

GOOD EARTH

Changing course

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The Teesta flows on wild and untamed, carrying with it the prayers and dreams of millions of people. But now...it is to be dammed. What will happen to it?

Photo: Manju Menon



The Teesta: A truly magical river.

My introduction to the Teesta was when I was little, travelling from Darjeeling to Kalimpong, where my uncle lived. During the three-hour drive, my parents would suddenly awaken when we reach the banks of the river. My mom would fumble through her bag for coins and ask my sister and me to touch them: “Wish upon it!” she would whisper excitedly.

Having “stored” everyone’s wishes in the coins, we would ask the driver to drive along the side of the bridge. When we were directly over the river, we would all throw in the coins. Some went down while others made the children playing on the bridge happy!

From the beginning, the Teesta was alive, magical... answering prayers, fulfilling wishes. Later in life, I left home and my friends for the first time to visit the villages of Sangsay, a remote village in Kalimpong. It was raining and the whole world seemed to be filled in gloom. To top it all, I got carsick. By the time we reached Teesta bazaar, there was a lump in my throat and my eyes felt embarrassingly moist. Then I saw the mighty river, gurgling past the valley and I made a wish. Wishes are never disclosed, we are told. I know mine has come true. Right then, I was not sure if it would. Having just been given the chance to wish for anything filled me with joy.

Mighty river

Today, when I pass the river, I am awed by it. Bringing with it the water, soil and rocks from the great mountains, with so many life forms thriving in it, sustaining so many lives, it is alive and magical in more ways than one. By the side of the hill, which the river caresses, a small gorge has been dug. They say this hill will be blasted to make way for a tunnel. The entire river will be made to change its course so a dam can be built.

I wonder if the people who envision this dam are extremely intelligent, for they seem to know what people who have lived with the Teesta do not. Or could they be extremely foolish. The river is mighty and will not be tamed. History has it that the Teesta was actually a tributary to the Ganga but it changed its course in the 1800s to join the Brahmaputra. It has the largest silt carrying capacity of all rivers in Asia. But no one seems to understand this, especially those who build the dam.

We watch as they keep blasting, ruining our hills with concrete and muck. I have another wish this time. I pray that the magic works.

What Can I Do?

Ask: Where does my food come from? Where does the water I drink, that I bathe in come from? Where does electricity come from? Trace all of it back to its first source. You will realise that the source is intricately linked to millions of lives — of children, men and women... their cultures. With realisation, comes wonder.

In collaboration with Kalpavriksh Environmental Action Group