

Teesta: A Death Story

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Since the beginning of the new millennium, I have been watching the Teesta River's slow death. It is the story of this river that I want to trace: its origin in Tso Lhamo, the history and the myths surrounding it, the geopolitical ecosystems it has nurtured, the riverine cultures that it has nourished, the literature and films around it, and now, of course, its obituaries that come in the form of oral and visual narratives every day. I shall trace the origin of the river; the various environments—both social and natural—that it has fostered; the politics of governmentality surrounding it; the ravages of that strange beast called “eco-tourism” centered around the Teesta and its effect on forest life and human habitat; the difficulties about water sharing and flooding between India and its neighboring countries (particularly Bangladesh) that have been generated time and again; the literature of Teesta-life in Bangla, Nepali, and Rajbangshi, and the films and music that it has birthed. Tracing its history not only from Hindu and Buddhist myths and folktales but also from travel narratives by Chinese men and nineteenth and early twentieth century maps, surveys, stories, and historical accounts by European travelers, I eventually come to government and nongovernment records of the deteriorating health of the river in post-Independence India.

I shall also deal with hitherto unpublished records of the disastrous flooding of the Teesta in 1968, an event whose impact is still felt in the district of Jalpaiguri in West Bengal. Along with these are records of first-person narratives, particularly in the Bangla language (and occasionally in Rajbangshi), from the early twentieth century through 1968 to the present day, these are rich accounts on how changes in the Teesta and the dam at Jaldhaka, one of the most visible attempts at taming the river, affected the life and ways of people in lower Sikkim and Jalpaiguri, as well as in Bangladesh. There are also records of conversations with the engineers and foot soldiers of the hydel projects, the new local ecosystem generated by them, their anxieties, and their indifference. I shall also be looking at a private archive of records of conversations, documents, and correspondence of the Teesta “martyrs” who went on relay hunger strikes to save the Teesta by trying, unsuccessfully, to stall the building of dams on it. My personal inquiry into the metaphysics of water accompanies this research of the river.