

# The Narrative Gravity of Weepingsikkim.blogspot.com

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## Abstract

Initiated in June 2007, weepingsikkim is a mediated 'framed' cyberspace censored/operated by a blogger/webmaster(s) in order to narrate a particular perspective and disseminate information about the multi-sited activities and protests enacted by some indigenous people against the proposed and ongoing construction of hydropower projects over River Teesta in Sikkim and North Bengal in India. The activists reiterate emphatically in words and through visual content that they want to cherish and preserve their fragile Himalayan landscape from greedy capitalists. The visual narrative frames and represents the Lepchas as environmentalists and the true custodians of Sikkim's environment. The blog has functioned as an electronic bulletin board, an online chronicle of the activities, and is subsisting in cyberspace as a multimedia archive about the Teesta movement (2007-09).

My analysis of weepingsikkim emphasizes how the availability of multimedia narratives originating from various sources can blur the distance and difference between the ethnographer and the subjects/field and democratize the production of knowledge and representations. Images, texts, films, and comments posted on weepingsikkim could be used stand-alone for any research. However, I have used them in conjunction with textual and visual data gathered through fieldwork, discussion and conversations with subjects and informants/collaborators using Internet and Communication Technologies (ICT). Given the digital divide and persistent inequities in access to telephony and internet among people residing in Sikkim, I emphasize the danger of (mis)representing and proposing generalizations based only on the blog and ICT.

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## Introduction

This paper analyses the organization of a particular narrative authored and circulated by subjects themselves namely indigenous activists residing in remote Himalayan Sikkim in Northeast India on weepingsikkim.blogspot.com (henceforth weepingsikkim). It is remarkable that a small-scale resource-poor social movement<sup>1</sup> emerging from a remote Himalayan borderland of India where a big digital divide persists has used internet activism and authored representations on weepingsikkim.blogspot.com. In doing so, they have acquired a global presence and a stronger voice. It is equally striking how cultural representations framed and circulated in cyberspace are engaging with ethnographic writings and informing our fieldwork practices. This case demonstrates how the Internet has become an active space for circulating self-presentations and a site for validating or challenging ethnographic representations. How I picture and what I write about them is available online without constraints of geography and time so long as 'democratic' access is given to them and to others.<sup>2</sup> Undeniably, the digital domain is democratizing the production of knowledge by permitting greater collaboration and demanding reflexivity in writing and methodological practice(s) (Banks 2001; Pink, Kurti and Afonso 2004) nonetheless it is concurrently undermining our authority to represent others.

Initiated in June 2007, weepingsikkim is a mediated 'framed' cyberspace censored/operated by a blogger/webmaster(s) in order to narrate a particular perspective and disseminate information about the multi-sited activities and protests enacted by some indigenous people against the proposed and ongoing construction of hydropower projects over River Teesta in Sikkim and North Bengal in India. I will term these organized protests as 'Save the River Teesta' movement after reworking their popular slogan 'Save Teesta'. Texts, newspaper reports, visuals, and films have been uploaded on this blog and it has been inter-networked with other online media

content and websites. It is not the organization of Save the River Teesta movement, but the blog and its discourse that is the central object/subject of my social research here. The blog exemplifies 'web activism' where notions of the self, the community, and representations of state-directed development, and participatory development get transformed and challenged by non-state actors who transgress state-produced and state-controlled texts and images (see Dartnell 2006: 4). I juxtapose the particular representational frame evoked on the blog between June 2007 and November 2010 with my analysis that draws on extended fieldwork, digital ethnography and visual research. My analysis of weepingsikkim emphasizes that online circulation of different ethnographic writing(s) (by subjects themselves and by anthropologists) and availability of multimedia narratives originating from various sources can blur the distance and difference between the ethnographer and the subjects/field and generate fuller cultural representations.

For my unfamiliar readers, I will briefly explain the main reasons for the organization and emergence of Save the River Teesta movement. On the one hand, the government of Sikkim asserts that the hydraulic development of River Teesta is the prime solution to the national energy crises and Sikkim's underdevelopment. Hence, in partnership with private companies it has proposed to generate around 3500 megawatts from the cascade development of River Teesta. It contends that hydropower projects would generate revenue, augment employment opportunities and develop the infrastructure and develop Sikkim. On the other hand, civil society organizations and indigenous activists have organized opposition to counter what they term to be the government's arbitrary decision to authorize the construction of 26 mega hydropower projects on the Teesta River. The majority of those who are opposing these projects belong to the indigenous Lepcha and Bhutia community mostly who will be directly and indirectly affected by these projects. Displacement, environmental degradation, loss of land and their livelihood, and loss of culture and heritage with the 'desecration' of their sacred sites are some common concerns. The government and project developers claim that they have consulted the people in order to generate consent and their participation have been counteracted with the emergence of formal opposition since June 2007. The leadership and membership core of the Save the River Teesta movement is drawn from the Lepcha community and their protests have inordinately focused on Dzongu (the Lepcha reserve) and North Sikkim, and less on other stages of the Teesta cascade. The activists' banner proclaiming, 'In the name of development, do not make us refugees in our own homeland [Sikkim]' succinctly challenges the rhetoric

of public interest. Nonetheless, some members of the Lepcha community residing in Dzongu were persuaded or pressurized to sell their ancestral land with promises of employment and other developmental benefits. Hence, the unanimity within the Lepcha community of Dzongu and their voice is diluted. The state government is the single largest employer in Himalayan Sikkim and many people repeatedly mentioned to me that they could not think of antagonizing their political and administrative bosses. The movement has not gained momentum and strength definitely due to internal differences within the Lepcha community and existing ethnic divisions, but also significantly due to the fear of government repression. This partially explains why the indefinite hunger strike was withdrawn and the protests subsided in September 2009 with both government and leaders deciding in September 2009 to negotiate and find solutions to the raised concerns.

I begin this paper by outlining how new technologies and texts demand adoption of new methodologies and the closer integration of the visual in our ethnographic practice. These developments generate new sites for research, enable fieldwork at a distance, but can also inhibit us by exercising control over our ethnographic representations. The second section discusses the structure, the thematic content, and organization of multimedia content on weepingsikkim, and the outreach and limitations of such internet activism. The third section discusses the framing of Lepchas as eco-warriors and the critical role played by pictures uploaded on the blog. I group the different visual representations circulated here into photographs of people, pictures of the landscape, satellite and digital Google images, photographs of banners, pictures of the day count, images of different kinds of maps, pictures of formal government communications and orders, and so on. Embedded in texts and comments, they document and provide visual evidence in support of the textual argument, and powerfully engage the viewer-reader.

My writing in this paper has been influenced by discussions and debates in three areas. Firstly, Erving Goffman's *Presentation of the Self*, the *Writing Cultures* debate on the inherently partial nature of ethnographic representations, the importance of multi-sited fieldwork, and the need to understand the connection between local and global contexts (Goffman 1959, Clifford and Marcus 1986, Gupta and Ferguson 1997, Sassen 2004). Secondly, the emergent literature on internet ethnography and internet activism (Dartnell 2006, Jordan 2001, Jones 1999, Kahn and Kellner 2004, Rheingold 2002) has influenced my understanding of technopolitics. What is vital here is not merely the form and content of the blog, but what it frames-in or frames-out. Thirdly, discussions in visual anthropology explaining the indexical and

representational quality of photographs, the intentionality in visual representations and their circulation in different media, and the idea of visual as evidence have influenced my interpretations (Banks and Morphy 1997, Banks 2001, Edwards 2001, Edwards and Hart 2001, Hall 1997, Jay 2002, Pink 2001, Pink, Kurti and Afonso 2004, Pink 2006).

### **Ethnographic Representations, Fieldwork, and Hybrid Methodology**

Undeniably, ethnographic writings are inherently partial and therefore a particular representation (Clifford and Marcus 1986). This paper is an analysis about group behaviour and their self-representation in a local-global context, but concurrently also a text of my experiments in methodological practices. I have been writing about conflicting claims over natural resources in this region since 2001 and my engagement has been ethnographic, historical, and now increasingly mediated by information and communication technologies (henceforth ICT). I recall Sarah Pink's declaration in the opening sentence of the introduction to *Working Images* 'Now, more than ever before, ethnographers are using visual and digital images and technologies to research and represent the cultures, lives, and experiences of other people' (Pink, Kurti and Afonso 2004: 1). Images, texts, films, and comments posted on weepingsikkim could be used stand-alone for my research nonetheless I have used them in conjunction with textual and visual data gathered through fieldwork, discussion and conversations with subjects and informants/collaborators. I describe here the process and need to use hybrid methodologies in my writing about the Save the River Teesta movement.

A *bricolage* approach became necessary given the long gestation period and trajectory of the movement. During my extended fieldwork in 2001-02 and short-term fieldwork in 2003 and 2005, oppositional discourses against the proposed hydropower projects on River Teesta in North Sikkim and in neighbouring Darjeeling Hills of North Bengal were whispered notes and undercurrents voiced by few indigenous activists and concerned citizens. The activists had hoped the government would learn from the mistakes and controversies connected with the Rathongchu hydropower project that was shelved in 1997 (see Arora 2004, 2006a), and would be committed to protect the heritage and rights of the indigenous Lepchas. In 2005, a group of activists filed legal petitions in the National Appellate Authority at Delhi to question the grant of necessary environmental clearances.<sup>3</sup> Activists have repeatedly sent representatives to convince the state and the national government to commission a review of the ecological impact of these projects. I would often meet

these activists when they came to Delhi during 2005-06. I was sometimes invited to attend their meetings with lawyers and environmental activists based in Delhi. One of the activists even shared the visual record that he was making about the impact of construction of hydropower projects on the fragile landscape and the so-called public hearings and some meetings. To an extent, I was able to get some sense of events occurring in Sikkim by looking at these video recordings.

Towards the end of 2006 and in early 2007 after government started to identify and acquire land, these oppositional narratives acquired a bigger audience, an audibility and formality in Sikkim. More and more villagers residing in Dzongu and Lepcha youth became alarmed and started organizing meetings and discussing how the projects would impact their present and future.<sup>4</sup> The protest activities of indigenous Lepchas were organized under the banner of the Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT) and many ecologically concerned Sikkimese people and other organizations joined their movement in June 2007. They decided to combine indigenous religious imagery with Gandhian method of *satyagraha* in order to exert moral and political pressure on the government to concede to their demands (Arora 2007b, 2008), and this was explicit in the visuals circulated later on their blog. This movement gradually engulfed the Lepchas living in Darjeeling, Kurseong, and Kalimpong in West Bengal and elicited a sympathetic response from the ethnic movements there. Between June 2007 and June 2010, multi-sited non-violent protests, marches, mass meetings and *dharnas* (sit-ins) were organized by the activists in several villages of Dzongu, Lachen, Chungthang, Gangtok, Rangpo in Sikkim state and Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Calcutta in the state of West Bengal, and in New Delhi.

I was engaged in short-term fieldwork on medical pluralism and meeting some of the activists in June 2007, when they decided to launch formal protests and start an indefinite *satyagraha* against the hydropower development of River Teesta at Gangtok (Arora 2007b). It became essential to innovate and adopt new methodologies to write about these emergent protests, as my full-time teaching responsibilities precluded participant observation of the movement. Thus, I have been able to only conduct short-term multi-sited fieldwork in Sikkim and New Delhi during 2007-09. Here, I must stress that there are substantial methodological differences in my recent fieldwork since digital penetration was quite low in 2001-02 when I was undertaking extended fieldwork in the region. Since 2004, telephonic penetration has increased. The more recent spread of low cost mobile network penetration and increase in computer literacy and access to computers and the Internet has made it



possible for me to regularly communicate with some of my key informants. I have extensively used telephone conversations, chatted online with some leaders of these protests, and analysed content available in secondary sources and on the Internet to understand the complexity and follow the trajectory of this movement.

I know them and the field knows me. Some articles written by me about their protests (Arora 2007b, 2008, 2009b) and information about others were posted on weepingsikkim and other environmental portals. This circulation has validated my ethnographic writings and also contributed to the online representation of this movement. My writings in newspapers, journals, and books constitute an external representation nonetheless their circulation and reproduction on the weblog have made them part of the internal narrative.

### Framing a Narrative in Cyberspace

Cyberspace was initially naively imagined to be an electronic commons, but we find that activism here is narrowly restricted to 'few participants who have the means, knowledge, social alertness, and the political will to participate' (Hurwitz 1999: 655-56).<sup>5</sup> Amongst various forms of computer mediated communication, technological innovations such as web-blog or blog, vlog,<sup>6</sup> and wiki<sup>7</sup> are easy to create and maintain. A blog is a decentralized per-user publication with the author controlling and owning it (Karger and Quan 2005: 149). They are used by people use for 'journaling, self-publishing and media news-critique (Kahn and Kellner 2004: 94). The essence of blogging is to transform consumers of information into content-producers (Karger and Quan 2005: 148). Weepingsikkim.blogspot erupted into cyberspace in simultaneity to an indefinite hunger strike initiated by Tenzing Gyatso Lepcha (General Secretary, Concerned Lepchas of Sikkim), Dawa Lepcha (General Secretary, Affected Citizens of Teesta)<sup>8</sup> and Ongdi Lepcha at Bhutia-Lepcha house on Tibet Road in Gangtok in Sikkim in Northeast India on 20<sup>th</sup> June 2007. The blogger/webmaster(s) declares that they seek to environmentally educate the public about Sikkim's fragile environment and create awareness about the adverse impact of large Hydropower projects. The contextual justification for starting the blog is given in the right column:

It began the day our friends Dawa, Tenzing and others decided to go on an indefinite strike last June [2007] and appeal to the Government of Sikkim on the dangers of mega Hydel dams and the ecological degradation and social impact that it would bring to Sikkim and Dzongu in particular. It is dedicated to them and the courage and conviction they have had in standing up for a noble cause and going hungry all these days. Dawa and Tenzing went hungry for 63 days earlier and even longer

one of 96 days, a few months later during the second indefinite hunger strike...

The blog claims to be 'a forum to express environmental and other concerns regarding our natural surroundings'<sup>9</sup> Organizationally weepingsikkim follows a linear format, with recent postings on the top and older postings running below. Structurally, it has a title with a header, a broad column in the left side for postings and a narrow column on the right declaring the intention of creating this blog, and its interconnections with select relevant websites and audiovisual content.

The header of this blog is written in Nepali language.<sup>10</sup> It states, '*ani Sikkim runcha.*' This begets two critical interrelated questions - who belongs to Sikkim? Who is weeping for Sikkim? The graphic in the header depicts a man dressed in Tibetan clothes paying homage to a couple dressed in traditional Lepcha attire with a snowy mountain in its backdrop. An adjacent caption identifies this image as a depiction of the iconic Statue of Unity which symbolizes the unity of the Lepchas, Bhutias and the Nepalis, along with the sacred mountain Kanchenjunga acting as the witness of this historic ethnic pact that took place in the fourteenth century at Kabi in North Sikkim.<sup>11</sup> Those who are not familiar with the history and ethnographic context can easily be misled by this graphic in the header. Since, the graphic primarily represents the ethnic unity of the Lepchas and Bhutias in popular memory and in historical literature where occasionally it has included the Limbus, but nowhere does any oral or written discourse acknowledge the Nepali to be part of this ethnic alliance. The blog attempts to recast collective representations. People residing in Sikkim do not interpret and represent this graphic in this manner. The absence of online criticism is perhaps a function of moderated content.

Dartnell highlights how 'web activism's symbolic, image-driven, and identarian features upstage its information aspects' (2006: 101). Bloggers are self-selected in their desire to publish their thoughts online, and we can't regard them to be representative of the general population (Thelwall 2007: 5-6). Sectional ethnic interests (the activists are overwhelmingly Lepchas) are asserting on this blog that they represent the voice of general interests and sustainable development of Sikkim. The blog tries to transform a *particular* narrative into a universal one despite the fragmented narrative circulating within Sikkim. Any overarching suppositions are problematic in multi-ethnic Sikkim. My fieldwork in 2007-08 indicates that loss of livelihood is a foremost concern for all project affected communities, nonetheless an ecological narrative of protecting the environment that nourishes them like a mother is not a uniform one. Members of some Nepali

ethnic organizations acknowledged the adverse impact of these projects on the environment.<sup>12</sup> They stated that they feared government repression so were not openly supportive and were maintaining distance from the ongoing protests. However, some members of the Rai, Gurung, Kshetri groups residing in Gangtok expanded that as their communities were neither directly affected by displacement nor going to lose religious sites,<sup>13</sup> therefore the responsibility of organizing resistance inordinately befell on the Lepchas and Bhutias who exclusively inhabit North Sikkim and periodically affirm their ritual connections with sacred landscapes located in it. Are those who are not resisting these projects being anti-Sikkimese and anti-national?

The footer of weepingsikkim contains a beautiful picture of a river flowing down misty forested mountains that is captioned as 'the most beautiful disappearing river.' The activists are visually alerting us how this beautiful river would be adversely impacted. Narratives on the blog explain time and again how the Teesta river will disappear after its water are channelled through underground race tunnels for producing power and the densely forested mountains of the river basin would be denuded with the water table receding.

The blog's right column contains an important disclaimer declaring, 'We would also like to clarify that <http://weepingsikkim.blogspot.com/> is not the official website of ACT (Affected Citizens of Teesta) and we do not have any political affiliations or belong to any political party or any other group as such.' Statements in the right column attest to responsible citizenship and impress on the readers that caring for Sikkim's environment is paramount an expression of belonging. This is evident in their assertion:

...It concerns us as normal citizens of Sikkim to be a little selfless at such an hour to not to turn or look away but rather show concern to a humanitarian, social and ecological cause in our own surroundings. As normal citizens of Sikkim, we have the right to see our rivers and forests and natural resources protected and preserved for the present and the future...

...26 or more mega Hydel projects being sanctioned across all of Sikkim is not the most appropriate of ways to so called industrially develop, as we feel. It is nothing but heading Sikkim towards major environmental disasters and negative social impacts in the very near future...this blog is therefore, our honest effort of intending debate, reasoning and understanding in this critical issue pertaining to our times and of Sikkim's and many thanks to this modern means of this amazing medium of communication...

The blog articulates an ecological nationalism albeit a restrictive one. Homage to Ms Chokie Topden was added here in April 2009 after her tragic death in an accident. Ms Topden was a social activist and leader of the Rathongchu

movement; at the time of her untimely death she was affiliated with the ongoing protests.<sup>14</sup> Sometime in 2009, a Cree prophecy was added in the right column to stress the environmental wisdom of indigenous groups and interconnect Save the River Teesta internationally with other indigenous people's movements.

The right column provides us the list of developers and power projects uploaded on the government website. Uploads of videos and films on the issues and public hearings conducted are posted in the left column making it possible for us to adjudge certain events without travelling to the sites of resistance. The blogger declares in the right column that (s)he sincerely hopes that this blog will generate awareness, engender and aid research. Weepingsikkim connects with like-minded networks such as International Rivers Network ([www.irn.org](http://www.irn.org)), Kalpavriksh, Narmada Bachao Andolan ([www.narmada.org](http://www.narmada.org)), South Asian Dams Rivers and People (<http://www.sandrp.in/>), Nespon ([www.nespon.org](http://www.nespon.org)) and so on. It interlinks with the Sikkim government official website containing the soft copy of the Carrying Capacity Study of Teesta River Basin ([www.sikervis.nic.in/ccstb.html](http://www.sikervis.nic.in/ccstb.html)) and media coverage in news channels. In analyzing these interconnections, the blog's outreach and impact, I am reminded of 'the Reed law' of exponential growth that connecting two networks creates far more value than would be the case if we add their sum as individuals and if they exist independently (cf. Rheingold 2002: 59-62). The fruits of internet networking and political activism on the net are manifest in the international attention and support that the movement has received despite its small-scale and remote location. Global digital linkages do enable place-specific politics to acquire a global span (Sassen 2004: 654).

The left column contains a chronologically organized narrative. This section does not have a single identifiable author despite the extensive use of 'I' in the right column. The blog has an anonymous moderator who can be reached at [weepingsikkim@gmail.com](mailto:weepingsikkim@gmail.com). The moderator/blogger declares it to be an open democratic forum, 'I am open to all views here and will publish them, whether the comments intend to support the cause of ACT or not. The important thing is to write and please do...this blog exists out of my love and responsibility to Sikkim, the land of my birth and my home.' Nowhere does the webmaster claim to be a Lepcha person.

Postings in the left column are sourced from multiple contributors, and it's an interactive portal where readers can express themselves. Three kinds of postings are discernible in the left section of the blog – reports of events and activities of activists by themselves, reports written by others and published in mass media, and comments by viewers and readers of the blog. The dominating

presence is of postings made by the activists that chronicle the trajectory of their struggle and the shifting ground of their oppositional discourse and activities. Many a times the entries were written by Dawa Lepcha who is trained as a film-maker himself while he was sitting on hunger strike and at other times a web-savvy activist has posted pictures of people joining the relay hunger strike and sharing print and media coverage of the movement. Content has been additionally sourced from newspaper coverage and commented upon by the moderator/blogger. Reader commentaries reflect the global outreach of the blog with supportive comments coming in from all over the world from the Diaspora, and sometimes from tourists who had travelled to Sikkim at that time.<sup>15</sup> However, the number of readers' comments are few and of restricted nature. I have not come across adverse comments made against activists or pro-hydropower project postings being uploaded.

Content-wise, the left column thematically focuses on the activists' demands and concerns pertaining to the proposed, planned and under-construction power projects. Postings here discuss the indigenous rights of the Lepchas, their love of the land and the idea of a sacred landscape, the centrality of Dzongu for Lepcha culture and history, government apathy and indifference to their concerns, the heroic struggle of some youth who have demonstrated willingness to die for the cause, their endangered future with the implementation of Panang project in Dzongu and the migration and settlement of others here, the centrality of environmental wisdom in Lepcha culture, the clash of corporate greed and indigenous custodianship of natural resources for future generations, local and global water politics, energy crises and climate change, the idea of a common future and caring for the earth, meaning of development and the need to find alternative routes to large-scale hydropower projects.<sup>16</sup>

The Chief Minister acknowledged the power of this blog and its effectiveness in tarnishing his eco-friendly image publicly on 15<sup>th</sup> August 2007. However, as a democratic expression of some people, the government could never block it. The archive of the blog and number of postings made each month here are located in the lower section of the right column. I note that 232 postings were made in 2007 and the frequency has been declining with only 48 postings made in 2008, 43 in 2009 and merely 12 postings in between January-November 2010. Undoubtedly, blogging is proving to be an important expression of political engagement, source of corporate global media critique, inserting journalistic socio-political intervention, and technoactivism (Kahn and Kellner n.d.: 6-14).<sup>17</sup> Blogging enables local politics to network and situate themselves in global politics, overcome their peripheral

geographical position, and counteract government apathy by actively carving an alternative public space. The regression in postings and irregularity in posting information on weepingsikkim are partially explained by the decline in number of organized events but also by a realization of the limited outreach of the Internet within Sikkim.<sup>18</sup>

Web activism is carving new political spaces for non-state actors, however 'techno-power is elitist' (Jordan 2001: 109-140). In the context of a persistent digital divide, digital narratives and representations may prevail uncontested. Hence, inequalities in access to internet and cyberspace will continue to be critical determinants structuring power between online and offline communities. The telecommunications network was poor until 2004 and thereafter computers were introduced with the establishment of 40 community information centres in rural Sikkim (Planning Commission 2008:108-09). My repeated query posed to the coordinator of the protests and one of the bloggers has yielded the interesting information that within India merely a few thousand people—largely Sikkimese students and other Sikkimese (not merely Lepchas) living within India and the world—were accessing this blog to keep abreast of events and the protest activities. Readers' posts were frequent in the first six months and declined as organized events declined and mass media coverage also became infrequent. This explains why pro-project supporters or the state government did not feel the need to counter online activism by circulating a differential perspective in another blog.

### Depicting Teesta activists and Lepchas as eco-warriors

Visuals are acquiring prominence with the distribution and availability of low-cost digital cameras and literally entering into everyday circulation. Taking pictures is no longer a conscious planned activity but becoming a spontaneous and uneventful habit. Advances in digital technology and miniaturization are enabling people to take pictures frequently and instantaneously with the handy mobile camera. Easy to use and easy to circulate, visual communication and visual culture have become integral to our everyday life. Nonetheless, the selection of a photographic frame and the moment to be pictured is always a decision and a matter of choice. Choices are affective decisions and they matter since they construct and respond to a particular context (Edwards and Hart 2004: 6). Like words, pictures and images (in paper or in digital format) contextualize and frame a narrative and simultaneously slice and silence other possible narratives. They are fragments of history and always a partial narrative.



The indexical appeal of the photograph is a primary reason why an image is taken, selected, collected, and circulated (Edwards and Hart 2004: 2). As things or objects, photographs have life-histories. Hence, they acquire and lose value and meaning in contexts (see Appadurai 1986: 12, 17). The meaning of a photograph therefore lies not merely in its materiality, form and content, but in the context of its use, appropriation, and circulation (Sassoon 2004: 191). This involves a shift in understanding the photographic image as an illustration to their being understood as documents, texts, which are engaging inter-textually with other texts and visuals. I have been strongly influenced by Banks (2001: 11-12) insistence that we must attend to the internal (content) and external (social context of its production and dissemination) narrative of any picture. Photographs are transnational objects par excellence that may begin life in one place but travel through time and space to new destinations (Harris 2004: 134). When digitized these photographs acquire a life of their own and become amenable to manipulation, mass circulation or reproduction, and get disassociated from their authors and de-historicized more than their paper counterparts.

Pictures put together make a 'statement about the world (Worth cf. Pink 2004: 3). Words and image fuse together on weepingsikkim to give the reader a sense of the moment, the events impacting the landscape, and the arguments taking place about the projects. The blogger is conscious of the power of vision and a visual narrative has been central to the organization and narrative of the blog. Many blog entries resemble photographic essays. The blogger has clearly been coached to think visually and reveals an ethnographic eye while selecting images. This is not accidental since Dawa Lepcha who is one of the key leaders of these protests is trained as a film-maker and has several films on Lepcha culture and religion to his credit. He has also authored some of the content that has been uploaded here. In fact, I am surprised to find the low filmic content circulated here.

What weepingsikkim.blogspot.com has profoundly achieved is to represent the activists and the Lepchas as true sons of soil and the rightful custodians of Sikkim's natural resources. Graphical content has played a critical role in attesting to their depiction as environmentalists. Photographs of people and activists, various activities and events organized by the activists, the river course and Himalayan landscape and construction activities therein, maps (drawn and digital one's), images of formal communications sent by the government, and banners circulated on this website have contributed intensely to this eco-warrior imagery and imagination.

Circulated in mass media and on the blog, many of the pictures depict young men and women, lamas and

shamans, Lepchas, Bhutias, and sometimes even Nepalis (names and clothes indicate their ethnicity) participating in the relay hunger strike. These are not unhappy angry faces but carry expressions of serious concern and sometimes smiling as enthusiastic activists devoted to their cause. A silk scarf adorned picture of Gandhi presides like a patron-saint over these non-violent protests and is constantly included in the picture frame of those joining the relay hunger strike. These pictures attest the new leadership and concern for environment among Sikkim's youth and their resolve to struggle to save Sikkim's environment and their homeland. The faces of some Lepcha leaders and some activists (Dawa Lepcha, Tenzing Lepcha, Tseten Lepcha, and some lamas) become synonymous with the image of hydropower protests, as they recur on the blog. The picture of Dawa Lepcha sitting below a khada covered portrait of Gandhi, the many pictures of Dawa and Tenzing in the first *satyagraha* and later the second *satyagraha* have transformed them into unforgettable heroic faces of Sikkim. The pictures of their hospitalization, and messages they sent to public from the hospital bed were widely circulated. They tugged at our emotions and convinced us of their sincerity and conviction in their espoused cause of saving their homeland. The front porch of the ground floor of Bhutia-Lepcha house located on Tibet road at Gangtok got rapidly transformed into a site of non-violent resistance and the indefinite *satyagraha*. This front porch with the numerous banners and groups of supporters sitting is frequently depicted on the blog. It becomes a permanent backdrop and over time this site is recognized to be the 'unofficial' headquarters for holding meetings and organizing protests against the Teesta projects.

'The act of presenting a place through a picture is one of linking images to some idea that they both refer to and help articulate' (Coover 2004: 188). The selection of what is to be pictured and presented does highlight the framing of an imaginary. In some of the landscape pictures, we see the beautiful union of sky and the earth, the connection between lofty mountains and the rivers that originate and flow through the valleys, the intimacy between human settlements, fields and the forests.<sup>19</sup> The pictures taken along the course of the river through misty forested mountains, human settlements and rice-valleys that lie on the banks of River Teesta remind us that this river is the lifeline of Sikkim. Those who have never visited Sikkim acquire a fair idea of the landscape and human settlements in this Himalayan setting by looking at them on this blog (or elsewhere on other websites). Many of the landscape pictures depict a lived landscape that is inhabited, a locus of heritage and rituals, and invested with meaning.

In isolation and by themselves these pictures could belong to any Himalayan context, however placed in the narrative context on the album akin blog, they become visual evidence and a quite convincing narrative of events, motivations and emotions guiding the activists and 'sympathetic' response of some others to this movement. Readers see the beautiful postcard image of a beautiful Himalayan village, which they are told is threatened by power projects. The greenery, the beauty, and the serenity of these landscapes, are often contrasted with other images that depict the ravages the projects are inflicting on the land. The activists claim that they don't want to lose their home and livelihood in the name of development acquires an urgency and poignancy. They reiterate that they want to cherish and preserve this Himalayan landscape. Their verbal assertion acquires a materiality with these depictions and they are transformed into guardians of the forests, river-waters, and the mountains. These pictures convey a message, which even a thousand words would not effectively be able to communicate.

The 'power of these image resides in their creation of fragments which come to stand as wholes, reifying culture in the endless repetition of images' (Edwards 1997: 61). These pictures are framing a narrative yet what is being framed-out is equally significant. The activists are depicted as eco-warriors engaged in the battle to control the course of development and thwart the greedy plans of the government and private companies to exploit the land and its people. The oppositional movement against the Teesta hydropower projects were supported by an ecologically conscious minority among Lepchas and residents of Sikkim and North Bengal. However, this is not what the blog highlights to the viewer/reader. It takes a moral position and beckons all Sikkimese citizens to protect its fragile Himalayan environment. Only some sections seem to be participating and in small numbers, and what about the majority that live in this area? Their response to the situation is captured not by their presence, but by their invisibility and absence. The majority of population in Sikkim is not as ecologically conscious and perhaps indifferent to the fate of their landscape. They seem to be going about their everyday life and opted to vote for and elect a government which is committed to construct these hydropower projects (Arora 2017). This is certainly not documented by the blog, but is an insight that I have gained during fieldwork and acknowledged by the leaders themselves to me in personal communications.

A certain degree of romanticism is evident in the choice and selection of images that can deceive a reader into imagining Sikkim as an idyllic rural setting where in the name of hydropower development corrupt project developers would enter and ravage the landscape. The Lepcha community itself is divided into those who

support and are pro-project and those who are opposing them. Clashes within the Lepcha community have been reported on this blog and admitted to me during fieldwork and in telephonic conversations.

Blogging does not preclude manipulation of these images – how do we confirm that these are true pictures and of specific landscapes that they claim to be? Only someone who has visited the area, seen and experienced the visual element can confirm that the circulated images are true. The truth of the visual depends on proof of its non-fabrication. Selective images can mislead, narrate a fictitious story, unless corroborated by other accounts and circulated as part of a larger body of evidence. Ethnographic fieldwork will continue to be significant as a way to know the world and generate knowledge about it.

## Conclusion

The digital world has emerged as a space for interaction and networking and an important arena for circulating representations. The Internet has placed the apparatus of cultural production in the hands of all those who know how to participate and use it (Poster 1997: 222). The consumers and former subjects have themselves become producers of cultural representations. Cyberspace now presents itself as a 'democratic' arena and domain where ethnographic subjects are writing about themselves and blurring the distance between the knower and the known. However, like ethnographic writings by anthropologists, cultural representations circulated by subjects about themselves will remain partial narratives and contestable truths.

Words, pictures, sounds, and hyperlinks interconnect in cyberspace to narrate a story on weepingsikkim. It was started to circulate information to a wider audience who could not physically participate in these protests, circulate activists' perspectives that were inadequately being covered in state-directed mass media, and garner public support locally, nationally and internationally. It has functioned as an electronic bulletin board for posting updates, an online chronicle of the activities and different perspectives emerging from the field, and finally subsisting in cyberspace as a multimedia archive about the Save the River Teesta movement. It has also reconfigured Lepcha belonging in the world and framed them as environmental custodians. From its inception this blog became a vital connection and source of information for me about the organization and trajectory of the movement while the uploaded news coverage indicated the manner in which mass media was reporting the event. However, this information aspect was quickly overpowered by its representational aspects and activities.



I have argued in this paper how digital technology is informing and digital ethnography is reworking the nature and the duration of our embodied fieldwork. Fieldwork would have given me a deeper comprehensive picture albeit been more time-consuming and expensive. However, when participant observation over a period of time became difficult and impossible, then computer mediated communication and telephony enabled me to continue with my research and effectively elicit information from a select group. Given the digital divide and persistent inequities in access to telephony and internet among people residing in Sikkim, I am acutely aware of the dangers of (mis)representation and proposing generalizations based on data collected merely through ICT. Various kinds of narratives about the Teesta hydropower projects are being circulated in online media including daily newspapers published in the region and available for intertextual analysis. However, focusing singularly on digital content is problematic and not desirable. My analysis of weepingsikkim.blogspot.com has been influenced and informed by my decade long ethnographic and historical engagement with different communities residing in Sikkim and North Bengal.<sup>20</sup> Several of my papers were posted and circulated via this blog (and by email to these activists), hence I was part of the polyphony of voices documented and chronicled here. I contend that the proliferation of digital networks is going to ensure reflexivity in our writing, since it will become eminently accessible and beget a swift response from different people including those whom we claim to understand and represent.<sup>21</sup> To an extent my ethnographic writing was accepted and validated by the activists online and other ethnographic writings disseminated on the blog. They constitute what Pink (2006: 138) terms to be an 'anthropologically informed social intervention' and aided in public advocacy on the Save the River Teesta movement. I conclude this article by asserting the need to combine fieldwork with visual and digital ethnography in our methodological practices to ensure fuller representativeness.

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This paper is dedicated to the people of Sikkim, their quest for participatory democracy, and the spirit of environmental activism within India.

### Notes

1. The scale of the movement and the competing discourses of Save the River Teesta movement have been detailed elsewhere (Arora 2009b).
2. I have mailed copies and emailed many of my articles regularly to a select group of informants and the

- leadership of the movement. Due to copyright restrictions and conditional access to journal websites, some of my published papers cannot be circulated on the blog. Hence, only their abstracts were posted on this blog.
3. Interviews with Tseten Lepcha, Dawa Lepcha and Ritwick Datta and Rahul Choudhary who are representing them as lawyers in courts at Delhi.
4. Based on telephonic conversations with some people residing in Dzongu in North Sikkim.
5. The demographic profile of users even in the US is skewed heavily towards the educated, the affluent, the urban and the whites (Hurwitz 1999: 656).
6. Video blogs or vlogs are similar to blogs but have audiovisual content instead of textual. Youtube and MySpace are popular examples of vlogs.
7. Developed in 1994, a wiki is a collection of web pages designed to enable anyone who accesses it to contribute or modify content, using a simplified markup language. The collaborative wikipedia is the most widely known wiki (See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki> accessed on 16/8/2008).
8. Their website defines them to be 'an organization of the indigenous Sikkimese citizens to protect the land and the people against the threat of devastation of the biodiversity hotspot (Khangchendzonga biosphere reserve), endangering the demographic profile of the indigenous primitive Lepcha tribes and the right to live in one's own homeland in dignity and security in the name of development harbingered by numerous mega hydropower projects at one go.' See [www.actsikkim.com](http://www.actsikkim.com).
9. Refer to the right column of the blog.
10. Interestingly it is not in the Lepcha language and script. Nepali is the lingua franca in this region. Hence, the activists have used Nepali words in order to reach out to a larger constituency of residents including those Lepchas who do not know their own language.
11. Refer to Arora (2004: 146-149, 2007a: 211) for details about this statue of unity and the ethnic treaty.
12. They requested anonymity.
13. Most of them were Hindus and not Buddhists and North Sikkim largely contains Buddhist sites.
14. Another obituary published in *Down to Earth* was posted on this blog (see Arora 2009c).
15. Refer to Arora (2004: 197-247, 2006a) for details about agitations pertaining to the Rathongchu movement.
16. The contested nature of hydro-development of River Teesta and the activist discourse challenging the rhetoric of participatory development has been extensively discussed in Arora (2009b).
17. One of the most successful politically active journalist blogs is Indymedia ([www.indymedia.com](http://www.indymedia.com)) that played an important role in reporting stories from the Iraq war that mainstream media could not. It is based on the idea of unmediated open online publishing.
18. The father of this blog was unable to continue as webmaster in 2009 due to some professional engagements and a substitute could not be found. This is what was communicated to me by Tseten Lepcha, who is currently the working President of ACT.

19. This is also the Sikkim pictured and presented in promotional material and tourist guidebooks (Arora 2009b)
20. I enjoy a rapport with nearly most categories of people – those who are opposing the project, others who are neutral or are indifferent, and those who support the Teesta hydropower projects. The only stakeholder I have not been able to engage with are the people employed by the project and the private companies that are constructing these projects jointly with the state government of Sikkim.
21. My research has gained much wider attention by being available in online format.

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