



# Preserving Máyel Lyáng

## The Lepchas Fight to Save Their Land

By Andra Leo

*The Dikchu dam across the Teesta River*

In the Himalayas there is a hidden land, one so beautiful, so bountiful and so perfect that the Lepchas, its indigenous people call it *Máyel Lyáng* - paradise. This paradise, in the tiny north Indian state of Sikkim, lies in the shadow of the world's third highest mountain – Kangchendzonga – the first in the Himalayan range to trap the monsoon clouds blowing in from the south. As a consequence, beneath its majestic heights lies the most fertile and ecologically luxuriant tract of land that it is possible to find in these mountains. This land is home to the Lepcha people – a timid and peaceful tribe who consider aggression unnatural and dangerous and who interpret envy as an affliction sent by the devil. They are happiest when they are in their beloved forests, walking its trails and living close to the abundant nature all around them. Born naturalists, they are able to



*Dzongu's deep valleys and high mountains*

recognise and use all of the forest's plentiful resources. Their non-confrontational nature has, however, been pushed beyond endurance during the past ten years. Their land and their cultural heritage are under threat; their sacred rivers are being dammed; the verdant forests blasted away and the people displaced. Lamenting



*Diversion tunnels through the mountain*

their lost and devastated land, the Lepchas have begun fighting back.

Today, the last refuge of the Lepcha people in a country once entirely their own, is in a reserve called Dzongu where only they are allowed to settle and own land. Dzongu, 70 kilometres north of Gangtok, is a roughly triangular area of very mountainous land that was set aside during the days of the British Raj, in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Even then it was believed that the Lepchas needed protecting, that their unique culture and traditions should be preserved and their way of life kept alive. This was because increasingly large numbers of Nepalese were already settling in Sikkim and indeed, today they are the majority race.

This difficult-to-access but pristine area was earmarked as a Lepcha reserve because it is the oldest recorded settlement of these forest dwellers. In 1938 anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer travelled there and described Dzongu's terrain as being "excessively precipitous ... and except for a few artificially levelled places there is probably not a hundred square yards of flat ground in the whole district" (from his book *Himalayan Village*). All travel there had to be done on foot along narrow, winding forest trails. Its daunting

physical characteristics helped to keep the reserve untouched and the Lepchas continued to lead lives closely entwined with their natural environment.

Not everyone believed in the benefits of a reserve. A R Foning, a Lepcha from Kalimpong, wrote (in *Lepcha: My Vanishing Tribe* [1987]) that he feared it might create a “sort of human menagerie”, with the people remaining backward, stuck in a time warp. Nevertheless, he recognised that in such a sanctuary the indigenous people would be free to effect improvements and developments “through their own inherent genius” and although these changes would occur much more slowly, they would be suited to the people’s own needs.

However, Dzongu has *not* been left to develop in its own way. Without consulting the owners of this hitherto unspoiled environment, India’s federal government and Sikkim’s state government went on a dam-building spree. Reports vary, but it seems up to 26 dams have been planned throughout Sikkim with at least three already completed. Within Dzongu’s boundaries one dam was constructed across the Teesta River and seven more were in the planning or early construction stages. Of the dams already built or under construction, the effects on the physical environment have been catastrophic. One village was swept away in a flash flood, while entire mountainsides and diversion tunnels near dam sites collapsed during the 2011 earthquake. Given the geological frailty of the environment, more dams can only bring more disasters.

The Lepcha consider the Teesta to be sacred and fear that their culture will disappear along with the river, much of



*A bamboo suspension bridge in Dzongu*

them. Therefore, the dams have already left numerous Lepchas homeless and disconnected from their mountains and hills, their sacred rocks and springs, their forests and streams. Those who resisted the land-sale temptations and then watched as tragedies unfolded, began to rebel against the passive, non-confrontational nature the Lepcha are known for. Something had to be done so they organised protests. In their eyes, *Máyel Lyáng*, their hidden paradise, was under attack and in danger of disappearing, so peaceful resistance began. When their protests were ignored, more drastic means to gain attention were decided upon.

In June 2007 Dawa Tshering Lepcha and Tenzing Lepcha began a hunger strike – one that lasted 63 days and was called off only when government representatives promised to review the plan to build another seven dams inside the reserve. However, the government reneged on its promises. Another hunger strike began – a relay strike in which many groups participated – Nepalese, Bhutias and fellow

Lepchas, but with Dawa and Tenzing continuing to the bitter end, a marathon 96 days. As had happened during the first strike, the young men had to be hospitalised when their organs began to fail, but they refused to give in. Their efforts and those of the many people who joined them during the second strike paid off – the government promised to scrap four of the projects and reconsider the others. Today Tenzing works at grass-roots level to persuade his people that the land is their most precious possession – without it they have no roots. Dawa devotes his life to making documentaries to educate the world about the Lepcha people and their *Máyel Lyáng*. This translation of an old poem speaks of the Lepchas’ deep feelings for their land.

*To the green fresh leaves I spoke,  
To the pine and the oak,  
To the flowers that strew the ground,  
To the moss that gathers round.  
To the far and to the nigh, to the blue and radiant sky.  
To the insects sporting here,  
To the water running there.  
To the meadow, to the hill,  
To the lively, to the still,  
To one and all the things I love,  
On Mother Earth, in skies above.*

(From: *Intimate Glimpses of Mysterious Tibet* by G E O Knight [1930])

For more on the Lepchas’ fight to save their land go to: [www.weepingsikkim.blogspot.com](http://www.weepingsikkim.blogspot.com)

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**Andra Leo** is an avid traveller and photographer who enjoys creating photo journals of her trips.

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*All photos by the author*



*The view from Gyathang Monastery in Dzongu*

which will go underground when dam diversion tunnels are constructed. From an economic point of view, the consequences for Dzongu’s people have already been dire, with many talked into selling their land for dam construction. Unused to having ready cash, they suddenly felt rich; many squandered the money and were left destitute. Sadly, some have turned to alcohol as hopelessness overwhelmed