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The Boleros stop in front of a long bamboo and cable bridge. We head towards the village of Tingvong, where we park for the night at a Lepcha homestay.

"The car stops here. You have to cross the Teesta to get to your destination," we are told. Some of us feel a rush of thrill at the prospect of having to do a tightrope walk on a bamboo bridge; others get cold feet. Ahead of us lay the cloud-shrouded peak of Mount Pandim, and below our feet, foaming water. It has begun to drizzle, bringing with it gentle winds that rock the bridge carrying unstable novice humans, almost as if to send a message—damn it however much you want, but here in the mountains, the Teesta is god.

Once we cross the bridge though, we enter into a land straight out of mythical folk tales. A small jeep waits to take us to our village. Everything is bigger, greener, and we are at our smallest. Ferns grow to the size of palm trees, the roads are lined with fat clusters of periwinkle blue hydrangeas and the largest orchids I have ever seen. Our jeep has to pass through several waterfalls and mountain springs—at some points, we cling onto our lives and gear over them, and at others, we drive under them, getting

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showered with fast-falling water in the process. Next to a stream is a modest temple with a prayer wheel; each time the waters hit the wheel a prayer is sent to the gods. This is the land hidden on the other side of Teesta.

Our night ends with warm *chee* drunk through a bamboo straw, accompanied by a meal of rice bamboo shoots and fern stir-fry, shared with the Lepcha family hosting us.

WHERE THE TEESTA BEGAN

The journey ahead to the source of the Teesta takes another two days.

We drive away from the forests of Dzongu towards Lachung, a small tourist outpost where we stop for the night. There is no electricity in the entire village—this, in a state that boasts the production of more electricity than it needs. Our gentle Sikkimese hosts try their best to accommodate us in the light of the single lightbulb being powered by the IPS. The town is pitch black, and the only noise comes from the Lachung river angrily gushing by. Here, the Teesta exists as its glacial upstream predecessor.

An hour before dawn, we get dressed in complete darkness, fumbling with our clothes and bumping against furniture, before hitting the road. The first rays of the sun strike the snowy peaks of Mount Katao turning the whole sky brilliant white—our eyes, having been in darkness for hours, take a moment to adjust. As our jeep climbs the mountainous road towards the foot of Mount Pahunri, the landscape changes fast. At one moment we are crossing jewel-green temperate forests, and then suddenly, the ground gives way to craggy red rocks, alpine fir trees and rhododendron bushes. A thick blanket of fog envelopes everything—the car, the road, us. I see a red panda crossing the road but my husband scoffs it off as a common Himalayan weasel.

Just as suddenly, the trees disappear. We are surrounded on all sides by snow-covered peaks and the only vegetation are small shrubs growing between lichen-covered rocks. With the absence of forest cover, the sun beams on unhindered. At this point, the road stops, and cars can go no further—it is locally known as Zero Point. To our right lies Mount Pahunri, and before us lies the Teesta in its purest, most nascent stage, flowing as a happy gurgling stream coming from the mountain crevices. This is where the story of this politically wrought river begins. At this point, the river has no idea that it will face multiple dams, be the subject of more than three decades of diplomatic wars, lose its ecology and its people, that it will be let down by states and governments. Here it is barely ankle-deep, barely rising enough to cover its stony riverbed. What it does not know is that by the time it reaches Bangladesh, it will be ankle-deep again in places, because it will not be allowed to flow. Watching the bubbly little stream set against snowy mountains, one truly fathoms the extent of human destruction.

*The name has been changed to preserve his privacy.

**As stated in the essay "Sikkim's Hydel Journey" published in *The Birds Have Lost Their Way* (2018) by Lokta Books in Sikkim.



Here the Teesta is a narrow mountain stream at Zero Point beside Mt Pahunri