

# Demanding an Honest, Open Review

## Movement Against the Tehri Dam

by  
**Madhu Kishwar**

Sunderlal Bahuguna and his wife Vimla Bahuguna are the moving spirits behind the famous and much admired Chipko movement. It is widely hailed as one of the key inspirational symbols of the worldwide environmental movement. At international conferences and seminars held by the Indian government and by non-governmental organisations the Chipko movement is mentioned as a model for involving women and indigenous people as activists in protection of the environment. However, in the land of its birth it has met with both repression and callous neglect.

Sunderlalji recently undertook an indefinite fast that continued for 45 days and nearly killed him. He was merely asking that the government complete an open and thorough review of the likelihood of the Tehri dam collapsing in the event of an earthquake and unleashing flood waters on the millions of people downriver. The campaign gathered added momentum after an earthquake caused heavy damage to life, livelihoods and homes in the Tehri region.

The main arguments of Sunderlalji, along with others who oppose the Tehri dam, include the following:

- It will flood out hundreds of villages permanently and submerge them without providing decently for the lakhs of displaced inhabitants.

- The area where the dam is being built is in a highly earthquake prone zone. This risk makes the Tehri dam unsafe in its present design and form.

- A series of much smaller dams that would be less destructive to the fragile environment of the area would be more useful than this one gigantic dam that is not suitable for this part of the Himalayas. Comparative analyses have not been thoroughly done to identify the costs and benefits of the two approaches.

- At the current rate that silt is being formed in this area, the dam would be uneconomic within 30 years, too short a time period to justify the massive expenditure required to build it.

- The administration of a project as vast as the Tehri dam by this hopelessly corrupt government just about ensures that most of the money will be wasted and that the materials and methods used in the construction will not be up to the quality standards as given in the design documents. This is not being taken into account in the government's arguments for constructing the dam.

- Many of the consultants the government has asked to advise them on whether or not to build the dam, as well as the government's own experts and committees, have come to the conclusion that the dam should not be built. However, powerful political figures, together with the contractors who stand to make hundreds of crores, continue to push for it.

- People are not even going to benefit to the extent of getting piped drinking water in the remaining villages of the area should the dam be constructed.

- Ganga is the most sacred of the rivers in India. The Himalayas are worshipped as the abode of gods and great sages, apart from giving birth to the great and holy rivers of India. The brutal tampering with the Ganga and the callous blasting of the Himalayas amounts to committing genocide against a whole culture and an ancient rich heritage.

One of the government's arguments in favour of the Tehri dam is that it will provide additional water and power to the fast growing metropolis of Delhi and the areas around Delhi. They also plan to build 140 industrial townships of the Modinagar variety in the fertile belt of western UP. But why should the hill people be asked to bear the cost of this "development" without recompense? The Tehri dam will submerge nearly 7,000 sq kms of prime land; 16,000 hectares out of this is forest land. About one lakh people are going to be uprooted from their homes and villages. Some may get pitiful amounts as cash compensation, some will be given barren, uncultivable land far away from their homeland. Those who for generations eked out a living by gathering forest produce or grazing animals are not considered entitled to any compensation, simply because they did not "possess" any land.

In 1972 the estimated cost of the dam was Rs 197 crores. By 1989 it had risen to nearly Rs 3,008 crores. At current prices it is estimated that it would cost more than Rs 5,500 crores. The authorities had earlier claimed that the life of the dam would be a 100 years. Now they give it a much reduced life span of 60 years because massive deforestation in the

*(Contd. on p.4)*

# Sunderlal Bahuguna's Crusade

Interviewed by Madhu Kisliwar

*What steps had you taken to raise the awareness regarding the dam before going on this fast?*

When the work on the dam started in 1978, many men and women went to stop the work and were arrested and sent to jail. The whole area was converted into a police cantonment so that the people could not do anything. The government said that they would hold talks, but nothing came out of them. After this we sent a petition to the Lok Sabha with 10,000 signatures. A committee was appointed by the Lok Sabha which went there for fact finding but the Lok Sabha was dissolved before anything could happen. Then, in 1980 Mrs Gandhi came to power. She had visited this area earlier when she was out of power. She appointed a committee under the chairmanship of S.K. Roy, Department of Science & Technology, to investigate the dam, but environment was not covered in the enquiry. We were told that, based on the report of the committee, a decision on the matter would be taken. Mrs Gandhi personally recorded on the file that even though the project had been prepared after a lot of thought and deliberation, she did not think that the



**Sunderlalji**

*Photo : Madhu*

project would be of any benefit to the local population.

Indira Gandhi had written that the matter should be re-examined, this dam should be given up and smaller projects should be designated. But the people in favor of the dam were very clever — they said that the small projects would all be loss making, and the Committee continued its work. When the Committee came we asked them to stop work on the project as

lots of money was being spent on it even while a decision was pending. They submitted an interim report which was not implemented. The Committee took five or six years to reach a decision. When we got tired of waiting for the report, we filed a writ petition in the Supreme Court in 1985 for "right of life".

Then the report of the Committee came out in 1986. It said that the dam should not be built because it would not be safe, it was too risky. The government did not accept the report. The Department of Environment made the same recommendation. At that time the government did not have the money to build the dam, though some money had already been spent. In the meantime, Gorbachev came to India in October, 1986 and discussed the objections of the Committee with Indian government leaders and said that everything was okay. As

the money was coming from the Soviet Union, the work restarted with renewed vigour in October 1986. It was converted into a central plan as the UP government did not have the money. A corporation was formed in which the central government had a 75 percent share and the UP government a 25 percent share. While the case was going on in the Supreme Court, the government constituted a second committee. When I started a

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