

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

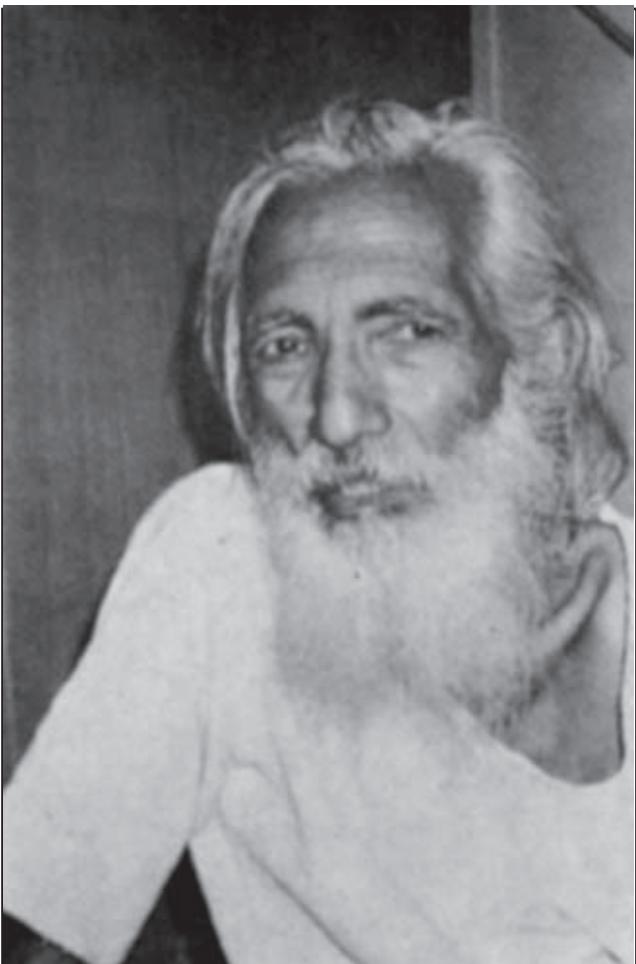
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Sunderlal Bahuguna's Crusade

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 convened 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 project would be of any



Sunderlalji

Photo : Madhu

benefit to the local population.

Indira Gandhi had written that the matter should be reexamined, this dam should be given up and smaller projects should be designed. But the people in favour 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 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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Garhwal mountains accentuated by this big dam will loosen the mountain soil. The flow of this eroded soil into the river is bound to increase the siltation level in the dam, thereby reducing the life of the dam to a presently estimated 30 years.

The irrigation potential of the Tehri dam project is no more than 2.7 lakh hectares of land. The installed capacity of power is planned to be 1,000 MW in Stage I, 1,000 MW in Stage II, and 400 MW in Stage III. However, we know from previous government projects that no power plants of this size built under central government control ever come remotely near fulfilling their design estimates of power output. According to Dr J.K. Bajaj of Patriotic People's Science and Technology Group (PPST), "It is... agreed that under the best of circumstances the power generation potential from this project shall remain below 350 MW and that the additional area irrigated shall not exceed 2.7 lakh hectares. It also fairly well known that this amount of power and irrigation potential can today be generated through much less invasive technologies at much lower capital cost. Establishing 350 MW of power generation capacity incidentally requires the putting up of a thermal power station of middling capacity with just 3 of the smaller thermal generation units that we produce almost entirely indigenously today, and 2.7 lakh hectares of additional irrigation can be easily achieved through a variety of medium and minor scale irrigation projects... if we were thinking about the Tehri dam project for the first time today, we shall in all probability find it to be a worthless exercise. Nobody takes such risks for so small gains. The project was conceived in the 1940s when even around 350 MW of power generation potential seemed large to us. And, we are continuing with it because during the many decades of talking about this project so many vested interests have gathered around it that we no more have the courage to call it off." Dr Bajaj advocates a thorough review: "There are perhaps many projects in India that were conceived decades ago, when our economic and technical capabilities were of an entirely different order, and are being blindly pursued today... we should probably think of, as a matter of national policy, suspending work on all such projects and reevaluating their utility and feasibility in the present day circumstances and situation of India."

Many of the government's own experts have time and again recommended scrapping this project. For example, the Bhumble Committee Report released in February 1990 ends with the following categorical statement: "... Taking into consideration the geological and seismic setting, the risk, hazards, ecological and social impacts accompanying the project, the cost and benefits expected, and after a careful examination of the information and data available, the Committee has come to the unanimous conclusion that the Tehri dam project, as proposed, should not be taken up, as it does not merit environmental clearance!" Yet the government not only is continuing with its folly but is also insisting on keeping this critical document a "secret."

Unfortunately, even after this region experienced a major earthquake on October 20, 1991, killing more than 2,000 people and causing vast devastation, the government has refused to do a serious revaluation. The local people insisted that the foundation of the Tehri dam had developed cracks. The characteristic response of the dam authorities was to completely seal the dam site to the public. Instead of an open investigation, the authorities merely came out with assertion after assertion that their stand had been vindicated, as there had been "no damage to the dam"— an absurd claim since the dam is yet to be built — and that the proposed structure could withstand earthquakes of much greater magnitude.

Government ministers claim the dam will be earthquake proof, citing a few selected responses from some of the many groups that have looked into the question, and ignoring the contrary opinions of the many experts that have warned against constructing it. In addition, they have yet to provide satisfactory answers to many of the other questions, some of which are outlined above, that have been raised about the wisdom of building this dam, or any other of its type, in the same area. We know from experience that much of what passes for government expenditure on development is incredibly wasteful, disregards the interests of the poor and the vulnerable, and is often ecologically disastrous. A vast number of contractors, politicians, and bureaucrats have become unimaginably wealthy as a consequence of our development plans of the past few decades. If there's been any change in the past few years, it's

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An Earthquake victim sitting beside the rubble of her house.

fast on Christmas day, December 25, 1989, it was a call attention motion to tell people that this fraud was taking place but no one is even aware of it. After 11 days of my fast the work was stopped. The government then called me for talks. It was then decided to abide by whatever decision was given by the Scientific Committee. It was also decided that the project should be audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) because the CAG had objected to it earlier. After that a final decision would be taken with the Planning Commission.

The committee of 14 scientists gave a unanimous report that there should be no dam. It is called the Bhumbla Committee after the chair-man, a scientist who was Vice Chancellor of Hissar Agricultural University. Even this report was suppressed. Only one point regarding the earthquakes was considered by the government, and even this objection was overruled by their engineers. At this point we said that the same people who are interested in building this dam should not be giving decisions about the dam, and we demanded an independent probe into the matter. There were many prominent scientists from the USA, USSR and from within the country who said that the dam was too dangerous and should not be built. Most prominent amongst them was Vinod Gaur, Secretary of Ocean Development, who is acknowledged to be amongst the world's best scientists on earthquakes. Another one was a Russian—Borak, Chairman of the International Organisation of Scientists, as well as James Broon from Nevada University, whose formula had been used in the calculations.

All of them were unanimous that this dam should not be built because there was danger to it from earthquakes. In response, the people wanting to build the dam originally

said that there is no risk of any earthquake. After the earthquake occurred they said that it had not caused any damage to the dam. But how could it have damaged the dam since the dam had not yet been built! After the earthquake we said that the project should be reviewed afresh because it has been proved that earthquakes can happen in this area and there have been fresh developments like cracks developing in the catchment area and cracks in the mountains. When rain seeps into these cracks there will be landslides — there have been many such incidents in the past. The catchment area of the Ganga is a very delicate area. In 1978 a big mountain in the catchment area of the Ganga crumbled and blocked the Ganga. There is a very long history of such incidents. There have been many blockages in the past; the river has changed its course many times.

And of course, the rate of siltation would also increase. We had hoped that after such a big earthquake the government would think afresh about building the dam there, but about eight days after the earthquake the Energy Minister made a statement that there was no danger to the dam from

the earthquake as the design of the dam was earthquake proof. After he made this statement, we felt that these people are absolutely callous and they were hell bent upon building the dam no matter what the consequences. Therefore, we decided to start a *dharna* at the entrance of the dam site on October 29. Our first demand was that before proceeding any further they first provide relief to the quake victims, but no one listened to us. Among other reasons we oppose this dam is because its building involves dispossessing about one lakh people of their homes. Moreover, as the site of the dam is just behind the town, and very close to it, there is a lot of blasting at the dam site that has resulted in both physical and mental damage. These explosions must be stopped while people are still living there. Due to the explosions all the houses in the town have been shaken to their foundations, and have developed cracks. When these explosions occur, children cry and run out of their homes and people are forced to leave their homes fearing that they will collapse.

We asked them to stop these explosions while these people are still living there. Even if it were necessary

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After the Earthquake

Photo: Anwal Jamal



Photo: Ashish Kothari

A Protest March near the Dam. The mountains here bear witness to effects of deforestation

been in the direction of uncontrollable increases in corruption on such massive projects as the Tehri dam.

The questions to be considered are consequently even more significant than whether the Tehri dam should or should not be constructed. We need to ensure that:

- powerful politicians and bureaucrats do not have the right to evolve development schemes without taking into account the interests of the people who inhabit the areas where the projects are located. We need to insist that the government follow responsive, open and democratic procedures, that they get uncoerced, informed consent from the local people before proceeding with such projects;
- as a matter of course an open public hearing for each and every proposed project be held with all necessary information easily available to all those concerned about the issues raised. Should anyone in the government or employed by the government refuse to provide the necessary information, or provide fraudulent information, that person should be exposed publicly and held accountable;
- for each project approved after such a public process, all the local people who are harmed receive sufficient assistance of all types, including monetary compensation, so that it is absolutely unmistakable that they have not suffered as a result of 'national development';
- an adequate system of monitoring the quality of the project and the extent to which the design plans are being adhered to has been developed for all large scale operations, but especially for those, like the Tehri dam, that are constructed on such a gigantic scale.

The government has usually ignored the aggrieved unless faced with violent opposition that it cannot root out with its security apparatus. Too many movements with specific grievances that are negotiable have turned from peaceful political challenges to armed warfare because they found the government unwilling to forego its control of the political process by a multitude of corrupt methods. The government only pays attention when the Bhindranwales take over the leadership of political movements from the Longowals. The few people like Bahuguna who will persist in the path of ahimsa and satyagraha despite callous neglect or even repression at the hands of the government find it increasingly difficult to be heard in all the din from the AK - 47s and the bombs.

All those of us who believe that government should be accountable to the people of this country ought to demand that all work on the Tehri dam be stopped immediately until an open tribunal brings out all the relevant facts and an honest public review is conducted. If it is established that certain vested interests knowingly and deliberately pushed ahead on what is found to be a disastrous scheme, punitive damages should be levied on them.

for them to build the dam there, no government has the right to torture its citizens; these explosions are a form of torture.

There should be no construction of any big structure, such as this dam, in the Himalayan region as this is an area prone to earthquakes. As for their contention that nothing will happen to their dam as it is going to be very strong and safe, we ask them: how will our homes be protected? And even if they manage to build an earthquake proof dam, what about the mountains? These are not earthquake proof. What will happen when these mountains crumble and fall into the dam — have they thought of the incredible destruction that will cause? And such incidents have happened — in 1963 in Italy the Beon dam was destroyed in this manner and 2,000 people lost their lives. It is just the same as throwing a stone in a vessel full of water — the water is sure to overflow. The dam will be like a sword of death hanging over the heads of a crore of people who live below it. In case of a mishap, Rishikesh will be destroyed in 57 minutes and will be under 200 feet of water. The water will be moving at a speed of 100 kms per hour. At this rate Haridwar will be finished in the next 20 minutes. Meerut in six hours will be under 30 feet of water. Similarly, Bulandshahr and Delhi will also be affected. Scientists have estimated that public property worth Rs20,000crores will be destroyed.

The budget for the dam is now estimated at Rs 5,058 crores. Out of this Rs 680 crores has been spent so far. The construction of the dam has not yet started. Till now only the base of the dam has been cleared and they are scraping to raise the walls. This is why we had to take this extreme step. We have been saying repeatedly: do not waste the money of the country.

The Russians who at one time had promised to finance the dam, do not

have the money any longer. They have put in a rider — they will help us but the rate of interest will be 12.5 percent not 2.5 percent — five times more. Further, the instalments will not be over a period of 70 years but of 20 years. Third, we will have to buy their machines for the money that they give us. Fourth, earlier the money was to be returned in rupee terms, but now it has to be returned in dollar terms.

Now the government is trying to get loans from various other sources.

Who is really behind this?

Contractors, politicians and engineers. For example, it is said that the chairman of the corporation formed for the dam is a relative of Kalpnath Rai, the Energy Minister.

What has been the attitude of the Environment Minister?

I cannot speak about him. What he is and what he is not, I have not been able to understand because he does not stand by what he says. In Parliament he said that the government will withdraw the scheme. But yesterday, when I met him, he said that the Prime Minister has taken the matter in his own hands and therefore he cannot do anything about it.

Apart from the Energy Minister there are his contractors—especially one particular contractor—Jaiprakash Industries — his fortune has changed as a result of his contract for work on the dam. Earlier he was a hired overseer in this area and now, within 20 years, he has become the owner of a Rs 1,300 crore company. These are the elements that are involved. You are well aware what money power is capable of doing.

Since 1977 you have been making efforts to have this dam stopped. You have tried many methods of satyagraha. But your voice has not been heard so far. You have had to resort to this extreme step with still no assurance that the dam will be scrapped. Do you feel that in today's world your philosophy, that of Gandhian satyagraha, is effective or relevant?

What other philosophy is there, I would like to know? I have an absolutely open mind. The fact of the matter is that today there are three methods available for solving problems.

The first one is the method of the establishment — through the



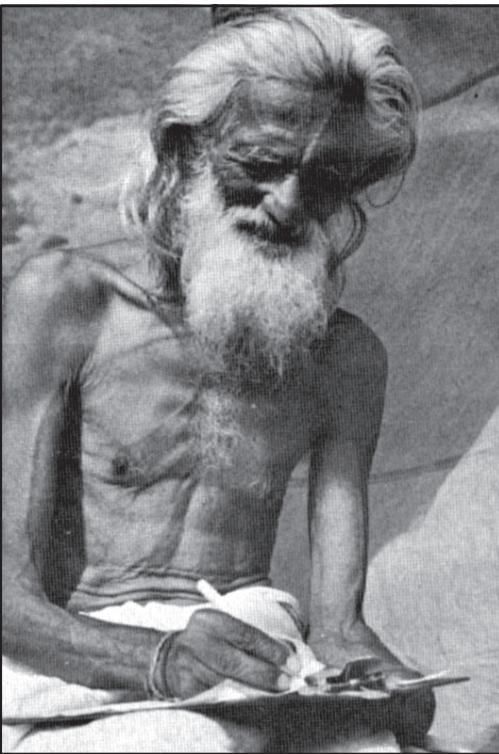
Photo: Sarvesh

Little children who died in the earthquake

machinery of law and order, the legislature and the judiciary. How can we solve our problems this way when the government machinery is breaking down, when the system has failed the world over? This is true not only of democracies but also of socialist societies and dictatorships: all of them are breaking down because they have not been able to solve their society's problems.

The second method is that of terrorism. This kind of extremism has also failed because the state has collective might and individual terrorism cannot match the collective terrorism of the state.

Only one other method remains. This method does no harm — at least it stops the degradation of human moral values. The other two methods not only claim human lives, they claim human values too — they are lethal for both. As for the third method, the one that I have adopted, I agree that it has failed thus far, but at least it does not harm anyone. At the most it will harm one person only — and it will harm only his body, not him, because a fast is different from a hunger strike. A person on hunger strike (*bhookh hartal*) is angry, he is unhappy at someone. For example, Kaikayi went on a hunger strike and sulked angrily in her *kopgriha*. Hunger strike is undertaken by politicians. It is a *tamsik* way of protest. The *rajsik* way of protest is *unshun* (giving up food). But *upvas* (fasting) is a *satvik* course of action. It is undertaken by a devotee of God. *Upvas* involves leaving the *vas* in this world and going under god's protection. When a devotee feels that his worldly efforts have failed, he says: "God, I am now under your care." He has faith as he has heard the stories of God and his devotees,



Sunderlalji during his fast

like the one about Gajendra Moksha, of the elephant and the crocodile....

Please tell the story, I do not know it.

A very powerful crocodile once lived in a river. One day an elephant went to that river to drink water. He was very proud of his strength. The elephant's foot was caught in the mouth of the crocodile. A great fight started between the elephant and the crocodile. The crocodile was pulling the elephant into the water and the elephant was pulling the crocodile away from the water. A lot of commotion took place, a lot of water was splashed, and the earth began to shake. In the end the pride of the elephant was shattered and he called out "Krishna, Krishna." Then Krishna came and freed him. The elephant's prayers are known as Gajendra Moksha.

In one of the *bhajans* of Surdas it says that, for those who are blessed by God, even the impossible becomes possible. (*Charan Kamal bandon*

harirai, jaki kripa pangu giri langhe, andhe ko sub kuchh darsai. Behro suni mook puni bole, runk chale sir chhattr dharai) Now Surdas was blind, and blind people have very sharp ears. He must have heard that in such and such village a lame person had crossed the mountains, a deaf person started hearing, a pauper became a king, et cetera. This way the experience of people has shown that through the devotion of God even the impossible becomes possible. It has been my own experience that when the will of the people is combined with the blessings of God, then all problems can be solved.

I can see the devotion to God, but do you feel that the will of the people is with you?

The situation today is that people are asleep. No one believes anyone. We have become intellectuals, and what is this intelligence? This commercialised intellect raises arguments — like the controversy going on in the papers — when I ask them why they don't print the truth about the matter, they say that they have to print both sides of the story. If one side is lying, it means that they are propagating lies when they present both sides. I have the belief that humans can be changed, and the power to change humans is in their hearts. Therefore, the appeal of the fast is not to the minds of people but to their hearts.

Your fast lasted 45 days. We were all concerned for your health and life. How did you endure the fasting?

It was the most pleasant time for me. My undivided attention was towards God, and I had full faith in him.

I had surrendered myself to the supreme power and when you totally surrender yourself to anyone, then where is the worry, as you are His

responsibility?

And He saved you?

There must be some work of His that this body has still left to do. He told me to stay alive, but even if He had taken this body, then a lot that could not be done while this body is living might perhaps be achieved after this body is no more. There are many examples in history showing that what some people could not achieve in their lives, they achieved through their deaths just as my guru of public life Shridev Suman did.

I was 13 years old when I came in contact with him. He was a disciple of Gandhiji, a *satyagrahi*. He fought against the tyranny of our princely ruler who denied all civil liberties. When Sumandevji raised his voice against the tyranny, he was arrested for rebellion, jailed and persecuted. He said that he was fighting for civil liberties and started a fast in jail. He was placed in solitary confinement. When he refused food, he was whipped. Sacks weighing 25 seers were tied to his feet. In those circumstances he survived for 84 days. He died on the 84th day. His body was stuffed in a sack and thrown in the river. There was a lot of terror in the princely state at that time, but after Sumanji's death the awakening came.

He died on July 25, 1944. The dead Suman became far more influential than he ever was in his lifetime. That is why during the *upvas*, I was very happy within myself. There was no question of hunger. Rather now, even when my stomach is upset, I still insist on eating. Then I was in a state of bliss. I would pray to God: "O God, remove this danger to Gangamaiya and create restlessness in the hearts of those people who have to take decisions."

Do you think that this has happened?

At least they have now recognised that the explosions must stop, that the people there should not have to live in a state of terror. They

had closed their minds to reviewing whether this dam was indeed needed. Reviewing the question of building the dam had been closed. Now, at least, they are starting to understand that it should be reviewed.

A social worker has to learn from the sun. Even if all the doors and windows are closed and there is a small hole, the sun peeps in through there. I have found a hole to peep from and I will keep peeping. The result is in His hands. My job is *shakti arjit karke shakti banane ka kaam* (gather more people and try and energise them).

There must be a lot demoralisation; many people in Tehri must feel that if after so many years of struggle their voice has not been heard, it won't be heard even now.

If they were demoralised, why would people continue with their struggle?

Do you feel your movement is strong?

A lot of money is being spent to weaken our movement. This money is working. Yet the common people, poorest of the poor, who have no voice, especially women, are with me

— women are with me because in Tehri the struggle for life is being fought by women. That is why in my fight for prohibition and in the Chipko movement women were in the forefront. For men, money is the most important thing, but for a woman it is her earth, her culture; she loves her environment.

The Chipko movement has become an international mythology but it seems to me that more trees have been cut than saved in the land of Chipko. What is the situation according to you?

Those who have made it an international mythology are wicked people who have opened environmental shops in Delhi, they have to run their shops and have to hold conferences. Leave them aside. As to the question of whether trees have been saved or not: the ban imposed on commercial cutting of green trees has been in force for 10 years. Earlier, lakhs of trees were being cut for commercial use. The jungles have been saved, go and see where the effect has been felt.

So you believe that it had an effect?



Photo: Sanjeev Sait

A view of river Bhagirathi meeting Bhilangana. The excessive silt being carried by these rivers is likely to choke up the dam reservoir

One important thing that has happened is that there has been a basic change in the way people think. Ten years ago people used to say cut trees for development. Today everyone is saying plant trees for development. This is the basic change in the thought process. Another important thing is that the people are directly challenging the commercial tree planting policies of the government. If the Chipko movement hasn't spread to Bihar, why do the Jharkhand people say sal tree stands for Jharkhand and for love? Some have called Chipko a preservation movement, some call it a peasant's movement, and so on. They try to fit it into their political ideology. Many books have been written on the movement, but very few have been able to understand the spirit of the movement.

Did all those who wrote their thesis on the movement or held conferences in it come forward to support you?

A few did. But many more came to break the movement. Had it not been for such people, the movement would have been stronger. Another thing that they have done is to pump money into it—government money, institutional money. They have made it into a department of government. What started as a voluntary action for change has become a Non Government Organisation (NGO).

Earlier the social worker used to be one of the people, and was sustained by the handfuls of rice they collected for him. The people now evaluate a social worker differently. They look at how much money he has brought, what new "development" schemes has he brought.

In your view, did the advent of money bring with it fights and quarrels? Do you accept grants?

I don't have any money, except the little that comes as donations. I think that an NGO is like a foreign plant

from outside. In India, we do not have NGOs, we have Buddhas and Gandhis who challenge wrong policies, who revolt. They are supplementary to no one. For this reason some people came here for a gospel. I told them that the gospel of India is the same as that of Buddha and Gandhi.

You had said in an interview that you get your strength from yog. Will you explain.

Sitting with your eyes closed is not yog. *Yog* means to concentrate your thoughts on something. This comes slowly with practice. A *karma yogi* does not need solitude, he can meditate while being around people, in society. In reality there are two great things about Indian culture — one is *Yog* and the second, the *Vedanta*. *Yog* is incomplete without *Vedanta*. *Yog* is *yoga* without *Vedanta*, the kind that is sold and practiced in the west. The *Yog* of the *Vedanta* says that there is life in all beings — humans, birds, animals, trees, rivers, the mountains. So anyone who sees the world in this manner, his love too will be all encompassing. The trouble today is that we have love for a few and the rest are strangers in our eyes. The second tenet of the *Vedanta* is to love everyone, see God everywhere. The greatest practicing Vedantist in India, Swami Ramtirth, has written a poem in which he challenges death. He says, what harm can death do to me? You can only take my body away from me, but I will be in leaves, in flowers, in branches, in water, in the songs of the birds.

When I was 13, Shridev Suman once asked me what I would do after studying. I replied that I would seek employment in the princely court. I am a native of the poorest district of India, where people only had one dhoti to wear at that time. He asked me, "then who will work for these people?" I replied that I will do that as well. He then asked: "how can one person have two Gods?" I did not

have an answer and asked him to explain it to me. He said that I would have to work out the answer for myself, but I should give a serious thought as to whether I should sell myself for a few pieces of silver. So, I tell everyone that I decided not to sell myself for a few pieces of silver and decided to face the hardships of life. Thus I dedicated myself for the service of people.

Where did you study?

Whatever I studied, I have forgotten. I have studied in the university and was amongst the brilliant students and toppers. But the first thing I did was to return my certificates to my elder brother because he expected that I would earn a lot of money and would work at a high post. One has to liberate oneself from these fetters, only then can you achieve self realisation. A person with degrees wearing the convocation gowns covers his character with the gown. And the gown is black, nothing of his personality can peek through. Therefore, first remove and throw away the gown.

At the age of 13 I joined Gandhi's movement. I believe that there should be something in life for which one should make efforts. The worst thing about our life today is that we have two personalities — one that is for our private life and the second that is for our public life. The first thing to do is to get rid of this dual personality — be the same outside as you are within and a lot of problems will be solved. Secondly, have a firm determination, so that whatever you want to accomplish, you are able to complete. If you want to understand this better then read the 12th chapter of the Bhagavad Geeta. Today the conflict is between knowledge and wisdom. We have too much knowledge and very little or no wisdom. The train of knowledge is meeting with accidents; only if wisdom becomes its driver will it run

well. And wisdom is the assembled experiences of common people, which they have gained from many generations.

What kind of help can educated city dwellers give your movement?

Go and live with the people, run schools for small children. People will surely feed them what they eat themselves. Go and instill self confidence in the people. Those who do not have too much time to spare, let them come and join those sitting on protest (*dharna*) against the Tehri dam and experience how they are living in an open tent by the river side. And it will be a free holiday in the mountains. Live in the mountains and you will escape the heat of Delhi. You will drink the ice cold water of the Bhagirathi, fresh, alive water.

Secondly, lies and misinformation are being spread that the people of Tehri are enemies of development, that they do not want the progress of the country, that so much money has been spent on them and they just will waste it, that Delhi needs this water. Go to each house in Delhi and tell them that the water from Tehri dam is the blood and tears of the people of Tehri. Sixteen people have lost their lives fighting against the dam. The people of Delhi should say that they do not want their water to come from tears and blood. If you want water for Delhi then ask them to save the water that is, for example, being wasted in five star hotels. And give the poor an equal share of water. Water should be equally available to all, like air.

Thirdly, we have the responsibility of the campaign, we are poor people. There are about 30 to 32 families of the movement who have lost a member or members, or someone in it has been maimed. We have to look after them for the rest of their lives. Some have left small children behind them. Some people should arrange to cover the expenses of these



Photo: Ashish

A view of the Tehri town and the temple that will be submerged

children for at least the next 15 - 20 years. For example, someone could deposit Rs 15,000 in the child's name and the child would be able to receive monthly installments to get to study.

People can collect small amounts and this can be used for the victims of bus accidents during this movement. We also need help in spreading information and awareness in order to carry our movement forward.

One last question : Your wife told me that you resigned from the Congress at her behest at the time of marriage (pp 14-15). Had you stayed on with the Congress party, as one of the oldest, foremost political workers of the area, you would probably have become the Chief Minister of U.P. long ago?

Even while I was in the Congress party, I had very little inclination towards political power. I used to concentrate on constructive social work. For instance, I began *harijan seva* at a time when untouchability was a very serious problem in our area. I would go to the *bhangi bastis* (neighbourhood of untouchables) and take classes. For this I faced a great deal of opposition. I went on to establish a hostel for *harijan*

students. Even in my village work I focused on constructive activities. I realized that those who want to do *seva* should not get into party politics.

The inevitable logic of party politics is that you must support your own party men, no matter how bad they may be and you must oppose and trouble those who are in the opposition even if they are doing good work. That is why I left it.

Have you ever had cause to regret that decision?

No, I was very happy when I left Congress because party work brought a lot of tensions. When on the day of my marriage I announced my decision to renounce party politics, I felt a sense of peace. Inner happiness comes from real *samaj seva* (serving society). That happiness enables a social worker to face the worst of hardships cheerfully. Infact, hardships strengthen a genuine social worker in the same way as iron gets to be steeled, when it is beaten upon.

(Translated from Hindi)