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Hydropower Politics in Northeast India: Dam Development Contestations, Electoral Politics and Power Reconfigurations in Sikkim

Rinchu Doma Dukpa¹, Jaime Hoogesteger¹ , Gert Jan Veldwisch^{1,*} and Rutgerd Boelens^{1,2}

¹ Water Resources Management Group, Department of Environment Sciences, Wageningen University and Research, 6700 AA Wageningen, The Netherlands; jaime.hoogesteger@wur.nl (J.H.)

² CEDLA Center for Latin American Research and Documentation, University of Amsterdam, Roetersstraat 33, 1018 WB Amsterdam, The Netherlands

* Correspondence: gertjan.veldwisch@wur.nl

Abstract: Around the world, the development of large dams has been increasingly contested. India is no exception and has seen the mobilisation of powerful domestic and transnational socio-environmental movements against dams over more than four decades. In this context, the State of Sikkim in northeast India has been entangled in prolonged hydropower development conflicts since the late 1990s. This article analyses these conflictive entanglements between the Government of India, the State Government of Sikkim, power companies and Sikkim's autochthonous tribe, the Lepchas. It zooms in on the period of 2011–2017, which saw an abrupt escalation of the conflicts to analyse the messy, deeply political and often unpredictable and contradictory world of dam construction and its contestations. Our analysis is informed by the power cube framework developed by John Gaventa. Our analysis shows how hydropower development is deeply intertwined with local patronage relationships. We show how local elections bring out dam conflict and the operation of power into the open, sometimes leading to abrupt and unexpected switches in positions in relation to hydropower development. We show that these switches should be seen not only as “strategic electoral tactics” but also and importantly as contentious political struggles that (re)configure power in the region. We show how in this process, powerful political actors continuously seek to stabilise power relations among the governing and the governed, choreographing a specific socio-hydraulic order that stretches way beyond simple pro- and anti-dam actors and coalitions as it is embedded in deep hydro(-electro) politics and power plays.

Keywords: hydropower development; movements; hydro-electro politics; power; Sikkim



Citation: Dukpa, R.D.; Hoogesteger, J.; Veldwisch, G.J.; Boelens, R. Hydropower Politics in Northeast India: Dam Development Contestations, Electoral Politics and Power Reconfigurations in Sikkim. *Water* **2024**, *16*, 1061. <https://doi.org/10.3390/w16071061>

Academic Editor: Athanasios Loukas

Received: 4 December 2023
Revised: 23 March 2024
Accepted: 25 March 2024
Published: 6 April 2024



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1. Introduction

Development of large-scale, mega hydraulic dam infrastructure in India has been heavily contested for more than four decades, including mobilisation of powerful domestic and transnational socio-environmental movements against dams [1,2]. A few brought intense global attention to dam development in India, such as the “Save The Narmada Movement” against the Narmada Valley Project, which culminated into a world-famous anti-dam movement [3]. Despite powerful critiques and scrutiny, the Indian Government (GoI) has continued to advance hydropower development as inevitable for the greater public and national interest, often executed as “top-down, state-led, growth focused and technocratic” undertakings [3] (p. 33).

The sustained belief in hydropower as a “renewable, non-polluting and environmentally benign source of energy” that is economically feasible [4] (p. 1) has side-lined the concerns over environmental and social impacts. In comparison to conventional non-renewable energy sources like coal and renewable sources like wind and solar, the instant

ability to generate electricity and control it in minutes, catering to peak demand fluctuations, makes hydropower the most flexible of all energy sources and thus lucrative over the rest. India's steady rise in per-capita electricity consumption, push for higher economic growth concomitant with rapid urbanisation and increasing population puts enormous pressure on the country's unsatiating need and demand for energy. While coal still remains the dominant non-renewable source of energy comprising 86% of fossil fuel share in India and 49.1% (the largest) of the country's total energy-mix, in the wake of climate change and India's own energy-transition objectives towards renewables, hydropower is lauded as offering significant potential not only for carbon reduction but also for meeting global sustainable development goals.

All National Policies, Acts and Schemes thus enacted by the GoI since the 1990s have been guided by such "benign" beliefs and India's growing demand for more energy, paving the way for accelerated hydropower development, increased capacity addition and facilitation of easy entry into India's regions with hydropower potential [5]. For instance, the GOI has made the clustered Northeast States in the Eastern Himalayan region the main hydropower hubs to provide hydroelectricity to other regions across India [6]. These "single-purpose" hydropower projects are meant only for electricity generation to be evacuated out of the generating states into power-deficit states of India, as opposed to multi-purpose dam projects planned elsewhere in India that include flood control, drinking water, irrigation, navigation and agricultural uses within generating states [6–8]. The evacuation of (hydro) power implies that water-power from water (and thereby hydropower) surplus distant, remote mountain area are transferred to water (and power) deficit plain areas of India through national grid wherever and whenever the need arises as a means of optimal utilisation of water resources of these Himalayan regions. Often, the end users and beneficiaries of the evacuated hydropower are not the power-generating states and its people but heavy industries downstream, urban development amenities, power companies and different sectors of central government such as the railways, airports, ports and so on.

It is then no surprise that the tiny State of Sikkim (See Map 1) has been embroiled in prolonged dam conflicts since the late 1990s, where the GoI, the State Government of Sikkim (GoS), power companies and Sikkim's autochthonous tribe, the Lepchas, residing in the protected and restricted 'reserve' area of Dzongu in North District, all had ambivalent and changing roles. Since the early 1990s, many large dams were commissioned in North Sikkim, many were cancelled, and many remain in conflictive limbo. This paper studies one of the ongoing dam conflicts in Dzongu, particularly zooming in on the period from 2011 to 2017 in which abrupt shifts in positions of local Lepchas reconfigured and escalated dam contestations. The locally elected Lepcha politicians became the most vocal anti-dam advocates, aggressively attacking the latest hydropower initiatives and openly supporting the local anti-dam activists and organisations that they had condemned and "victimised" in the past. Conversely, many staunch anti-dam activists and dam opponents turned into fierce pro-dam supporters themselves, joining forces with the other pro-dam supporters and hydropower-developing companies. New alliances were created, and the old ones broke down, giving rise to a complex web of hydro-politics.

These mobilisations and counter-mobilisations between the local Lepchas in Dzongu in North Sikkim have taken a divisive turn, which profoundly brings into question the changing dynamics of hydropower development and hydropower conflict in the area as well as for the state of Sikkim, especially in relation to the power, consensus building, electoral politics, the effectiveness of protest movements and its transformation over time. Why did the local Lepchas in Dzongu flip their positions on hydropower? How did the powerful GoS and the locally elected GoS representatives secure compliance and support at the grassroot level? What does this mean for the power relations between the "governing and the governed"? And finally, what are its implications for the dam movements and mobilisation in the region?

Our research findings in Dzongu reveal that hydropower development, since its implementation in the early 1990s, was and still is deeply intertwined with local elections,

making dams and dam contestations-and-conflict key political issues. Refs. [2,3,9] have shown that even though in India, dams “are consistently de-linked from any political context” and framed by dominant political engineering as technocentric infrastructural development, in fact, large dam and dam movements are political issues that have “bled into democratic electoral and party politics” [3,10–13]. Across the world, dam development, riverine mega-hydraulic projects and the related territorial struggles, ontological controversies and epistemological legitimisation endeavours always and necessarily trigger power dynamics and alter power relations [9,14–18]. To examine these, in this article we use the “power cube” framework by Gaventa as an analytical tool to assess the ways in which power works and transformative changes happen [19,20]. Power here is not presented in just an oppositional way, such as by positing the powerful versus the powerless and hegemony versus resistance, but as a flexible adaptable continuum [20].

To scrutinise the subtleties of these dam/power relationships in Sikkim [21,22] and deepen, while going beyond, the contemporary scholarly emphasis on river-based onto-epistemological struggles over mega-hydraulic development [23–28], this paper dives into the messy and often unpredictable and contradictory world of water governance [29], thereby challenging rational planning paradigms [30–33]. To do so, methodologically, this paper is based on the first author’s ethnographic research in Sikkim during the period of 2017–2019, and follow-up research visits throughout the years 2020 to 2023, to show how hydropower development is deeply intertwined with local patronage relationships. “Deep hanging out” in the region (the first author being a native-language speaker) scrutinises dams and their contestations in Sikkim as the core politico-electoral issues. Fifty-seven semi-structured interviews were held with local politicians, village leaders, small and large landholders, dam engineers and water governance scholars. The research also involved multiple group and individual discussions to explore perceptions of complex, diversely experienced instances of electoral politics, anti-/pro-dam manifestations and patronage relationships. Next, literature and archival research in India, Sikkim and abroad laid the basis for understanding historical dam development in Sikkim. Further, studying mass media (TV and internet) reports and communications revealed additional insights into the backgrounds and discursive framings of electoral politics and grassroots mobilisation. Finally, feedback from regional and international conferences provided more analytical insights.

After this introduction, we provide a detailed historical contextualisation of hydropower development in Sikkim and hydropower conflict in the study area to reveal the shaping of patterns and routines that underlie these power relationships. In Section 3, we briefly introduce our conceptual approach to power and how to study it, largely building on the power cube framework by John Gaventa. Section 4 presents a historic background to the case. Section 5 describes our main findings, where we focus on how local elections bring out dam conflict and contestation in the open, making visible the operation of power. In Section 6, we analyse the abrupt switch in positions on hydropower development and, using the three dimensions of the power cube framework, discuss how such shifts are not only “strategic electoral tactics” but also contentious political struggles to (re)configure power in the region by both dam and anti-dam factions. In the final section, Section 7, we present our conclusions.

2. Operationalising Power as a Conceptual Lens

John Gaventa’s “power cube” framework illustrates power concepts and sets of relationships that are constantly changing [34]. Gaventa has drawn from various power scholars, particularly from his mentor, Steven Lukes’ “three dimensions” or “faces of power” [35–37] to conceptualise the “forms” of power but in relation to “spaces” in which they are found and the “levels” that make the power cube (see Figure 1). According to Gaventa [38] (p. 1), “Lukes’ three dimensions of power were... only three aspects of a single spectrum of power”, presented as one dimension or aspect of power—the “forms”

in power cube. This necessitated the focus and elaboration on the other two aspects of power—the “space” in and “levels” through which power operates as well.

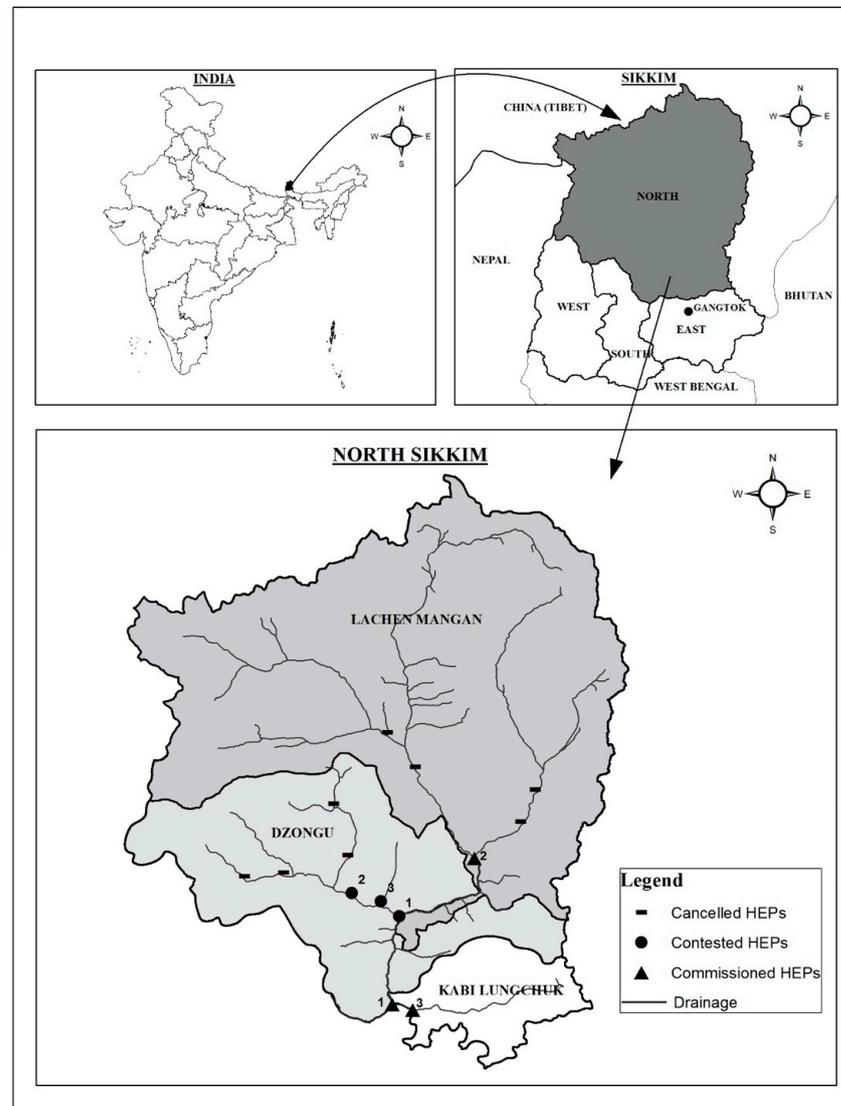


Figure 1. Map 1 showing Sikkim in India, the North District and its three constituencies. ▲1, ▲2 and ▲3 indicates commissioned HEP’s, where ▲1 shows Teesta Stage V HEP (510 MW), ▲2 shows Teesta Stage III HEP (1200 MW), and ▲3 shows 96 M Dikchu HEP. ● 1, ● 2 and ● 3 are contested HEPs, where ● 1 shows Teesta Stage IV HEP (520 MW), ● 2 Panan HEP (300 MW), and ● 3 Rahi Chu HEP (25 MW). Source: own elaboration.

The different forms, spaces and levels and its sub-dimensions are considered as a separate but interrelated, flexible and adaptable continuum, each with its own mechanisms and uses that are constantly interacting with each other to reinforce the total impact of power [20]. Each dimension of the power cube “reflects a spectrum of possibilities which interact with one another, opening and closing the entry points for influence and change” [38] (p. 8). Gaventa’s main argument is that only when the different dimensions of power and its sub-dimensions work across or align vertically and horizontally just like a Rubrik’s cube can transformative changes be brought about by social actors in specific contexts (see Figure 2) including in movement-building [39].

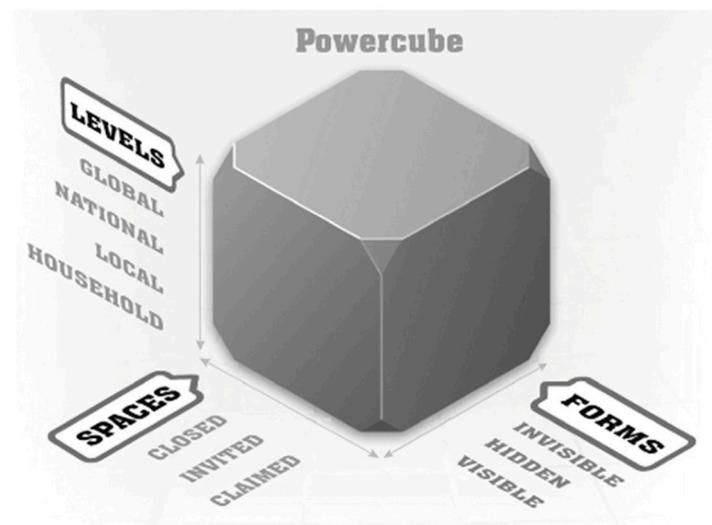


Figure 2. Power cube. Source: [20].

Each of the power cube's dimensions and its subdimensions are discussed below. The forms of power (i.e., visible, hidden and invisible) refer to "how power manifests itself"; the spaces (i.e., closed, invited and claimed) refer to "the potential arenas for participation and action"; the levels (i.e., household, local, national and global) refer to "the multiple layers of power in a global world" [20] (p. 119). In this research, we have used the power cube as a conceptual lens to understand the varied connections in the working of power. This has directly informed the way in which we present the narrative and the specific findings in Section 5. This is followed by a discussion in Section 6, where we examine the sudden change in positions regarding hydropower development and, through the lens of the three dimensions of the power cube framework, we explore how these shifts go beyond merely being "strategic electoral tactics". The power cube analyses help us to show that instead, they represent contentious political battles to reshape power dynamics in the region.

2.1. Forms of Power

"Visible" power (the "first face")—Based on the Weberian approach, power is a "relation among people" where "some people have more power than others" [40] (p. 201). In Dahl's "intuitive idea of power... A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do" in (political) decision-making arenas [40] (p. 201). Dahl had asserted that "power necessarily wears some face", visible in instances of conflict and compliance. Power would relate to concrete decisions of political actors/groups and (or) their participation in the decision-making situations and arenas. Such assertions had assumed that the (political) decision-making arenas were neutral playing fields [19], "penetrable by any dissatisfied groups" [36] (p. 39) and that the political actors are aware of their grievances and with sufficient resources and agency to make their voice heard, that they participate in decision making at their own will [20]. Non-participation or inaction was not considered a political problem or an issue, rather a decision of those who decided not to participate [19] and therefore devoid of any power effect. The visible face of power, easy to investigate through simple observations—"who participates, who gains and losses, and who prevails in decision making" [41] (p. 55), including who secures or invokes the highest probability of responses [40].

"Hidden" power (the "second face")—Critiquing Dahl's assertions, Bachrach and Baratz [42–44] had argued that power is not only reflected in having B do something that B did not want to do, but also in preventing B from doing what B wanted to do. They called this "nondecision-making" that confined the scope of decision making to relatively 'safe' issues". Certain issues are deliberately kept off the (political) decision-making arenas to prevent grievances from developing into full-fledged issues or to prevent the outbreak

of conflict or repress and drowse down the existing ones through the securing of willing consent [36] (p. 111). This was performed by “manipulating the dominant community values, the accepted rules of the games, the existing myths and political institutions and procedures, systematically and consistently to the benefit of certain persons and groups at the expense of others”—effectively termed the “mobilisation of bias”, where “some issues are organised into politics while others are organised out” [44]. Even political actors or groups can be prevented from entering the decision-making arenas and (or) participating in decision making [20]. Non-decision making (on some issues) is therefore a form of decision making [36], revealing the second face of power—the “hidden” power [19]. Even the proponents of hidden power tend to assume that if there was no conflict, overt or covert, then there would be “consensus on the prevailing allocation of values” [36] (p. 23) and that non-participation then was merely due to apathy, indifference, or complacency [44]. Gaventa pointed out that the continual exclusion of key issues or political actors or groups from participation results in “a sense of defeat, or a sense of powerlessness, that may affect the consciousness of potential challengers about grievances, strategies, or possibilities for change” [34] (p. 255). Power relationships then develop into routines of non-challenge.

“Invisible” power (the “third face”)—Lukes argued that power not only reflected (and was exercised) in overt and (or) covert decisions and non-decision makings [36] (p. 22) but also through the “influencing, shaping or determining” of people’s beliefs, values and opinions [36] (p. 16) “to prevent such conflicts from arising in the first place” [36] (p. 27). For Lukes, this was ... “the most effective and insidious use of power” [36] (p. 27)—understood today within the power scholarship as the “radical power” or the third face of power [38]. The third face entails domination, constraining the political actors or group “to live as their nature and judgment dictate” (Spinoza in [36] (p. 114), “restricting their capabilities for truly human functioning” [36] (p. 114). Lukes informed us that we cannot rely on observation and taking preferences as “given” but look at possible manipulation of preferences and intentions. According to Lukes, “A exercises power over B by getting him to do what he does not want to do. . . by influencing, shaping or determining his [sic] very wants” [36] (p. 27). Such power goes against B’s interest “by misleading them, thereby distorting their judgment” [36] (p. 13). He argues that what seems on the surface to be willing compliance to authority may actually be the result of subtle manipulation and ‘shaping’ of beliefs, values and ‘interests’, which can lead people to support circumstances (or figures) that render them disadvantaged or powerless. For Lukes, the third form of power is manifested when people are prevented from realising their own grievances by having their concerns and desires so deeply influenced that they accept their own domination and even become complicit in it, either by believing that it is natural or by believing that it is in some way beneficial. The third face of power emphasises the suppression of latent conflicts through a combination of action and inaction.

Discussion on power-with-a-face does not end with the third face of power, with many considering Michael Foucault’s conception of power as the “fourth” face [36]. See for hydropower’s applications, [15,25]. Foucault’s power differs remarkably from the three faces of power in that it rejects the central feature shared by other three faces where “A’s and B’s are taken as given” [45]. For Foucault, power is not an institution, nor a structure, nor a possession [46,47] but dispersed throughout the society, discursively constituting subjects whose actions may contribute to the operation of power [19]. Power therefore is everywhere, producing reality, knowledge and truths [46,48] but without intentionality, objective interests, or a repressive character [46,49]. While a few overlaps can be found between the third and the fourth face, Gaventa’s power cube does not incorporate the fourth face, opening up avenues for power theorists and researchers to explore if and how the power cube framework operates (or not) with the fourth face.

2.2. Levels of Power

The different forms of power operate across multiple levels such as the household, local, national and global level from where the individual (political) actors or groups can engage [20]. Each level is potentially significant, as they are dynamic, interrelated and most importantly in continuum, constantly shifting in relation to the other [19]. Power relations therefore must be explored both within and across these levels along a continuum [38] (p. 14). Local actors and actions are shaped by global forces and global actors when these local actors resort to global forums as arenas for action or deploy and insert global discourses. Likewise, global actors and forces connect to local actions, actors and knowledge [19] (p. 28). This means that the arenas of decision making go beyond the household, local and the national to the global. “A failure to work across levels of power can serve to prevent or limit outcomes. . .” [28] (p. 14).

2.3. Spaces of Power

Spaces “are seen as opportunities, moments, and channels” where political actors or groups “can act or anticipate to potentially affect policies, discourses, decisions and relationship which affect their lives and interest” [19] (p. 26). Beyond neutral entrances for participation, “power manifests itself differently in different spaces” [20] (p. 118) and shapes what is possible within the different spaces including who may enter to participate in it or not [19]. Therefore, how and by whom these spaces are created and with what interest and terms of engagements, including trade-offs, become crucial in understanding the effects of different forms of power within it [39]. These spaces, like “levels”, exist in “dynamic relationship to each other, constantly opening and closing through struggles for legitimacy and resistance, co-optation and transformation” [19] (p. 27). Often, power produced and gained in one space, for instance, through new skills, capacity, experiences, or narratives, may be deployed to enter and effect other spaces [20].

- (1) *Closed spaces* are those where only a few actors in powerful positions and authority make decisions behind closed doors, without any consultation or involvement of others [19]. Often, many decision-making spaces are closed, and those operating in it may try to build legitimacy by creating invited spaces [19]. However, closed spaces can also be made to open into invited spaces by “civil society efforts”, “people’s movements” and “right to information” that attempt to mobilise greater public involvement [38] (p. 11).
- (2) *Invited spaces* are those where actors in less or no authority are invited to participate by those in power and are “regularised. . . institutionalised, ongoing or more transient” [19] (p. 26). Gaventa warns us though that while such spaces “may give the appearance of greater voice and engagement” of those in less authority or power [38] (p. 12), there is “need to be aware of whether those speaking [or participating] are really reflecting their own voices, based on critical awareness of their own interest, or whether there are forms of invisible power that shape what people say” because some “voices can really be echoes of power where people are saying what power holders want to hear or are really speaking for others who are controlling or influencing what they say” [38] (p. 120).
- (3) *Claimed/Created spaces* are those that are claimed by less powerful political actors, challenging the power holders, their knowledge and negotiation frames [19], shaping autonomies and arenas for self-initiated forms of deliberation and decision-making. In riverine struggles, this happens often through grassroots action, commoning endeavors and translocal coalition forming [18,28,50,51].

3. Hydropower Development in Sikkim: A Centre-State Nexus

As the bearer of the highest constitutional power within the federal structure of India, the Government of India (GoI) or the “Centre” is the key power-choreographer, initiating the first ever large-scale systematic and detailed river-basin studies for water resources development across the country, particularly in the Himalayan regions since 1953. Every

successive GoI has since then engaged in (re)creating, (re)managing and maneuvering the processes, practices and policies to advance hydropower development as one of the national objectives to secure India's energy needs, including ensuring participation of the State Governments and power companies. Detailed project reports of these studies became the basis for "all" hydropower development plans in India, executed decades later as "National Projects" by the GoI via the Central Public Sector Enterprises up until the ushering in of the new economic reforms in India in 1991–1992 and, after the reforms, by the State Governments too as joint ventures with both Central Public Sector Enterprises and Private Sector Enterprises or Independent Power Producers. The Centre, however, through its Central Public Sector Enterprises, still remains the key decision maker, wielding a monopolistic control over India's large and mega hydropower development.

Hydropower development in Sikkim is therefore not a recent phenomenon, rather the outcome of over four decades of planned surveys and investigations initiated by the Centre (see [21,22]). It began in the early 1960s whilst Sikkim was still a sovereign Kingdom and continued all through the Kingdom's tumultuous merger with India in 1975. The investigation was concluded in 1987 with the final assessment and identification of numerous feasible mega, large and small hydropower projects (HEPs—Hydro Electric Projects) across Sikkim. The ambitious six-staged "cascade" development project—Teesta Stage I, II, III, IV, V, VI HEPs—were a part of *this* assessment. When the GoI commenced the cascade project construction in North Sikkim in the early 1990s, at the threshold of political prominence was a new local party, the Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) that had won Sikkim's State Legislative Assembly elections with an absolute majority in its very first attempt in 1994 to form the GoS. The SDF party's political expansion is key to understanding Sikkim's hydropower development trajectory and the current flip-flop of the Lepchas in Dzongu. Notably, since SDF's first electoral victory in 1994, both the party and the party-led State Government of Sikkim (GoS) enthusiastically favoured dam constructions as directives of the GoI, although not reciprocated in the same way by many people in Sikkim. The SDF party was in power as the GoS for five successive terms (1994–2019), each victory cementing the founding member, Mr. Chamling, as the undisputed Chief Minister of Sikkim for twenty-five straight years and paving ways for more dam-based development for Sikkim, particularly in the North District. Many large/mega-scale dam projects were commissioned during the SDF rule despite anti-dam sentiments and dam-resistance throughout Sikkim.

Prior to the economic reforms of 1991/1992, other than to support the GoI or Centre's initiatives and plans, the State Governments in India had negligible involvement in the planning and development of their own water resources despite the Indian federal system devolving the responsibility for such development to the State Governments. This was for two major reasons. First, the State Government, despite being entitled the legislative power to regulate, control and develop its water resources within its territory [52], is subject to laws empowering the Centre to take over the "regulation and development of inter-state river valleys" [52] (p. 313). As most major rivers in India flow through more than one state, they are not confined to state boundaries; hence, large-scale river development, its planning and associated clearances have always remained under the control of the Centre [3]. Secondly, the capital-intensive nature of such development made the States entirely dependent upon central aid, perpetuating the Centre's dominant involvement in water and hydropower development. States, particularly the small ones like Sikkim, were involved only in the development of mini, micro and small dam projects not exceeding 25 MW, while all dams over 25 MW, considered "large", "national projects" became exclusive Central Public Sector Enterprises undertakings.

However, in the initial years after the economic reforms, hydropower development enthusiasm and response from the private and foreign investors had been poor. The share of hydro had declined since 1963 despite "being recognised as the most economic and preferred source of electricity" [4], and the powerful anti-dam resistance and social/environmental movements against numerous GoI's hydropower undertakings through-

out the 1970s/1980s had created legitimate doubts, making dams a risky venture for the private investors. The realisation that public sectors (be it State or the Centre) were insufficient to develop the vast untapped hydropower potential of India prompted the GoI to provide additional incentives to encourage greater private sector participation and investment in hydropower development. The GoI then reset the hydropower arena by enacting (and amending) numerous pro-hydropower Acts, policies and schemes throughout the late 1900s and 2000s, aimed to provide the States and the Independent Power Producers (IPPs) a more conducive environment to invest in the Centre's identified feasible hydropower projects [4,5]. With decentralisation of the power sector, the GoI delegated the State Governments to facilitate and fast-track the implementation of hydropower projects (identified by the Centre) as Government Joint Ventures with Independent Power Producers as well as the Central Public Sector Enterprises.

Newly formed states like Sikkim with high fiscal dependence on the Centre readily complied with the Centre's directives and the new policy changes. Not only was/is Sikkim dependent on the Centre for all its planned (budget) and unplanned (service salaries) expenditures, but as one of the Special Category States, Sikkim receives additional "central assistance on preferential conditions owing to the strategic location and special requirements" that further increases its dependence on "transfer of resources from the Centre" [53] (p. 83). Resisting "national projects" was/is therefore not the norm, with the constant fear of budgetary cuts and developmental delays from the Centre placing the Centre in a skewed "power over" relationship with the States. Given this disproportionate dependence on the Centre, the SDF party-led GoS had for long played by the "rules of the game" supporting the Centre's HEP plans while it gradually strengthened its electoral base with every successive SLA election. This explains why the GoI's 50,000 MW Hydel Initiative that announced an additional 29 hydropower projects in Sikkim in 2003 resulted in an enthusiastic engagement and involvement of the GoS led by SDF in the promotion, facilitation and advocacy of hydropower development in Sikkim despite the same government cancelling a 60 MW HEP in West Sikkim in 1997 under public pressure.

At the same time, however, the opening of the power sector to private and foreign investments after the economic reforms and its subsequent decentralisation inadvertently challenged the Centre's monopoly over mega and large hydropower development projects in India, as State Government through Joint Ventures could now be major power stakeholders themselves to develop large/meg dams. This resulted in a new kind of power struggle over the control and development of large/mega dams by State Governments. The entry of the Independent Power Producers in Sikkim, post-2003, gradually made the GoS perceive hydropower development as an alternative, quicker route to development outside the purview of the Centre. In a way similar to the post-colonial era discourse with colonised countries gaining independence and where (opposite to contemporary anti-dam imaginaries) mega dams often figured as symbols of decolonisation, large dams became a means to regaining back Sikkim's control of its natural resources within its territory. Thus emerged a new State-led belief that hydropower development would "... pull Sikkim out of its economic dependence on grants and loans" from GoI and secure Sikkim's self-reliance [54] (p. 33). An unprecedented mobilisation for large dams by the GoS soon followed, but this time to further the State Government's own newfound ambition for hydropower development expansion in Sikkim rather than as a mere support for Central Public Sector Enterprises, crushing any brewing anti-dam sentiments and protests in the process. A series of anti-dam protests had unfolded after the 2003 announcement across Sikkim by different ethnic communities (see [22]), but none captured the public's interest like the Lepchas of Dzongu. A staggering eight large dam projects were announced for Dzongu alone—three from the existing "cascade" projects already at different stages of implementations (Teesta Stage V (510 MW), Teesta Stage III (1200 MW) and Teesta Stage IV (520 MW) and five new projects (Panani (300 MW) (See Map 1), Rukel (90 MW), Ringpi (160 MW), Lingza (160 MW) and Rangyong (90 MW), as a part of the 2003 announcement.

4. The History of Anti-Dam Protests: The Lepcha Journey from Dzongu to Gangtok

Historically and culturally, Dzongu (See Map 2 below) has a distinct place on the right bank of Teesta, which has been described as the core of the Lepcha tribe's territory, identity and cultural heritage. However, as an administrative constituency, Dzongu also spreads across the left bank of Teesta River. In total four Gram Panchayat Units (GPU, local self-government) on the right bank shown by 1, 2, 3 and 4 (see second part of Figure 3/Map 2) where 1 indicates the Lum Gor Sangtok GPU; 2, the Hee Gyathang GPU; 3, the Lingdong Barfok GPU and 4, the Passingdang Safo GPU (4); and the three GPUs along the left bank indicated by 5, 6 and 7 showing Tingchim Chanday GPU, Mangshila Tibuk GPU and Namok Swayem GPU together make up the political Dzongu constituency. The right bank of Dzongu, inhabited by around 7000 Lepchas, is a "restricted" and "protected" area under the GoS, where there is prohibition on the entry and settlement of non-Lepchas including any Lepchas from outside of Dzongu without government permit, since 1958. This has enabled the right-bank Dzongu Lepchas to carve out a distinct, separate, rooted existence and identity of their own attached to Dzongu—one that is considered different from other similar Lepchas [55] including the left-bank Lepchas. This study focuses on the Teesta Stage IV dam project that affected seven Gram Panchayat Units of the administrative Dzongu constituency, whereby we examine the dual pro- and anti-dam "flip-flop". The project respectively affects two Gram Panchayat Units of the Lachen-Mangan constituency (shown as 9 and 10); and one GPU (shown as 8) in Kabi Lungchuk constituency. Ringhim Nampatam GPU and Singhak GPU is shown as 9 and 10; while Ramthang Tanyek GPU is shown as 8 in Figure 3/Map 2.

The arrival of dams in Dzongu was officially announced for the first time in 1992 by the then Governor of Sikkim, Mr. S.K. Bhatnagar at "Namprikdang mela ground"—a landmark site in Dzongu with "immense historical and cultural importance for the Lepcha community" [56] (p. 16). Dzongu was lauded as a "*sun-ko-khani*" [goldmine] for its rich water resources, necessary for dam development. Although a few eminent Lepchas of Dzongu under Sikkim Tribal Salvation Council, a collective group formed by the Lepcha-Bhutia communities of North Sikkim, had initially challenged and condemned such announcement, anti-dam protest by the Lepchas was a far cry. The Council was engrossed in other demands like the demand for autonomous 6th Schedule status exclusively for North District to safeguard the rights of the tribal Bhutia and Lepchas residents of these regions (Fieldwork, 2021). Moreover, the absence of any follow-up after the announcement drowsed the little interest that dams had generated at the time of announcement. The STSC was dismantled over time.

However, outside of Dzongu, Sikkim had witnessed its first ever anti-dam movement between 1995 and 1997 initiated by the Lepcha-Bhutia Buddhist monks in the West District of Sikkim against the 30 MW Rathong Chu HEP and thereafter successfully mobilised by a group of Bhutia activists under the banner Concerned Citizens of Sikkim [57,58]. The movement had engulfed the state capital, Gangtok, where the anti-dam activists had sat for an indefinite hunger strike, threatening the newly formed SDF GoS implementing the project. Rathong Chu HEP was eventually scrapped in 1997 under intense public pressure by the SDF party leader, the then Chief Minister of Sikkim, Mr. P.K. Chamling, causing "a major setback" to the power situation of the State [53] (p. 81). However, Mr. Chamling was hailed as an instant "hero of the masses" [59], and two years after, the SDF party registered its second major victory in the 2009 State Assembly election, securing Mr. Chamling's second term as the Chief Minister of Sikkim. In fact, the SDF party won in the very constituencies protesting against Rathong Chu HEP, retaining them until 2019 [60–64]. Those critical of the cancellation of Rathong Chu HEP had claimed that "Chamling has been very adamant about carrying on with the Rathong-Chu project till his political adversary Bhandari [from SSP] started backing the movement to scrap the project" (Jigme Kazi in [59]).

Meanwhile, a new "Joint Action Committee" group was formed in mid-1999 by the local inhabitants of Dzongu and its surrounding areas to protest against the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation Ltd. (NHPC) that officially began the construction of the

510 MW Teesta Stage V HEP from 2000. Apparently, the Memorandum of Understanding for the Teesta Stage V HEP had already been signed by the NHPC with the GoS in 2000. The locally prevailing perception that dam constructions were inevitable once the Memorandum of Understanding was signed had demobilised anti-dam protest. Teesta Stage V was commissioned eight years later in 2008 and remains in operation today.

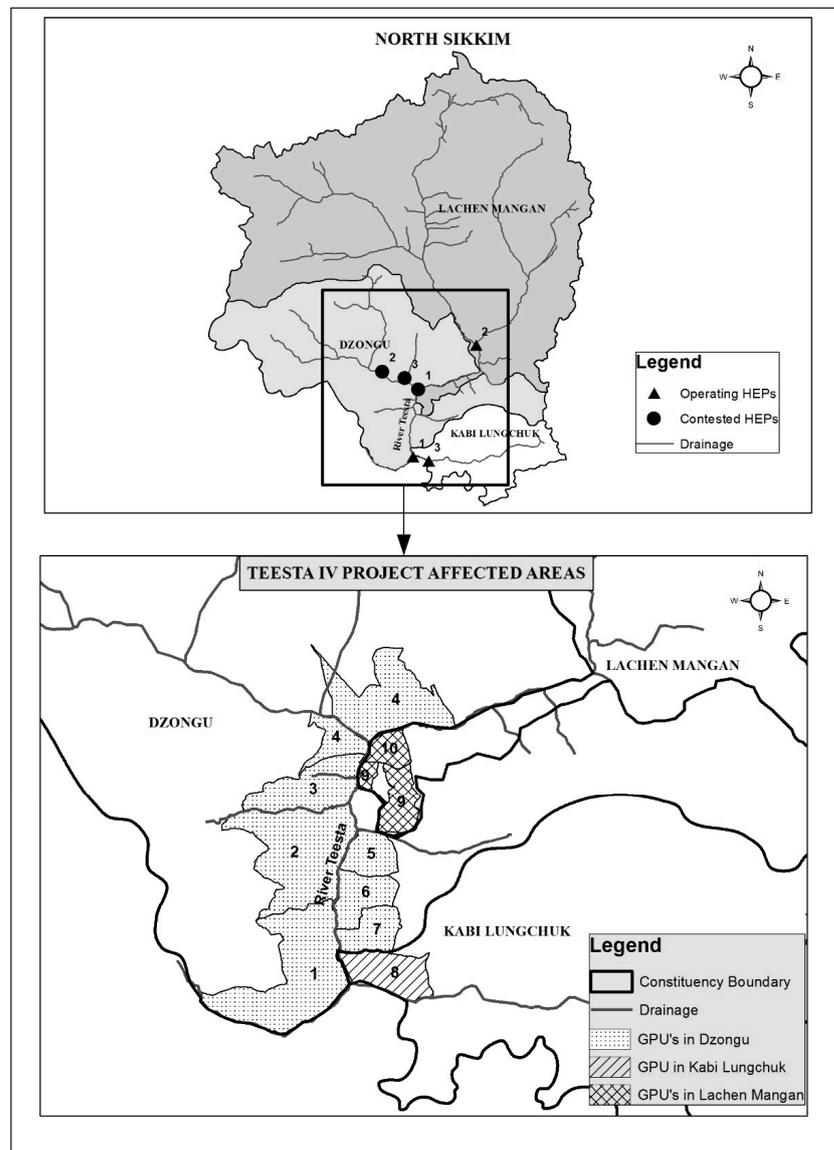


Figure 3. Map 2 showing the projected affected Gram Panchayat Units on the right and left bank of River Teesta. Numbers refer to Gram Panchayat Units (GPUs, local self-government), as explained in detail in the text above.

The announcement of 29 additional dams for Sikkim in 2003 by the GoI as a part of its 50,000 MW Hydel Initiative for the country triggered a second wave of anti-dam protests in Dzongu, resulting in the formation of a new “Lepcha” civil society organisation, the Affected Citizens of Teesta (ATC), in 2004 to protest against all the dam projects in North Sikkim, especially the 1200 MW Teesta Stage III HEP and the 300 MW Panan HEP geared towards immediate implementation. ACT comprised a small group of educated youth Lepchas of Dzongu, who initially began by researching dam threats and submitting numerous petitions to the GoS appealing to reconsider such developments in Dzongu. However, not only were those petitions disregarded, the GoS rushed on an allocation spree

to award dam projects to private and public power developers, signing multiple Joint Venture agreements [65]. ACT activists were unable to mobilise their anti-dam support in Dzongu against the pro-dam enthusiasm that had gripped 80% of the local Lepchas [21,22]. As a result, the Teesta Stage III HEP and Panan HEP were approved at a public hearing with overwhelming local consent in 2006 and 2007, respectively, severely demoralising the ACT members.

In the absence of (mass) local anti-dam support in Dzongu, together with Panan HEP's controversial public hearing allegedly marred in accusations of coercion, intimidation and threat to un-willing landowners by the dam proponents for consent, the ACT members were compelled to upscale their protest. As a "last strategy", in early June 2007, the ACT members took their protests to the state capital Gangtok, from where their protest quickly grew into a much wider popular social movement like the Rathong Chu movement. In the capital, they resorted to the Gandhian-inspired peaceful, non-confrontational, indefinite hunger strikes. The first individual hunger strikes had commenced from 20 June 2007 and lasted for 63 days; the second a year later from 10 March 2008 and lasted for 93 days. Relay hunger strikes were held from June 2007 to January 2010; demanding for complete cancellation of all dams from Dzongu. Two more Lepcha organisations had joined ACT's hunger strikes in the capital, garnering more attention and visibility both in and outside of Sikkim. Unlike other, more prominent anti-dam movements of India that were mobilised around key issues of displacement and rehabilitation, ACT's anti-dam movement in Gangtok was overtly focused on geo-ethnic underpinnings [21]. It heavily relied on Lepcha "folklore and mythology" to establish the Lepchas of Dzongu "as protectors of a scared place" [66] (p. 42), easily appealing to the imageries of the common masses.

The second individual hunger strikes in 2008 lasting for 93 days brought the GoS under severe criticism and condemnation of large-scale dam projects from several fronts—the opposition local political parties of Sikkim [67,68], non-political civil society organisations from (in)outside of Sikkim [55], the Sikkimese public and prominent anti-dam activist like Medha Patkar who made a rare appearance in Sikkim that same year (in April 2008) to offer solidarity for Dzongu [69]. In retaliation, the GoS had counter-accused the anti-dam activists and the new-found solidarity as one that was supposedly 'infiltrated by anti-social elements' mobilised under the vested interest of outside forces and labelled the ACT members as anti-national and anti-development [69,70]. Nevertheless, the deteriorating health conditions of activists undertaking individual-fast-unto-death eventually pressured the GoS into cancelling four of the five new dam projects—the relatively much smaller ones in June 2008. The most controversial of the five, the Panan HEP was not one of them (indicated by ●2 in Map 1 and Map 2). The anti-dam movement in the capital was quickly disbanded after the cancellation announcement, and most of the protesters had returned back to Dzongu, hoping to continue their everyday resistance for Panan HEP. However, over time, such zeal faded away as Panan HEP was stuck in a quagmire of delays and inactivity. To this day, the Panan project is neither cancelled nor commenced.

Inadvertently, all through ACT's protest in Gangtok (2007–2008), the NHPC had silently cemented the groundwork for the second of the cascade HEP—the mega 520 MW Teesta Stage IV HEP—without attracting the attention of the protesting activists. The MoU had been discreetly signed in 2006 between the NHPC and the GoS in Gangtok without the knowledge of the Lepchas, and the project was slated for construction from 2015 [71]. Dzongu witnessed the third wave of protest in 2011 when the NHPC openly began to solicit public consensus for Teesta Stage IV—which gradually snowballed into a mass flip-flop in the dam position of the Lepchas—the focus of our paper.

Below, we describe our theoretical underpinnings within the rubric of power that will help explain the mass flip-flop in the later sections.

5. Explaining the "Flip-Flop": The Play of Power, Party and the Public

Through Dzongu's local elections, we unravel the historical construction of power relationships and explain their operation in terms of how power is engendered and exer-

cised and who endures its impacts within the small Lepcha community. We analyse how it shapes local responses to hydropower development in the region through time; “power in a given community can never be understood simply by observation at any given point in time” [34] (p. 56).

5.1. Hydro-Electoral Politics and Obtaining the Consent

North Sikkim has three political-administrative constituencies—Lachen-Mangan, Kabi-Lungchok and Dzongu—and elects three members to the State Legislative Assembly. While the Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) party secured its first ever electoral success to SLA in 1994 from Lachen-Mangan and Kabi-Lungchok constituencies, it had failed to secure any win from Dzongu constituency for two successive elections, in 1994 and 1999. However, despite this, the SDF party had still emerged victorious in Dzongu because on both occasions, the winners from opponent parties had switched parties and joined the SDF party—in power since 1994 and on a steep trajectory to gaining more prominence across Sikkim.

The changing of party affiliations before elections and (or) after electoral victories by winning candidates to join the ruling government’s party is a common practice in Sikkim. The Dzongu constituency winner of 1985 and 1989 elections from the then ruling party Sikkim Sangram Parishad (SSP), Mr. Sonam Chyoda Lepcha, had impressively secured his third successive win in the 1994 elections discarding the SSP party, low on popularity, only to quickly join the new SDF party that formed the new Government of Sikkim after the declaration of the results that year. Up until 1994, elections in Dzongu were fought on general development issues and the welfare packages that contesting representatives promised the Dzongu Lepchas. Mr. Sonam Chyoda Lepcha had however lost his fourth constituency election as an SDF candidate in 1999—a defeat that came at the backdrop of hydropower development concerns over Teesta Stage V that was gearing for immediate implementation under the SDF party as opposed to the SSP party that had taken up the anti-dam cause. Imperative here is to note that in the 1999 assembly election (as well as in 1994), the winning party’s victory was by a very slim margin (see Table 1).

Table 1. Dzongu constituency compiled from EIC data.

SLA Election Years	Total Electors (Dzongu)	Voters/Valid Vote Polled	Winner Party	Runner-Up Party	Winning Margin in % in Dzongu	Total SLA Seats Won by SDF Across Sikkim
1995	4761	3956/3844	INC	SSP	1.2	19/32
1999	5469	4725/4644	SSP	SDF	3.7	24/32
2004	5903	5118/5118	SDF	INC	30.7	31/32
2009	6623	5959/5947	SDF	INC	66.2	32/32
2014	8167	7269/7166	SDF	SKM	30.3	22/32
2019	9595	8483/x	SDF	SKM	35.3	15/32

Canvassing hard *against* the cascade hydropower development or Teesta Stage V within Dzongu, another local resident—Mr. Sonam Gyatso Lepcha—had won his first ever constituency or State Legislative Assembly election as the SSP party candidate. With this victory, for the first time, issues concerning hydropower development became an electoral issue in Dzongu. Most local Lepchas recalled how they had voluntarily supported Mr. Sonam Gyatso in the 1999 assembly elections due to his anti-dam position. However, like his predecessor, a few months after becoming the area-MLA on “no-dam” agenda, Mr. Sonam Gyatso too had joined the ruling SDF party along with all of his supporters and overnight became a staunch, vocal advocate for hydropower development in Dzongu up until 2011. And with it began the dynamisation of power relations in Dzongu constituency around hydropower development, and the contentious embedding of dams in electoral

politics and political power struggles that shaped dam conflict and cooperation in the region.

Five years later, Mr. Sonam Gyatso gave the SDF party its first major electoral victory in Dzongu in 2004, and thereafter successively in 2009 and 2014 State Legislative Assembly elections on pro-hydropower development agenda—interestingly by huge vote margins including in 2019 when he did not contest the assembly election himself. The table below shows the election result of Dzongu constituency during the SDF rule/regime between 1995 and 2019 as well as the total seats the SDF party has won in every successive election to emerge as the “single largest winning party” in Sikkim after 1999 [71] (p. 108) and a party with no official opposition in State Legislative Assembly until 2014.

After four successive SLA victories in Dzongu (1999–2014), Mr. Sonam Gyatso became the key local figure promoting and advocating for hydropower development—both cascade and new ones—within “his” constituency. For almost a decade, between 1999 and 2011, he exerted enormous influence, especially through elected Panchayat members in mobilising local consensus and approval for hydropower development, suppressing any brewing anti-dam protests and solidarity within Dzongu. Panchayats are institutions of self-government for rural areas and therefore core arenas for grassroot mass mobilisation. Sikkim has a two-tier Panchayat system—at the village (Gram Panchayat) and district level (Zilla Panchayat). Justifying the necessity of hydropower development for Sikkim in general (in 2018 when Mr. Sonam Gyatso was interviewed), he had explained how “*Sikkim as a State has to generate some amount of fund by its own*” and how “*hydropower is an important means to generate money and directly benefit the State*”. Mr. Sonam Gyatso’s political affiliation to the SDF Government, in power since 1999, his legislative position (and timely elevation to ministerial posts) and most importantly, his local Lepcha roots in Dzongu gave him an undisputed socio-political credibility in his constituency. A locally trusted, revered powerful politician, he easily commanded and maneuvered public actions/inactions of the local Lepchas within his constituency. Throughout this paper, we will see Mr. Sonam Gyatso’s direct intervention to either drowse or flair dam issues in Dzongu.

However, it was not just the constituency Member of Legislative Assembly of Dzongu; after 2003, the entire remaining Government of Sikkim’s State machineries became heavily involved in trust building and lobbying within Dzongu to generate consensus among local Lepchas for dam development. Numerous “*public awareness programmes*” were conducted in Dzongu with a message that dams were a national necessity and not harmful and that “*a good rehabilitation and resettlement package*” would be part of the deal for dam-affected landowners. Government and power companies sponsored field visits to dam sites of other power projects to assure local Lepcha residents who were uncertain about hydropower development and supportive of anti-dam protesters. The visits were effective because soon after, many reported to have given their approval for hydropower development. In these exercises of political maneuvering the main anti-dam activists were, however, not invited. The local government officials emerged as effective pro-dam influencers and enablers in Dzongu. Although not expected to publicly display political-party affiliations while executing their government duties, these district-specific officials “*acting like leaders of the pro-dam group*” rigorously worked towards securing consensus for dams. Some of them led “*door-to-door anti anti-dam-awareness campaign instructing and warning*” especially local government schoolteachers and government clerks “*to either lend their support for dams or to stay neutral*”. By virtue of their powerful positions, they successfully silenced all those Lepcha households that had one or more members working for the GoS and who were sympathetic to the anti-dam cause. These bureaucrats further clamped down on the anti-dam protest by repeatedly refusing permits to other Lepchas and non-Lepchas attempting to enter Dzongu to support the anti-dam activists and declining permission to the anti-dam protestors to mobilise for rallies in the region.

These coupled with massive promises of economic development and employment opportunities not just for the project-affected landowners but for “all”, by their trusted constituency Member of Legislative Assembly and local bureaucrats, greatly lured the

local Lepchas and successfully mobilised the majority of them into giving overwhelming approval for Teesta Stage V, Teesta Stage III and Panan HEP amidst anti-dam protest. However, dam consent and support were also garnered by “threats” and “coercion” in the face of more resistance from the non-willing landowners. In this regard, an old Lepcha landowner explained how those unwilling to part with their lands came under “*intense pressure from the Government through the Panchayats, official and power companies*” where they were threatened that if they did not accept the compensation, they would not receive anything, but their lands would still be acquired by the government for the “*greater public interest*”. Many landowners and anti-dam supporters, against their wishes, reported to have been compelled to consent to hydropower development by the state machineries, resulting in the creation of the “culture of silence” on dam development, more so on anti-dam resistance in Dzongu.

5.2. The Mechanism of Anti-Dam Repression: Lepcha vs. Lepcha

What facilitated grassroots-level support for pro-dam advocacy and the culture of silence on dam issues within Dzongu was the party-driven local governance structure of the villages in Dzongu and in Sikkim: residents are affiliated to political parties and so are their trust, loyalty and support. Elderly Lepcha usually make up a strong party-affiliated network of supporters and cadres of political parties at the grassroots level in Dzongu. Since local distribution of public resources, and local development plans and schemes, are allocated and implemented by the party in power, i.e., the State Government, villages across Sikkim exhibit overtly visible party-based affiliations and allegiance to the political leaders in power—the most immediate ones being the constituency Member of Legislative Assembly and Panchayats. Party loyalty and obeying of party command or directives run deep not only in Dzongu but anywhere else in Sikkim. This was why any anti-dam reasonings and campaigns by ACT members particularly after 2007 were directly met with absolute distrust and apathy in Dzongu because their protest was automatically perceived as dissent against the ruling SDF Government. According to some of the anti-dam activists, “*lies had been spread about them that their village-to-village travel to raise awareness about dams and its consequences were campaigns to open a new political party in Dzongu.*” Meeting and interaction with ACT members, despite local familiarity, were thus avoided and flatly declined by elderly Lepchas, passionate SDF loyalists “*fearing repercussion from their party*” or worse still, being labelled a “*party-dhrohi [party-betrayer]*”.

A former Gram Panchayat member from Dzongu recalled how in 2008, under the instruction of Mr. Sonam Gyatso—“*to not support those fasting in Gangtok*”—the Panchayat heads had unanimously followed the part constituency Member of Legislative Assembly’s order and refused any support to ACT members fasting in the capital. The heads even forbade their ward members from supporting the anti-dam cause, citing that such acts went against party ethos and orders. That same year, again under the instruction of Mr. Sonam Gyatso, anti-dam Lepchas from Dzongu and their supporters were stopped at the Phidang Bridge, one of the entry points to Dzongu, by the local Lepchas belonging to the SDF party. Recounting the infamous clash, a young Lepcha of Dzongu who had participated in the clash regretfully lamented that “*more aggressive than the state police*” who also prevented the anti-dam supporters from entering Dzongu, it was the (pro-dam) Lepchas “*like us, in massive numbers throwing stones at the peaceful protestors, insulting them, and asking them to go back*”.

The hostilities were not limited to ACT members alone but to anyone even inquiring about dams in Dzongu. A non-resident Lepcha youth from nearby Chungthang GPU outside Dzongu recalled how he and his friends “*nearly got hit by angry elderly Lepchas*” when they visited Dzongu to ask about dams. The deeply rooted territorial insider–outsider, local–nonlocal notion already in existence in these parts of Sikkim (see [21]) only exacerbated such hostilities, disadvantaging the anti-dam mobilisation. The othering of “all” non-Lepchas, including even the Lepchas of nearby constituencies by “Dzongu Lepchas” isolated Dzongu and turned any issue concerning Dzongu strictly as “*their internal matters*”. This not only

eroded “interest” in affairs of Dzongu but dissuaded those sympathetic towards anti-dam activists from the nearby constituencies from supporting them. A new kind of labelling of anti-dam supporters as “non-resident Lepchas” or “outsiders” interfering with the “developmental activities” of Sikkim “with political overtones” gained prominence in Sikkim and Dzongu after 2007—the year ACT members took their protest to Gangtok.

After the Gangtok protest and amidst the escalating local hostilities, some parts of Dzongu had again erupted in anti-dam protest in 2011 when the NHPC announced its public hearing date for environmental clearance for Teesta Stage IV HEP in July 2011. However, in a surprising turn of events, a day before the public hearing, “all the Panchayat members and landowners” initially supportive of hydropower development boycotted the hearing en masse under the persuasion and instructions of Mr. Sonam Gyatso, who had by then become the Power Minister of Sikkim [72] (p. 29). This abrupt local boycott, “as a power game, targeted the NHPC, and not Teesta Stage IV HEP (the hydropower issue in itself)”, perplexing the NHPC officials, for it had raised suspicion on the GoS’s position on dams. What followed was a brief “election-like-village-to-village-canvassing” by the NHPC officials and Mr. Sonam Gyatso: NHPC canvassing for local support for Teesta Stage IV while Mr. Sonam Gyatso canvassing for support against the NHPC. Despite Mr. Sonam Gyatso’s aggressive canvassing, the NHPC had succeeded in conducting the public hearing for Teesta Stage IV in its second attempt a year later in March 2012. Unlike in the past, where dams were approved by over 80% public consensus in Dzongu, Teesta Stage IV was approved by a little over 50% of the local voters, mostly from the six project-affected GPUs falling on the left bank of Teesta (see Figure 2).

The NHPC’s slim success had instantly instigated another round of anti-dam protests on the right bank of Dzongu, fuelled also by Mr. Sonam Gyatso’s intervention. With panchayat elections slated that same year, in order to contain the simmering protest from spreading outside of Dzongu, the GoS strategically announced that the “right” to raise “public-issue on dams and dam-development” would rest solely with the elected political representatives of Dzongu. The pushing of dam development issues into the Panchayat domain before the election was an attempt to make ACT and other similar organisations “irrelevant” in Dzongu as also to test the changing dam scenario. Much like Sikkim’s State Legislative Assembly elections, Panchayat elections too are contested on a political party basis since 1997. The pro-dam stance had been implicit among all the SDF party candidates despite Mr. Sonam Gyatso’s brief boycott stint. All SDF candidates were well-known dam supporters, and a majority of them emerged victorious at both Gram Panchayat as well as Zilla Panchayat within Dzongu in 2012. The few independent winners joined the SDF party soon after their win.

The Panchayat victories at both the Gram and Zilla levels in Dzongu politically established the elected SDF candidate’s undisputed “right” over Dzongu’s affairs, strengthening the SDF party’s hold in Dzongu, and with it, its continued support for Teesta Stage IV. This “capturing” of all democratic political spaces of articulation at the grassroots level, rather than quelling anti-dam activists, inadvertently compelled the apolitical ACT members to make their own political electoral debut in the 2014 State Legislative Assembly elections.

5.3. The Flip: An Electoral Strategy and Struggle for Power

In 2013, a new political state party—the Sikkim Krantikari Morcha (SKM)—was formed in Sikkim, which contested the State Legislative Assembly in 2014. After two decades of SDF rule, the new party’s “rallying cry of *Pariwartan* (change)” [73] (p. 67) found instant resonance with the Sikkimese public, especially those aggrieved under the SDF-led GoS. Many anti-dam activists from Dzongu had swiftly joined the new party, including many politically neutral or silent local GoS employees and SDF party cadres. One of the ACT’s prominent founder members, Mr. Dawa Lepcha, known for his 63 and 98 days of individual hunger strike in Gangtok, in fact contested the 2014 State Legislative Assembly election under the SKM party against the long-time incumbent constituency Member of Legislative Assembly and the Power Minister of Sikkim, Mr. Sonam Gyatso from the SDF party. For Mr.

Dawa Lepcha, born and raised in Dzongu, *“nothing operates outside of politics in Dzongu so I had to join politics. Our people look up to the government, politicians, bureaucrats, and panchayats. Their powerful positions make them trusting and credible. I thought that if we can reach those powerful positions, the local people will listen to us”*.

It was during the 2014 Assembly elections that the mass flip happened in the political positions of the Lepchas of Dzongu. When Mr. Dawa Lepcha, the face of ACT and well respected in Dzongu despite his anti-dam activism, contested as an SKM candidate with an anti-dam agenda; Mr. Sonam Gyatso had publicly denounced his decades-long pro-dam position and took an anti-dam stand himself too. Mobilising the *“public grievances”* around the commissioned Teesta Stage V HEP and not the impending Teesta Stage IV, the constituency Member of Legislative Assembly’s election campaign was built on *“attacking”* the NHPC for not fulfilling its promises with Teesta Stage V [74]. While he did question the *“techno-feasibility”* issues associated with Teesta Stage IV, it was his vitriolic condemnation of the power company (and not hydropower development projects per se) that echoed amongst his grassroots party cadres. Mr. Dawa Lepcha, on the other hand, had campaigned against *all* hydropower development plans and projects in Dzongu, particularly Teesta Stage IV HEP, promising *“to stop them all”* if he got elected. However, *“fearful anticipation of loss of all economic opportunities from dams”* if Mr. Dawa Lepcha came to power discouraged many Lepchas still aspiring for dam development in Dzongu from supporting him. Mr. Dawa Lepcha lost the election and Mr. Sonam Gyatso yet again became the constituency Member of Legislative Assembly of Dzongu constituency for the fourth successive term. The SDF party retained its majority at the State Legislative Assembly to form the fifth consecutive GoS but lost many assembly seats to a new SKM party that emerged, however, briefly as the official opposition party winning ten State Legislative Assembly seats, threatening the SDF regime.

After winning the 2014 Assembly election, Mr. Sonam Gyatso was elevated as the Deputy Speaker of State Legislative Assembly, from where he continued his attacks on the NHPC within his constituency with renewed public confidence and power. He successfully repositioned himself as *“honouring what the public wants”* and responded to the *“negative impacts of dams”*, which he realised *“damaged and depleted resources in Dzongu”*. This new position on the NHPC was quickly adopted by local district officials and the grassroots-level SDF party cadres but only within Dzongu constituency falling on the right bank of Teesta River. On the left-bank Dzongu constituency, including Lachen-Mangan and Kabi Lungchuk constituencies [See Map 2], where a heterogenous mix of Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalese had given their approval for Teesta Stage IV, the same district officials and bureaucrats continued to support the development of Teesta Stage IV. This dual stand by the GoS representatives on the right- and left-bank Dzongu constituency made many SDF party loyalists critical of the State Government (including Mr. Sonam Gyatso) since the other SDF party constituency Member of Legislative Assembly of Lachen and Kabi Lungchuk constituency remained staunch supporters of Teesta Stage IV in their respective constituencies.

Despite growing confusion and distrust amongst the party supporters, Mr. Sonam Gyatso continued his anti-dam crusade against the NHPC on the right-bank Dzongu constituency and by 2016 had successfully gained the support of many former, prominent anti-dam activists from ACT and other anti-dam organisation members from Dzongu. With the threat of the SKM party’s political expansion still looming over the SDF party in Dzongu (and across Sikkim), in a master stroke, the SDF party made the *“anti-hydropower stance”* a key criterion for the selection of SDF party candidates for the Panchayat elections due in 2017. And as such, the SDF party offered Panchayat election *“tickets”* or nominations to key ACT members and their supporters that they had just wooed into the SDF party and to those newly flipped SDF party cadres who were committed to canvas on a purely anti-dam agenda. This was almost like an attempt to placate the suspicious party cadres and to prevent the outflow of old and the newly converted anti-dam activists and their supporters from joining the SKM party. This strategy was effective because the SDF party won the 2017

Panchayat election in Dzongu constituency with majority and retained its grassroots-level party support within Dzongu. As usual, the few who had won as independent candidates without any party affiliation joined the SDF party soon after the election, strengthening the SDF party in Dzongu.

With all the elected grassroots-level Panchayat members belonging to the SDF party, anti-dam mobilisation further intensified in Dzongu, but this time, not only against the NHPC but directly against Teesta Stage IV and against hydropower dams as such. The new anti-dam activist Panchayats on board instantly withdrew the approval from the main three (of the four) project-affected Gram Panchayat Units on right bank Dzongu—Lum Gor Sangtok, Lingdon Barfok and Passingdang Safo (shown as 1, 2 and 4 in Map 2)—that had earlier given Forest Clearance Approval for Teesta Stage IV. The Panchayats of these three Gram Panchayat Units then joined hands with the remaining Hee Gyathang GPU (shown as 3 in Map 2) to collectively decline approval for Forest Clearance in 2017.

This, however, excludes the “majority” of landowners still supporting the development of Teesta Stage IV HEP, which we discuss in the next section. They were joining the pro-dam other six project-affected Gram Panchayat Units (See Map 2) of the left bank—three from left-bank Dzongu constituency, two from Lachen-Mangan constituency and one in Kabi Lungchuk constituency (shown as 5, 6 and 7 in Map 2)—that have approved the Forest Clearance.

5.4. The Pro-Dam Supporters and a Split Community

Still, not all flipped on the right bank of Dzongu to join the anti-dam faction spearheaded by Mr. Sonam Gyatso. Many direct project-affected landowners, who had already flipped earlier under Mr. Sonam Gyatso’s assurances when pro-dam support was mobilised in Dzongu, refrained from the new flip. A palpable frustration had set in these landowners, as succinctly described by an old Lepcha landowner, also an SDF loyalist and a passionate anti-dam supporter during the initial ACT protests: *“If I change today like these politicians, then there will be no value for my stand, and tomorrow neither the NHPC nor the GoS will take me seriously. I have given my land. If the project comes, well and good. If it doesn’t, I couldn’t care less. But I will not change my mind now”* (Fieldwork, 2020). Other landowners, who had also earlier consented to giving away their lands for Teesta Stage IV and had been restricted access or cultivating on it by the NHPC, were reluctant to flip without any compensation for years of disuse that had rendered their lands unproductive. They believed that the politicians were simply *“playing with public emotions for votes and power”* and if the constituency Member of Legislative Assembly or GoS were genuinely concerned about the socio-environmental impacts of dams, then *“MoU signed between GoS and NHPC foremost should have been cancelled”*. Additionally, many Lepcha youth in need of employment, who had earlier passionately supported the ACT activists, also joined the pro-dam landowners. The belief that hydropower development was still the fastest means, “a-once-in-a-life time” opportunity to better their economic conditions and living standards, resolved their pro-dam stance in Dzongu. And so, Lepchas supporting dam development all arose in defence of the NHPC—their perceived benefactor and patron of socio-economic opportunities.

These pro-dam youth Lepchas, however, became instant targets of the newly flipped anti-dam activists/supporters. Since they did not fall under the category of formally identified direct project-affected landowners nor direct project-affected families (according to the 2008 Hydro Policy), they were vulnerable to *“no land, no say”* attacks of the anti-dam factions. The pro-dam landowners, on the other hand, were accused of being in minority, *“greedy”* and *“sell outs”* as more Lepchas on the right-bank constituency joined the area-MLA. However, undeterred, the (right-bank) pro-dam Lepchas resisted joining the anti-dam protest despite being SDF cadres themselves. This was because they found a key ally in the strong pro-dam supporters from the left-bank constituencies.

On the left bank, the SDF party’s other constituency Member of Legislative Assembly of Lachen-Mangan and Kabi-Lungchuk had mobilised an uncompromising pro-dam

stand, supported unanimously by their constituency residents. Not only had “all” the identified landowners given their approval for Teesta Stage IV “multiple times” willingly but lamented at how they had “*patiently waited and still waiting for over two decades for the commencement of Teesta Stage IV*” (Fieldwork, 2020). In fact, they had repeatedly pressured the NHPC and the GoS for speedy implementation of Teesta Stage IV. The “*dream of building [big] homes*”, “*sending children to private schools and institutions in Gangtok and other states across India*”, “*buying [bigger] vehicles*” and “*moving to places nearer Gangtok*” from the monetary compensation they hoped to receive from the NHPC kept their faith pinned on the SDF GoS and the NHPC—all of which made for their unrelenting dam support on the left bank.

Holding meetings on dam issues by the Government and NHPC official therefore became difficult and contentious because these were boycotted by one faction or the other. By 2019/2020, the hostilities between the two factions were so heightened that not only were the factions unwilling to negotiate or budge from their respective dam stands but its members refused to face each other at any project-related meeting. Even their interactions with the Government officials, including that with the then Chief Minister—Mr. P. K. Chamling—were separately scheduled to avoid direct clash between the factions. Given that a majority of both the pro and anti-dam factions belonged to the SDF party, each faction had been tactfully reassured by Mr. Chamling, successfully averting any loss or erosion of their confidence on the SDF party or the SDF GoS. In a volte face, the Chief Minister placated the anti-dam faction that the SDF Government would not push for the dam construction without “*proper consultation and genuine consent of the locals*”, explaining how all other dam constructions earlier had “*happened unknowingly*” but to the pro-dam faction, reiterated his full support for Teesta Stage IV, claiming: “*I brought the Project here, why would I stop it now. The project has a public demand. It will begin soon.*” In fact, the Chief minister pinned the blame on the “*locals and their internal fights*” for the delay of Teesta Stage IV and “*not the government*”. This ambiguous position, rather than cautioning the dam factions, had only boosted hope on both the sides, aggravating the cycle of mobilisation and counter-mobilisation around Teesta Stage IV in the region.

6. Discussion: Examining Power Reconfiguration in Hydropower Politics

As the foregoing sections show, across Sikkim, the manifestation of all “three differing continuums of power” has become most apparent in the decade-long conflict over hydropower development in Dzongu. In terms of “power levels”, the Government of India (or the Centre) has been the (hydro)power choreographer of India that sets as well as controls the country’s hydropower arena, while the respective State Governments are their power managers. The Centre’s local presence in distant regions like Dzongu, or for that matter, in North Sikkim, is concretely visible in the GoI’s officials and fieldworkers undertaking geophysical investigations since the early 1970s, and the NHPC officials after 1989. They deeply embedded these far-flung areas under the Centre’s direct influence, connecting national, state and local levels of water governance and conflict. The North District also had visible State presence given the politico-administrative structure of Sikkim that brought its inhabitants directly under the State too, locally and quite literally personified in the GoS officials and the elected representatives. With such Centre and State’s presence, power, in terms of the “relation” of the Centre-State representatives with the local residents, operated intrinsically through their everyday work and its associated encounter and engagement with the people of the region. These power relations have resulted in the activation of the different faces/forms of powers at different times, levels and spaces as hydropower development was pushed in the region, giving rise to distinct place-based hydro-electoral politics over large dam development in Dzongu.

6.1. The Working and Complementarities of Visible and Hidden Power

While visible power (e.g., legislative, policy force) and hidden power (e.g., manipulation, sidelining particular factions) were integral part of the dam development agenda

and practices, invisible forms of power were as important. Since there was no precedence of large dam nor its development in Sikkim until 1999 and in North Sikkim until 2007, the dominant central narrative that power projects were necessary for “national development” and “public interest” led both the GoS and its local public into believing that the exploitation of Sikkim’s abundant water resources was necessary for nation-building, instilling a heightened nationalistic fervor in the newly formed tiny State of Sikkim for dam developments. The Centre-State power relation, channelising a full “patron-like support” from every successive GoS for hydropower development, flared local imageries. The articulation of “*desh ko heet ma*” (for the sake of the county [India]) and “*desh ko bikash*” (for the country’s development) as a common, recurring justifications for HEPs by most elderly Lepchas of Dzongu and elderly GoS politicians even five decades later reflects the Centre’s conditioning of beliefs for hydropower development in North Sikkim. This explains why anti-dam protest did not galvanise within Dzongu in the early 1990s. Further, the State-centric narratives about self-reliance, revenue generation from dam development and reducing Sikkim’s fiscal independence on GoI, promoted immediately after 2003 by the SDF GoS, easily influenced and shaped local Lepcha’s beliefs and interest in large dams, garnering support for such massive development.

In fact, so deeply entrenched were the Centre-State and SDF party’s conditioning of Dzongu Lepchas, i.e., the effects of the invisible power, that the very visible socio-environmental impacts and drastically changed landscape from the construction of the first cascade large HEP of North Sikkim, Teesta Stage V, and its associated mounting protests from project-affected-villages, did little to dampen Lepcha enthusiasm for more dams in Dzongu and their ardent support for the ruling SDF Government.

Against this backdrop, the other faces of power have concomitantly been activated, especially in response to any (perceived) threat and(or) challenge to the ruling establishment. For example, the co-optation of the victor candidate at successive SLA and Panchayat elections against candidates opposing dams or the SDF party, the mass conversion of the victor’s grassroots-based supporters, promotion to higher bureaucratic and ministerial positions and the aggressive pushing for dam development using state machineries in Dzongu all express the first and second face of power. We see how the thin winning margin widens up disproportionately after 1999, skewing towards the ruling SDF GoS representatives promoting large dams in Dzongu and, oddly enough, remaining as highly skewed even on anti-dam stands taken by the SDF GoS in 2014 and 2017 SLA elections. This, we argue, is because of the grounding of the invisible third face of power at the local grassroots level, operating in and through the very party-affiliated local Lepchas themselves, who profess remaining “loyal” to their chosen political parties. It is the defense of large dam development by the party-affiliated Lepchas of Dzongu that thwarted the mobilisation of anti-dam concerns and resistance within Dzongu, without any direct confrontation with or antagonisation towards the State and the Centre until 2007. Thus, the effect of invisible power made existing local spaces for anti-dam contestation at the grassroots level redundant, cutting down mass support. While this had forced the ACT members to take their anti-dam protest to Gangtok—Sikkim’s capital—we argue that this inadvertently set in motion the activation of three dimensions of power by the GoS, the power companies and its supporters to repress the anti-dam protest.

In terms of the power cube framework, we view the Lepcha’s journey to Gangtok—their “last strategy”—as the ACT members’ attempt to create spaces elsewhere outside of Dzongu while also scaling up their protest from the grassroots local level to the regional level for more efficacy and effectiveness. The chronology of events may look as if the ACT members gained victory by successfully enabling the cancellation of four proposed (relatively much smaller dams) in 2008, but it becomes clear how the real target of the GoS was to control all socio-political spaces of participation and decision making at all levels at the grassroots: the wards, the villages and the Gram Panchayat Units, which would facilitate the execution of the GoS agendas—be it for dam development or resisting it. This becomes very clear through the GoS’s exercise of the first and the second face/form of

power, starting with the aggressive open attack on the anti-dam protests with accusation of “anti-national” and “anti-development” (publicly threatening and intimidating); next, by being ambiguous on dam position and later by organising the most rigorous/classic “mobilisation of bias” on the very anti-dam plank it fought against for decades—this all to outflank the most credible, trusted anti-dam candidates (who had been the face of anti-dam movement) during the 2014 SLA election. This brings us finally to the flip-flop politics on dam construction in Dzongu—both by the GoS and the Lepchas.

6.2. Political and Electoral Flip-Flops around Hydropower Development

The elected SDF party-affiliated Member of Legislative Assembly of Dzongu and Mangan-Lachen constituency, who have respectively resisted and supported Teesta Stage IV across the right and left bank of River Teesta, raise questions on whether hydropower development is an end in itself, for local and regional development, or just a means for the SDF Government’s own vote bank politics and survival. The SKM party’s first victory in Kabi-Lungchok constituency in 2014, and its inroad to the remaining two constituencies—Dzongu and Lachen-Mangan—riding on the sentiments and grievances of anti-hydropower development, compounded the SDF party’s fear of losing local support. This had compelled the GoS—that had blatantly ignored anti-dam appeals in Dzongu and de-mobilised the anti-dam movement in Gangtok—to now galvanise the pro-dam supporters in Dzongu to change their position and join the “save Dzongu” faction to push its new agenda in the spaces opened after 2003. This explains the “flip-flop” ambiguity of the SDF party, different also on the right and left bank. SDF’s dichotomous political position with regards to right- and left-bank Dzongu shaped both these places differently, which also affirms that “spaces are not neutral for participation but are themselves embedded in power relations, constantly being shaped and influenced by them” [75].

Such calculated political flip-flop over dams strengthened the intensity of the anti-dam protest in Dzongu because the elected representatives at the Panchayat levels, all SDF party loyalists, came out in the open as anti-dam flag bearers, without fear of anti-party, anti-development and anti-national labels. The anti-dam faction that had been in minority and lacked Lepchas support within Dzongu overnight sprung as majority under the SDF party support. At the same time, the pro-dam faction that had enjoyed party support suddenly were reduced to minority, supported strongly by the newly flipped pro-dam supporters. The SDF Government’s “master stroke” within Dzongu constituency conveniently absolved the GoS as hydropower development enthusiast and politically projected a people-centric image for itself. Herein, both the pro- and the anti-dam factions still approached the GoS and its representatives to remedy their grievances, rather than going against the SDF GoS. It is evident that the GoS did not directly engage in confronting the GoI, nor cancel the Memorandum Of Understandings with the NHPC, hence it routed the covert-contestation mobilising anti-dam unrest on the right bank. The Lepchas, still hoping for change, remain sandwiched between the SDF-led GoS (fighting for more “power” over its resources and electoral votes) and the NHPC (that has already made heavy financial and infrastructural investments in the project-affected villages and is gearing for more HEPs in Sikkim).

The reason why the SDF-led GoS successfully pulled off the flip—de-mobilising the anti-dam movement at its peak in 2008 in Gangtok, far away from Dzongu, and re-mobilising the same back in Dzongu in 2014—is because of the party-based “patron-client” relationship that exists between the GoS and the people of Sikkim. This is, we argue, what facilitates the operation of the various dimensions of power and thereby builds the “total” impact as explained in Gaventa’s framework on power. Although top-down in nature, this political patronage relationship operates via the party-based delivery and distribution of public services and benefits in Sikkim, usually in exchange for party allegiance and loyalty towards the ruling dispensation. This patronage politics is deeply embedded in the social fabric of Sikkim right from the grassroots ward to village to Panchayats to GPUs, affecting all walks of life and overtly visible during elections, party rallies and seeking employment opportunities. The NHPC as well as the new private Independent Power Producers have

followed a similar path in dispensing patronising welfare and social aid—today in the name of corporate social responsibilities—too woo the public and creating a system of dependent patron–client relationships just like the State Government. No one wants to offend nor confront the party in power nor the powerful companies. This is also because power, even at a local level, is literally “personified” by the elected Member of Legislative Assembly, Chief Minister, Ministers, State and Central bureaucrats including the power company officials—all too visible given their everyday presence and engagement at village weddings, funerals, cultural functions, social gatherings, party rallies and public talks. The different faces or forms of power therefore have for long operated and become visible in the actions/inactions and functions of people who personify or represent power, which makes it difficult to escape or challenge the political patronage system.

This is why, behind the fear of being labelled party-*drohi* [traitor] or anti-party, it was the fear of falling out of the ruling party’s or ruling people’s or powerful companies’ patronage that prevented many Lepchas from offering and showing solidarity to the anti-dam factions—and participating in the aggressive “mobilisation of bias” through “organisational outflanking” of ACT. This anti-party fear was only to project a negative image for ACT as anti-development and anti-national, damaging trust building between ACT members with the majority of Lepcha residents, making a pariah of the anti-dam protesters in their very own ancestral Dzongu region. So brutal was this mobilisation-of-bias followed by victimisation and intimidation that many key anti-dam activists later on resigned from their activism due to lack of local support for the anti-dam struggle in Dzongu after losing the election. This manufactured exclusion of the anti-dam protesters and of their anti-dam issues has also resulted in what [34] (p. 255) has pointed out as “a sense of defeat or sense of powerlessness” that affects the consciousness of potential challengers and those sympathetic towards the anti-dam cause in Dzongu, creating and perpetuating the “culture of silence”. It took a powerful flip by the ruling party to break the culture of silence on anti-dam supporters. Could this then be victory of the anti-dam movement as it is often claimed, or should it rather be analysed as a temporary “misalignment” of the dominant forms, spaces and levels of power? For certain, both pro- and anti-dam issues have been used as “vote banks” and for strategic, electoral tactics, to leverage favourable political outcomes by politicians, ruling and opposition parties.

7. Conclusions

To conclude, we have explained why the Lepchas switched their positions on dams and hydropower. We have shown why and how the GoS, its representatives and the companies strategically operated in this dam/anti-dam political mining field in order to secure compliance and support at the grassroot level. We also examined how they continuously seek to stabilise power relations among the governing and the governed, to choreograph ‘hydraulic order and the politics of the governed’ [76,77]. Implications for the dam movements and mobilisation in the region remain to be seen particularly as natural disasters such as landslides, flash floods, glacial lake outburst floods and earthquakes are exacerbated in the region, compounded and amplified by human greed, failure and mismanagements. The granting of power projects to questionable power companies, conducting blotched public hearings, exaggerating the benefits of large dams and downplaying the adverse negative impacts of the same, resorting to coercion and intimidation and so on have greatly increased the risk, vulnerability, fear and uncertainty in the project-affected areas, especially in the environmentally sensitive regions of Eastern Himalaya. Numerous dam failure disasters across the world—Vajont dam disaster in Italy in 1963 and Banqiao Dam disaster in 1975 to name a few—including many across India such as the Machchu II dam failure in India in 1979, seem to be forgotten easily. The latest flood disaster that completely washed away Sikkim’s largest mega dam—the Teesta Stage III that was built at 1530 m above mean sea level in Chungthang village, North District of Sikkim, and commissioned less than five years ago—has caused colossal loss of life, properties and human displacement all along the Teesta Valley in Sikkim and in the neighbouring state of West Bengal. The flood also

completely damaged the NHPC's Teesta Stage V lying downstream of Teesta Stage III. And as reconstruction and repair are being planned, dam issues and conflict are back in Sikkim again. We are to assume that with the mass flip against large dams in Dzungu that received both the ruling as well as opposition party's support, the recent dam failure disaster in the region that affected parts of Dzungu and the emerging dam controversy gaining attention in Sikkim, things ought to have worked in favour of the Lepchas of Dzungu and dams ought to have been cancelled, but ground reality was no different. Large dams are meant to stay in Sikkim, and where better than North Sikkim—far away from the scrutiny of the public.

Author Contributions: Conceptualisation, R.D.D., J.H. and R.B.; methodology, R.D.D., J.H. and R.B.; formal analysis, R.D.D.; investigation, R.D.D.; data curation, R.D.D.; writing—original draft preparation, R.D.D.; writing—review and editing, R.D.D., J.H., G.J.V. and R.B.; supervision, J.H., G.J.V. and R.B. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by the Department of International Development (DFID) through The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) Grant Number W.O7.68.413. It was also supported by the ERC European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Riverhood, Grant Number 101002921); see also www.movingrivers.org.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

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