

Memorable Fast

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Ever a man has staked his life to save his country from the disasters of a perverse development project, it has been Sunderlal Bahuguna in the last two months. Starting his *upवास* in jail after being arrested from the site of the upcoming Tehri Dam in Garhwal on February 28, Sunderlalji continued to refuse food until, a full 45 days later, on April 12, an assurance from the Prime Minister persuaded him to "stay" leaving open the possibility of resuming his fast. For the members and supporters of the anti-Tehri Dam movement, as well for the tens of thousands of people whose lives have been touched by the Chipko movement, this action came not too soon. For, whatever the indomitable spirit that carried him on for much longer than most of us would have survived, there is a limit to what a frail and aging body can take, and surely 45 days must have been perilously close to that limit.

Intended to harness the hydro-electricity potential of two Himalayan rivers, Bhagirathi and Ravi, angana, the safety aspect, displacement, and environmental effects of the Tehri Dam remain areas of serious concern. The Public Investment Board has not yet cleared it, and the Ministry of Environment has recently admitted that the conditions it imposed while giving conditional clearance have not been fulfilled. The recent earthquake in Uttarkashi has put a further question mark on the dam, as publicly stated by the Prime Minister himself while touring the quake-hit area.

Yet no review has been launched, nor construction work stopped. It is in this context that local people continued to oppose the dam. Since October 28, 1991, a dharna commenced at the entrance of the dam site with supporters taking turns to sit in protest. After a massive rally on December 14 of more than 5000 people, demonstrators squatted on the machines. From December 14, 1991 to February 28, 1992, the Tehri Pandh Virodh Sangharsh Samiti members were able to stop all work on the dam, a

historic achievement in itself. Their justification was that construction work on the dam was in any case illegal, since it had not yet received Public Investment Board (PIB) clearance.

Then suddenly, at 1.30 AM on February 28, Sunderlal Bahuguna and 40 other satyagrahis were arrested. Their camp was broken up, and Section 144 imposed on the area. The arrested activists were taken to various jails. Sunderlalji, his wife, and another activist went on immediate fast, and were shifted, first to Roorkee, then to Meerut. A writ was filed by the INTACH and PUCI, against their arrest, and on March 8, they were released unconditionally. Back in Tehri, Vim'aji and Bishaji broke their fast. Sunderlalji continued his saying that he had received no concrete response on part of the government. Extra when, in an unprecedented move on March 18, Members of Parliament unanimously appealed to Sunderlalji to give up his fast, he expressed his inability to do so until the government gave some definite response to the call for a review, and stopped the illegal work which had since been resumed at the dam site.

Protests continued in Tehri, surrounding areas, and Delhi. On March 10, a rally of over 1500 people, mostly from the submergence zone, was held. The demonstrators broke through the police barricades, deliberately violating Section 144 imposed on the area, and sat for a symbolic half-hour on the machines at the site. Tension in the area kept building up as the fast continued, and was relaxed only when it was suspended after the Prime Minister ordered a halt to blasting in the area, and assured the MPs, George Fernandes and Rajmohan Gandhi, of a review.

MEANWHILE, many people have questioned the validity of using the fast as a tactic. The question is particularly relevant in the case of Sunderlal Bahuguna who has gone on fast more than once. But leaving aside the justification for previous occasions, this time Sunderlalji seems to have been left with little other option. All legitimate forms of dissent and consciousness raising have been tried

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out by the Tehri movement members, to no avail. And for a person who has seen his beloved mountains being auctioned off at the whims of a callous and insensitive state for well over half a century, what other form of action is left? In any case, as Sunderlalji repeatedly stated, his was an *upवास* (prayerful fast), as opposed to a *bhikh hartal* (protest fast), and he was only "giving himself into the hands of God" as his last option. That is why he was openly taking lime water and honey (but no solids), and that is why he repeatedly told anxious supporters to consider the issue and not the person.

Now that the fast has been put on hold, the heaviness in the hearts of all of us who have been worried sick for the last month, would be lifted. But only partially, for the real issue of the destructive dam, and of the wider questions regarding developmental paths and social justice, still looms large.

While giving up his fast for the present, Sunderlalji said: I do hope that while the investigation proceeds all work on the project is halted and the people's movement to save the Ganga and the Himalayas intensified."

Thereafter, he explained:

"At the time, being I suspended my 45 days' prayerful fast which was my life's spiritual action to reach the hearts of all concerned, specially in a moment when it is long since has come the end of the day. This was my humble effort to remind the nation that non-violence as practised by the Father of the Nation holds only way to solve the problems facing humankind.

Three immediate actions that readers are urged to consider, apart from going to Tehri and involving themselves in support actions elsewhere, are:

1. Urging the Prime Minister to involve independent scientists, economists, and environmentalists in the task of reviewing the project, and to make the entire process of review public. There is otherwise a real danger that quiet erecting being done in the name of a review, and before we know it, the government could come out with a statement that the project is the best thing that happened in the country. It is perhaps because of this that Sunderlalji has only "stayed" his fast, leaving open the possibility of resuming it as the government or does not stick to the word. In this context, a demand must also be made that while the review is on, a judicial and citizens' team should be set up to ensure that no work on the dam carries on illegally.
2. For those of us in Delhi and other big cities, who are sucking the resources of the country to cater to our ever-growing demands of electricity and water, to ask ourselves whether it is justified to cause such ecological and social disruption. Water and power shortages in cities are more a result of inefficiency and wasteful use, and of unequal distribution, rather than of absolute demand increase. We should issue statements that we are not prepared to back some

other region only because of our own selfishness, and that, specifically, justifying Tehri Dam in the name of meeting Delhi's needs is wrong and callous.

Why the Dam is being Opposed

Prime Minister Narasimha Rao has apparently started a review of the Tehri Dam, though the contours of this review are not yet known. Such a re-examination is long overdue. Twentythree villages and the historic Tehri town will be submerged, thereby displacing 90,000 people. Ongoing rehabilitation measures are half-hearted and callous, and there is little sign of change. There is also the important question of whether it is justified to cause so much ecological and social disruption in the fragile Himalayas, to cater mainly to the power and water demands of large farmers and urban populations in the plains. But the strongest argument against the project has been that it falls in a highly earthquake-prone area, which could experience quakes with an intensity of 8+ on the Richter scale. The dam is designed to withstand an earthquake of maximum 7.2 intensity. If a quake causes the dam to burst, the resultant floods would devastate towns like Haridwar and Rishikesh. Even an emergency release of water during peak floods, or due to landslides from the fragile hillsides around the reservoir, could inundate these towns and hundreds of villages downstream. Records long suppressed by the government show that on more than one occasion, emergency releases from the Bhakra Dam, for instance, have caused mass inundation in Punjab.

In addition, though all cost-benefit analysis is based on an estimated 100 year life-span of the dam, there is apprehension that the Tehri project will not survive for more than half that period because of a high rate of siltation. This further raises doubts about the economic viability of the dam which has already seen a greater than 20-fold increase in cost since it was originally proposed. The recent news, in fact, is that the dam is to cost Rs 1000 crores more due to the rupee devaluation, bringing the total cost to a whopping Rs 4000 crores. With the Russians likely to back out from their earlier commitment to finance the dam, there is no idea where this amount is going to come from.

Despite several clear warnings against carrying on work, including a unanimous rejection by a committee of the Union Ministry of Environment which also suggested various alternatives, the Tehri Hydropower Development Corporation (THDC) has carried on the work. The foundation of

(Continued on page 40)