The recent Montreal-Kunming agreement on biodiversity conservation in 2022 in which India is a very important country to teach the world 'how to preserve the ecological biodiversity' through their enriched Indian Knowledge System that includes the diversity and ecological specific socio-economic life in Hindu worldview and the vast diverse indigenous cultural knowledge in various tribal communities that can only be explored through their own understanding of bioregionalism.

Sociological Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The Major research questions of the study are:

1. What are tribal explanations for their environmental surroundings?
2. How do tribal communities explain their sustainability in relation to ecology and the environment?
3. How do tribal communities construct cultural explanations of identity in relation to ecology and the environment?
4. What is the nature of the counter-dialogue by the tribal community against the state development discourse?

The present study is a qualitative study employing cross-sectional research in mapping the local narratives and existing counter-narratives developed by the Lepcha community in response to external interventions, especially state-

sponsored modern development projects such as NHPC. It attempts to explore and analyze the epistemological conflict between Lepcha understanding of their bioregionalism and ecologically sustainable way of life and the state understanding of ecology and environment under the umbrella of modernization and development. The study also followed micro-sociological theories such as symbolic interactionism and phenomenological understanding of people's life world and their social construction of meaning towards ecology and environment. The central focus of the study lies in examining the Lepcha life-world through their cognitive mapping of place, ecology, and identity, as articulated in their social and cultural narratives. These counter-narratives reflect an epistemological resistance to universalized models of development and highlight indigenous understandings of 'bioregionalism' rooted in place-based knowledge and cultural practices. Ethnographic method was employed to capture the depth and complexity of lived experiences of the people. Data collection involved unstructured interviews, in-depth conversations, oral histories, and participant observation. Respondents were selected from diverse social categories, including elders, women, youth, farmers, activists, bonthings (traditional religious practitioners), and social workers, ensuring representation across gender, occupation, and social roles. Content analysis was used as a key technique to interpret local narratives, folklores, and collective memories that shape the Lepcha understanding of ecology, environment, and community life. These narratives are crucial in constructing the concept of bioregionalism as an embedded cultural and ecological framework. Participant observation included engagement in rituals, daily practices, meetings, and protest activities, providing insights into the community's socio-cultural organization and resistance practices. Unstructured interview enabled the researcher to capture diverse perspectives on locality and their perspectives on development.

The study particularly focuses on the Lepcha resistance movement against NHPC as a site where ecology, identity, and cultural politics intersect. This resistance is understood not merely as opposition, but as a culturally organized and historically

grounded assertion of indigenous ecological consciousness. Thematically, the research analyzes how ecological knowledge, place-based identity, and cultural rootedness contribute to sustaining a bioregional worldview. It highlights the interconnectedness of tribal culture, environmental ethics, and resistance, thereby situating Lepcha experiences within broader sociological debates on sustainability, indigenous knowledge systems, and risk society. Overall, the study contributes to both local and global discourses by demonstrating how indigenous ecological knowledge and cultural practices offer alternative models of development.

In this context, place-based identity, ecological sustainability, and cultural rootedness that define the shared ethos of subsistence are emphasized by bioregionalism as a framework. An immersive and interpretative investigation into community members lived experiences in relation to their ontological security with the connection of bioregional community life against the external definition of ecology, place, and development was made possible by the qualitative research design. The study sought to provide a detailed account (as thick description) of the place as Clifford Geertz interpreted it as a counter-definition to the statistical rationality of postcolonial developmental settings that reveal the social and symbolic meanings, spiritual connections, and emotional attachment with the environment and forest entities. This was in contrast to relying on statistical data or generalizing developmental interventions in tribal communities. In order to obtain an in-depth understanding of lived ecological consciousness, cultural observation was made in a culturally significant manner regarding local clothing patterns, symbols, rituals, religious acts pertaining to nature, and local community techniques of resistance against NHPC.

The major thematic areas of which the information gathered from the key respondents of different categories of Lepcha tribe of Dzongu living in Sikkim are:

- Ecological values and rituals
- Resistance strategies and community mobilization
- Personal experiences of environmental change

- Intergenerational knowledge transmission
- Perception of “development” and the NHPC project

The 60 respondents for the study were selected not as a “data point” but as a knowledge-holder, story-teller, or active agent in the cultural and ecological narrative of Dzongu. The age range of respondents spanned from young Lepcha activists (18–30 years), then middle aged (31–50 years) to community elders (above 60 years). There are 26 respondents are from 18–30 age group including male and female, 25 respondents from middle age and 09 respondents were above the 60 years including male and female. These age groups of the respondents were basically related with following understanding of the study.

- Younger respondents, (18 male and 8 female) especially members of the activist group Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT), were instrumental in articulating contemporary forms of ecological resistance using legal, digital, and media tools.
- Middle-aged respondents (30–50 years) (20 male and 5 female) provided insights into the lived experiences of balancing economic livelihood, spiritual obligations, and environmental stewardship.
- Elders, (6 male and 3 female) often oral historians and custodians of ritual knowledge, served as invaluable sources of indigenous ecological wisdom and sacred cosmologies, transmitted across generations.

The study consciously included the perspectives of Lepcha women, whose ecological roles are often overlooked in mainstream environmental discourse. The Interviews and informal discussion with focused group interaction with women revealed how ecology is gendered, and how cultural memory and environmental care are often embodied in feminine roles, such as caretakers, seed-savers, and story-keepers.

The Lepcha ecological world view

Lepcha, Bhutia, and Nepali are the three mainstream ethnic communities living a small state in Sikkim. Lepcha tribe is the indigenous and primitive people of Sikkim

and they have a deep traditional knowledge of their nature or ecology. Lepchas were known as the first 'people of Sikkim', their constitutional status is that of a Scheduled Tribe, and in Sikkim, the State Government has given them the status of the "Most Primitive Tribe". The Lepchas are legally recognized as Indigenous in India through the Government's listing of their people as a 'Scheduled Tribe. They were recently recognized as having 'primitive tribe' status. Dzongu was declared a Lepcha reserve in 1957 by the last Chogyal of Sikkim in recognition that it is the Lepcha's sacred land and should be preserved for Lepchas. (Little 2008:2). Though numerically small, representing less than 7% of the total population in the region, they are historically, culturally and linguistically a very important community. The Bhutias invaded Sikkim in the 15th Century. Originally from Tibet these people settled in northern part of Sikkim and are known as the Lacheepas and Lachungpas in the North Sikkim. These people constitute about 10 % of the total population of Sikkim.

The Lepcha have an abundance of stories and narratives about their daily activities that have a connection to the rivers, mountains, forests, groves, and sacred surroundings. They used to reside in traditional Lepcha dwellings, which are constructed of bamboo with different structures (made up by various mythical beliefs relating to ecology) and are raised around five feet above the ground on stilts. They are also exceptionally skilled archers. The Lepcha's worldview of daily living, maintaining their means of subsistence, and, more broadly, their social structure is greatly influenced by these mythologies. According to the Government of India census of 2011, the total population of Lepchas in India was 80,316, another 3,445 live in Nepal, and constitute up to 15% of the indigenous tribal population in Bhutan, residing primarily in Sikkim. ItbuDebu Rum's Lepcha creation tale is told by elders of this community. The narrative describes how the first Lepcha pair, Fudongthing and NazongNyu, was created by Kongchen Konglo's (Khangchendzonga's Lepcha name) new snows. They call themselves as Mutanchi Rongkup RumKup, which translates to "Mother's Loved Ones, Children of the Snowy Peaks, Children of God." (Tribal.gov.in, Annual report, 2024). The deeply

embedded ecological indigenous and traditional knowledge system of the Lepchas (Rong) of Dzongu is typified by relational ontology and animistic in nature. Folklore and knowledge of medicinal and other plants and herbs, shows Lepcha's deep connection with their nature. Rivers like the Teesta, which are closely linked to cultural identity, mythology, and livelihood practices, are living examples of spiritual action rather than resources. Along with that their indigenous knowledge systems recognized in ethno-biology for example, documented uses of 118 plant species by Lepchas in ethno-medicinal practices and local medicine practitioner are totally dependent on these medicinal plants which are also very distinct in nature. The field for the research was Dzongu situated in the northern part of Sikkim, a designated Lepcha reserve area of Sikkim. Dzongu holds immense ecological, spiritual, and cultural significance for the Lepcha people. Surrounded by the Teesta River and Kanchenjunga National Park, it is often described by the Lepchas as a "Mayal Lyang" (Hidden Paradise) a sacred land bestowed by their ancestors. Dzongu is also the epicenter of the Lepcha resistance against hydroelectric dam construction, especially the proposed Stage IV Teesta dam by NHPC, which threatened sacred rivers like Rongyoung Chu and deeply revered landscapes. Hence, Dzongu provides a rich site for investigating bioregionalism through the lens of ecological knowledge, activism, and indigenous identity. The term "Dzongu" originates from the Bhutia language, translating to "a place with nine districts," which underscores its cultural significance and historical context (Gowloog, 1995). Geographically, Dzongu Valley has a triangular shape, covering an area of about 78 square kilometers. The altitudinal variation within the valley ranges from 700 meters at its lowest points to 6,000 meters at its highest peaks (Pradhan and Badola, 2008). Oral narratives and shared environmental memories are the main means by which bioregional attachments are maintained, according to an empirical qualitative study on the ecology, society, and culture of the Lepcha people residing in Dzongu. Elders tell tales of ancestral narratives, origin stories of Lepcha tribe and mountain Kanchanjunga, woodland experiences, and river deities like Teesta and Rangeet that influence environmental decision-making and

community ethics. The stories related to ecology are continuous from one generation to another through songs, festivals, rituals, and everyday practices, all these shows landscape's collective memory. Despite the increasing effects of modernization, displacement, and outside development initiatives, younger Lepcha people view these tales and collective memories as the community's cultural "stock of knowledge" (Schutz, 1967) and as cultural anchors that place them within a larger ecological framework.

Therefore, the bioregional narratives that support the ecological self of the Lepcha community gave rise to the environmental movement of the Lepcha tribe in North Sikkim, Dzongu. A common moral position that puts cultural and ecological integrity ahead of material progress is expressed via songs, prayers, protest rituals, and oral testimony. Thus, bioregional awareness actively influences political and ecological activity in addition to preserving memory.

While healers, farmers, bonthings (traditional medicinal practitioners), and women integrate ecological knowledge into ritual healing, agricultural practices, and the preservation of sacred forests, young activists reinterpret ancestral myths to address environmental problems. These changes highlight how different Indigenous narratives are dynamic, adapting and resisting new challenges while preserving their ecological ties to their ancestral lands. An elder from the Dzongu says that,

Lepcha's each and every ritual is related to nature only. From building their houses to agriculture, to health, marriage, festivals to death rites, all are fond of doing rituals related to Mother Nature. It is universally accepted that they have never migrated beyond Kanchenjunga's shadow. It appears that the community made a conscious effort to always keep Kanchenjunga in sight. It is rare to find any Lepcha village from where Kanchenjunga cannot be sighted. According to them, a Lepcha greeting 'Achuley' refers to the salutation to the mountain. Within the Lepcha villages, the traditional practitioners/healers like-the bongthing, mun and the monks, conserve and preserve endangered species of plants in their domicile gardens for ritual purposes.

Even the concept of health and illness among the Lepchas people are fully guided

and cared by the supernatural. Lepcha people have their tradition and costume and their own rituals. Various rituals are performed by *Bongthing* (male Lepcha priest) and *Muns* (female Lepcha priest). *Bongthings* and *Muns* are god gifted or are inherited from their father and forefather. Lepcha people they belief that if they get sick then they can be cure by the supernatural things like offering various kind of rituals to god and goddesses of their community. Their offerings are totally dependent and devoted to the nature. These symbolic meaning to the natural objects regulates the everyday economic action of the Lepcha community. Taking Goffman's (1959) understanding of social self, it is theoretically right to say that Lepcha everyday life is a performance, where actors use symbols, gestures and rituals to maintain social order and express their cultural identity. For them their relationship with nature, rituals and subsistence can be understood as continuous dramaturgy and that performance takes place on ecological landscape of Dzongu. In this stage, for Lepcha their landscape is like a front stage, as Dzongu itself is an ecological theatre on which cultural identity is performed and backstage is where negotiation, meaningful preparation and practice take place. It is like every day spaces of meaning of ecological ethics, symbols (that taught) and preparation.

NHPC and the Developmental Epistemology

The story of Lepcha movement against the NHPC project in Dzongu rooted with the modern-universal-homogenization development discourse and the local epistemologies of progress and happiness. It explores the narrative of how Lepcha culture is threatened by modernization and massive hydropower projects, and how young Lepchas are dealing with the loss of their tradition. This is an excellent illustration of how local beliefs have fostered a particular local brand of environmentalism in Dzongu, North Sikkim. The NHPC Hydro Power project, which involves the construction of a dam over the Lepcha sacred river Teesta, is the subject of this development. Now in the name of the development, it becomes more commercialized and marketed by using complex scientific equipment's and instrument. The Lepcha understands of NHPC on river Teesta is a crisis of Lepcha's 'public sphere' by the domination of 'system world' over 'lifeworld' (Habarmass

1987, 1989). The traditional 'public sphere' of Lepcha in Dzongu has a bioregional ethics of 'communicative rationality' that shapes their local 'ethos' of community inter-subjectivity through collective memory and spiritual understanding of ecology and environment. The protests to save environment are not merely on grounds of displacement but that the regions, place, their cultural and ethnic traditions are rooted in the river Teesta and its ecological environment. From the Lepchas narrative of what they describe as 'a violation of a sacred Landscape'.

The NHPC commissioned two projects in 2011 that are already producing electricity: the 60 MW Rangeet-III HEP and the 510 MW Teesta Stage-V HEP. Teesta Stage IV, the most controversial hydel, which is in the process in the Dzongu Lepcha Reserve. It includes six projects (including one that is almost finished on the Dzongu border at Dikchu). Large-scale infrastructure projects, industrial expansion, and modernization have frequently been the subject of developmental discussions. These concepts frequently disregard local customs and indigenous cultures, viewing them as less significant in the quest for advancement. This tension is seen among the Lepcha community in Dzongu, North Sikkim. NHPC initiated hydropower projects, which they have strongly criticized. On the other hand, the Lepcha people believe that these projects put serious threats to their cultural legacy, which they have protected for many centuries. Their spiritual traditions are disturbed by the building of dams and associated infrastructure, which also jeopardizes the natural balance that supports their way of life (Lepcha, 2021, 2022; Tamang, 2022).

The present scenario exemplifies a larger struggle between two ideologies: localization, which places more emphasis on community control, cultural preservation, and environmental stewardship, and modernization, which stresses government-led development and technological solutions. The Lepchas continued opposition to NHPC's initiatives poses significant queries regarding modern development strategies. Who really benefits from these projects? Whose needs come first? What parts of local culture, tradition, and the environment are lost for the sake of progress? By closely examining how the Lepchas interact with these

industrial projects, we can gain valuable insights into how marginalized communities respond to, resist, and reevaluate development. The Lepchas counter narratives illustrate the importance of valuing local identity and protecting the environment, rather than simply following outside notions of progress.

This example highlights the need for a more fair and inclusive approach to development that respects diverse cultures. In opposition of NHPC, Chewang Lepcha (age-54) a key informer of the study, who is a farmer said:

Nature has supported all the times during calamities. We worship nature viz. stones, mountains, hills, and rivers. The Kangchendzonga and rivers are paramount reality for Lepcha. Likewise, it is significant in Bree (marriage) that while holding the promise (Sungkyu) the couple worship and sip water to piouness their love for endless journey. The couple make promise as 'Kanchendonga nadaleejain, Teesta Rangeet nasukkeesamma' (until the fall of Kanchendzonga or rivers Teesta and Rangeet will shrink, their marriage intact forever). This belief remains intact throughout their life.

According Tempa Lepcha, 68 years old retired Lepcha teacher of Hee-gyathang,

There are perimeters of Dzongu such as in the north direction is - the peak or mountain named Phophundoad signifying as it is shaped like a fishtail. In the south direction, there is a river called Ungrungphap. Between Ungrungphap and Phophundoad, there are the people of Dzongu."Our ancestors were giving must respects to environment. But now, gradually those values are vanishing and people are getting materialistic day by day.

There are some counter narratives also found among the young and middle age generation Lepcha people about their everyday life. According to Dawa Tshering Lepcha, 52 years old male Lepcha,

I feel differently from the others who think that the past Lepcha life was better. In the past, there were no roads to reach one village to another village. People were reaching from one village to another by climbing the hilly road that was taking so much time. There were no education and no connection with the outside world and were no health facilities. But now, we have well-connected roads, every Panchayat has schools and hospitals for primary check-up and now people are not living

hunger due to the government facility of PDS and MNRGES. Now, the young generation Lepcha is going outside and they are doing well in education and also in competitive market opportunities.



Source: Field work

The Conflict: Dzongu and the Politics of Knowledge

The concept of the politics of knowledge refers to how certain ways of understanding the world are privileged (e.g., technical, state-endorsed scientific knowledge against the space and place) while other form of knowledge are being understood especially Indigenous and place-based (can be understood through the concept 'bioregionalism') epistemologies are marginalized or dismissed. This idea is central to interpreting the conflict in Dzongu, between scientific led knowledge and local based indigenous knowledge. In Dzongu, the Lepcha community's knowledge systems are deeply tied to cosmology, ecology, and land stewardship, and this produces a distinct epistemological conflict with state based one-dimensional approach for development of NHPC. The debate around environmental impact of hydropower projects in Sikkim also contains a religious dimension. The Lepcha's, now settled mainly in the protected area of Dzongu, traditionally regarding nature, mountains and rivers as integrally connected to themselves. There is a deep-ecological connection between Lepcha and their ecology as being part of one guardian under Kanchanjungha Mountain. Their spiritual history

remains at the core of their traditional value system and that has become part of their anti-dam movement under the banner of Affected Citizens of the Teesta (ACT) (Little, 2009). The Bhutia communities, which predominantly reside in the West Sikkim, have equally been involved and actively participated in anti-dam protest. Especially the proposition of projects on the sacred, Rathong Chu River in the Western part of Sikkim, has provoked protest on religious ground by several groups among which Sikkim Bhutia Lepcha Apex Committee (SIBLAC). Protest such as these have eventually even led to several projects on this river to be scrapped. According to Lepcha cosmology, the first Lepcha man (Fudongthing) and woman (Nazong Nyu) was created in Dzongu by the heavenly ancestor Itbu Rum. According to oral tradition (by elders), Dzongu is one of the "hidden lands" (beyuls) blessed by Guru Padmasambhava, where humans, nature, and spirits coexist. Dzongu is considered a geographical manifestation of myth, a living, sacred geography, the abode of ancestral spirits, and a paradise for ritual, healing, and community well-being. The land itself becomes a sacred setting that narrates the ancestry of Lepcha people's history. Their Mother God, Teesta (Rongnyu), is implanted in them, and Rongyong Chu is connected to ancestral fecundity. Numerous ceremonies, healings, and purifications take place here. Regarding Dzongu's as a sacred landscape, position as previously mentioned, the state's administration has approved a plan to bar NHPC from the region around Dzongu and the Teesta River. The Dzongu and Tholung valleys are regarded by the Lepcha as a holy place and landscape since they are connected to the legendary origins of the Lepcha people (Tamlong, 2015). The second was the NHPC Teesta stage (IV AND V). The region's elders (during the field work) spoke out against the destruction of sacred places, especially those associated with the Ancestral God Kanchenjunga, sacred lakes, Kathok, Tso Lhamo, the rivers Teesta and Rongyong, and ghosts and evil protectors associated with forests (Laso mung, Tungkyong). According to the elders, this wasn't the destruction of only object like a place but it was the bio-cultural devastation or we can say ethnological destruction.

The story of Lepcha movement against the NHPC project in Dzongu rooted with the modern-universal-homogenization development discourse that promote uniformity and the local knowledge system or the epistemologies of narratives towards their ecology and their indigenous practices. By 20 August 2007, an indefinite hunger strike was ongoing at B.L House in Gangtok. Political leaders from both within and outside Sikkim voiced their support for Lepcha community (Tamlong, 2015). In 2007, ACT was led by Dawa Lepcha and Tenzing Lepcha who fought to protect ecological integrity and maintain regional environmental balance (that is symbolically meaningful). Local People of Dzongu resisted the project in various ways that including using banner with slogans and that reflected their ancestral stories of origin of the place and tribe, narratives of their existence, mythologies related to their rituals, Gods, forest and evil spirits and songs. These forms of expressions emphasized the strong connection between their indigenous identity, ecological values and sustainable way of life. The Lepcha community's opposition to hydro power project is not merely political but it also represents a cultural assertion of their worldview where land, rivers, spirits and people are interconnected within one moral and ecological system. Their traditional knowledge system show that nature is deeply embedded in their social life, memory and spirituality rather than being viewed only as a resource. Contemporary global development discourse increasingly reveals a fundamental tension between the demands of economic growth and the ecological limits of the planet. Since the post- world- war II period, dominant development paradigms largely shaped by modernization theory that mostly emphasized industrialization, infrastructural expansion, and market integration as primary pathways to progress. These approaches often reflect "trickle down" logic, assuming that technological and material advancement will automatically improve conditions at the grassroots level. However, from sociological perspectives, particularly drawing on critical development theory and political ecology, such growth-oriented models have produced uneven outcomes. Environmental crisis in the late-twentieth and early twenty first centuries, such as climate change, biodiversity

loss, deforestation and displacement highlight the contradiction of this model. Thinkers like Arturo Escobar and Wolfgang Sachs critique this dominant paradigm by arguing that development is not a neutral or universal process but a discourse shaped by power, knowledge and global hierarchies. In this sense, development can function as a form of cultural and economic hegemony, often undermining local knowledge systems and alternative ways of living. Therefore, it becomes essential to conceptualize development through the lens of sustainability and ecological justice. This involves recognizing pluralistic epistemologies, valuing indigenous knowledge and promoting models of development that are environmentally sustainable, socially equitable and culturally sensitive. Finally, the call to rethink development through sustainability connects with sustainable development theory and concepts like ecological modernization, which attempt to reconcile economic growth with environmental protection (Naess, 1989; Guha, 1998). Ecology, in this sense, goes beyond the mere conservation of resources; it interrogates the very foundations of how societies define and pursue well-being. The ecological perspective emphasizes that development should be understood holistically, where economic, social and environmental dimensions are deeply interconnected. In the late 1980s, discussions around sustainability and localized development gained momentum as efforts increased to align development practices with ecological responsibility. The Brundtland Report (1987) introduced the idea of “sustainable development” defining it as the fulfilment of present needs without undermining the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This concept rapidly gained acceptance among policymakers and international organizations, contributing to the widespread adoption of sustainability frameworks.

In this context, now we have to see how state, capital and modernization discourse intersect in Dzongu and how Lepcha tribe see them as external existential threats to their land, livelihood and cultural identity. Here state sponsored modernization project frames the NHPC projects as necessary steps towards local development and economic growth of Sikkim. The logic of scientific and infrastructural progress

of the Sikkim's people through NHPC by the state legitimizes as a rational planner of development. From a sociological standpoint, the state sought to implement a unilinear development model that Dzongu must develop through the universal notion of progress, which in some way imposes a cultural hierarchy that prioritizes techno-economic rationality over indigenous worldviews and their phenomenology of lifeworld. Similarly, this can be understood in the context of Foucault's "Power/knowledge and bio-politics," in which he argues that the state, NHPC, engineers, and NGOs produce knowledge about environmental impact assessment, and this knowledge legitimizes control over both the Lepcha population and their natural world (the River Teesta). In this case, the Lepcha become the focus of governmentality, which ought to be advanced in order of sustainable growth. This is known as "bio-political domination," in which authority is dominated via controlling the environment, their life world, and their geographical territory. The tribal community becomes a target of opposition and object of growth as well. Taking this into account, the main goals of this research paper are to conceptualize these kinds of emergent social movements based on how indigenous knowledge, institutional practices, and the preservation of ecologically particular livelihoods build local identities. The contemporary reaction by the Lepchas in Dzongu towards the mainstream development paradigm of modernization process sponsored by the state creates an academic discussion on the question of tribal rights in the name of progress and development. The major objectives of this study were to develop theoretical perspectives on how nature becomes a social construction of reality through explaining that how an individual and this ethnic group are attached with a symbolic and cultural meaning towards natural objects. The symbolic interactionist like Mead and Blumer's perspective in social psychology sees first, the unique feature of the human mind is its capacity to use symbols to designate objects in the environment. For Mead (1932) mind is a process. Mead termed this process of using symbols or language covertly 'imaginative rehearsal'¹. In accordance with principles of behaviourism, Darwinism and Pragmatism, Mead stressed that mind arises out of in the process of individual or infant and how with

the trial-and-error method they came with some appropriate symbols, gestures and shared language which give common meaning to the individual and its environment. With this development, gestures now denote the same objects and carry the same meaning for interaction and mead calls this process as 'conventional gestures'².

The understanding of Lepcha connection of nature or ecology in sociological way has also emphasized from the very beginning of when Durkheim (1912) developed the concept of 'totemism'. As we know 'totemism' is a system of religious belief which attributes divine properties to a particular type of animal or plants. It gives cultural meaning to certain physical objects. This region is an example of case study because basically this particular geographical territory has some unique features of belief system and practices. Lepcha people have given certain meaning to the physical object or to the nature and we called it as 'social construction of reality'. Here the question is, which type of rights, the Lepcha people are demanding for- is the structural development right, which is dominated or sponsored by state and the external forces of globalization or either their rights of their own home land? This paper is trying to explore the dynamic understanding of man-environment relationship in the context of local beliefs, culture, and religion in terms of critical understanding of contemporary conflicts and resistance toward the post-colonial development through the lens of farmers, government school teachers, elders, old people, women and youth of the community.

The case study of Lepcha community living in Dzongu is trying to explain the social construction of ethnic identity of Lepcha community with their socio-cultural linkages to the ecology and environment. The symbolic meaning to the nature through religious beliefs and rituals by the Lepcha community in Dzongu produces a sense of "subsistence ethics" that shapes their social action in everyday life. This ethnic/tribal identity based on the beliefs of 'naturism' has turned into collective consciousness in the form social movement when the NHPC Hydropower Project introduced over the Teesta and Rangeet River under the banner of

development of Lepcha life. Here For them, the bioregional consciousness becomes a form of resistance that is simultaneously cultural (preserving identity), ecological (protecting ecology and bio diversity) and political (rejecting domination discourse of so called development). The movement has been conceptualized by the community as destruction of their nature, livelihood and sustainability. Their harmonious and spiritual relationship with river Teesta and Rangeet through religious symbol have been destroyed in the name of “development” project backed by scientific rationality of the Postcolonial state. This movement is unique and has a basic difference from the other social movements in the sense of method that they adopted for their movement largely derived the mythology of Lepcha community. In this context of development, According to Tenzing Gyatso Lepcha, age 42 from Dzongu, who is a young farmer and an activist:

Development denotes sustainability and always works gradually in the process of development. There are alternative ways of development rather to build the dams. Actual development represents progress in the health sector, education, maintenance of roads, conserving and preserving nature and promotes eco-tourism. For instance, building a luxurious hotel in the village doesn't means the overall development of the village of village population, rather, the development and initiation of home stay with a community centric approach which is our traditional way to treat guest is a most suitable tourism policies for the development of our village commons. The local homestay will promote ecotourism, conservation of environment and community-based tourism. According to me equal opportunities in development and eco-centric sustainable development is the actual meaning of development and progress.

Sherap Lepcha, a 65 years old Lepcha farmer and a Mun Bongthing (female healer) narrated:

For me development is unthinkable without the agriculture that gives the life tour villagers. Progress means Kheti pati lagawnu, Anna bali lagawnu, and saak sabji lagawnu (sowing the crops, millets, seeds, and vegetables that are considered as progress). Over the last decade, we farmers revived the cultivation of traditional millets like finger millet and foxtail millets that were declining due to hybrid rice promoted by government. Our development can't be defined by the people who are not seen our culture, our environment and our tradition. Development must be aligned with our own ecological worldview and with our own notion progress. Any developmental intervention in the name of infrastructural development in Dzongu

should be appropriate according to the Dzongu's ecological and environmental context. In this sense, living in Dzongu with the idea of development must be rooted with its traditional agricultural practices because farming can only lead to the protection of our sacred land and our ecological sovereignty.

According to Chewang Lepcha, a 55 years farmer from Dzongu stated:

Dams and industries in Dzongu will not achieve development and progress for Dzongu people; these are only for the benefit for the people living in town and other people who are the outsiders of Dzongu. As a result, the Dzongu people will only face the natural calamity by disturbing the natural ecosystem of Dzongu. Roads and bridge initiatives in our locality are sufficient but dams and industries will not benefit for our people. Dams can provide progress for a short time but we will face long-term or long-run impacts on the environment as well as on Lepcha people. In the name of development, the Lepchas of Dzongu will be the only sufferer.

Along with the above narratives, the common understanding of development by the Lepcha people across the generation is “there should be complete banned of mega NHPC projects in Sikkim in general and Dzongu in particular because it is a sinking area and is a holy place of Lepcha people. Development that is initiated by the Sikkim government needs verification and survey to know about the region's ecological and environmental specificities. Different location or places have different geographical nature and natural settings and the government should be noted this while planning for infrastructural development. The development model that the government is introducing makes local people isolated and deprive without taking into account of their understanding of ecology and environment in their life.

This study tried to theorize the problem of development discourse in the Lepcha cognitive world view, their narrative analysis towards the nature and human interaction and the Teesta and Rangeet in the collective memory of Lepcha society. This can be related with the sociological understanding of ‘phenomenology of lifeworld (Schutz, 1967) with the community identity through Lepcha's ‘cultural stock of knowledge’ as ‘ecological self’. The human conduct is always established in a particular place that shapes the community's geographical landscape. The interaction between man and environment and the associated practices forms the basis of social organization of space and place. Such practices range from human

beings very struggle for livelihood to its involvement in cultural practices. These interactional competencies and embodied practices finds expression in the form of what is in common parlance is understood as 'surrounding', 'environment', 'landscape', 'territory' etc. and these comes under the community's symbolic representations, their livelihood and the life world goes on. These are the things which are means to them as the essence of their life. The landscape and the territory provide a social relationship between human and nature which help to develop the sense of "belongingness" towards the landscape.

Conclusion

The Dzongu region of North Sikkim officially designated as a protected space for indigenous community of Lepcha provides a critical empirical context for examining the above mentioned dynamics. For Lepcha, the natural environment constitutes a sacred and living entity deeply embedded in their cosmology, cultural practices and collective identity (Arora, 2006). The tension surrounding hydropower project in Dzongu can be understood as an epistemological conflict between competing knowledge systems that is modern scientific knowledge and indigenous ecological knowledge. This divergence reflects deeper epistemic hierarchies that privilege certain forms of knowledge over others. Drawing upon Michel Foucault's concept of power/knowledge, it can be argued that development discourse functions as a regime of truth that legitimizes specific forms of knowledge while marginalizing others³. In this sense, hydropower projects are not merely technical interventions but are embedded within discursive formations that define what constitutes "valid" knowledge and "rational development." Likewise post-colonial perspective also illustrates these dynamics by foregrounding the question of voice and representation. Gayatri Spivak's seminal question, "can the subaltern speak"?⁴ is particularly relevant in this context, as it draws attention to the systematic silencing of marginalized communities within dominant discourses

of development. The Lepcha community also faces this kind of structural marginalization. In addition, Karl Marx's critique of capitalism provides a lens to interpret hydro power development as a process of commodification, wherein natural entities such as rivers are transformed into units of economic values (Marx, 1867, 1976). Max Weber's concept of rationalization further explains how bureaucratic and technical logics come to dominate decision making processes often doesn't considered ethical and cultural considerations (Weber, 1922, 1978). David Harvey's notion of "accumulation by dispossession" deepens this analysis by highlighting how development projects entail the appropriation of land and resources, frequently leading to the displacement and disenfranchisement" of indigenous populations (Harvey, 2003). Such process are often justifies in the name of the "greater common good", yet they produce uneven outcomes that disproportionately burden marginalized communities. This paper basically, argues the conflict over hydropower development in Dzongu within a broader theoretical framework that integrates political ecology, post-colonial theories and classical sociological perspectives. It examined how competing knowledge systems interact, conflict and negotiates within the context of state-led development initiatives. In doing so, the study contributes to critical debates on development, environment and indigenous rights and also need diverse epistemologies in policy making processes. This paper calls for a more reflexive and dialogical approach that acknowledges the legitimacy of indigenous knowledge systems and fosters more equitable and sustainable futures.

Notes

¹The human mind is according to Mead characterized by some unique features: the human mind is capable of using symbols to denote objects, to rehearse different types of action, and to imaginarily select the most appropriate line of action (the latter two are made possible by virtue of the symbols). This mindful use of symbols is called imaginative rehearsal, and this process is a necessary condition for the development of self and society. Because of the

mind's capacity to use significant symbols, as a basis for true communication, humans can transcend the simple pattern of action based on gestures. Gestures are used in any act involving two or more people (or animals), but only through the human mind can they acquire meanings which become common or shared among individuals in the course of their interactions with others. These are significant symbols, and they make up the essence of human communication through language.

² With this development, gestures now denote the same objects and carry the same meaning for interaction and mead calls this process as '*conventional gestures*'. Human behaviours, interaction and social organization are possible by the virtue of unique human abilities, beginning with the capacity to use and read conventional and or significant gestures that mean the same thing to the sending and receiving the organism.

³ Foucault's concept of power/knowledge emphasizes that knowledge is not neutral but produced within power relations that determine what is considered truth. (Foucault, 1980).

⁴ Spivak's critique highlights the structural conditions that prevent marginalized groups from being heard within dominant discourses, even when they attempt to resist (Spivak, 1988).

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