

IN Issues number 70 and 91 of **Manushi** we had reported on the Tehri dam controversy and the two indefinite fasts undertaken by Sunderlal Bahuguna in 1992 and 1995 to press for an independent and transparent review of the entire Tehri dam project in the Uttarakhand region of the Himalayas.

Following both of these fasts, which lasted 45 days and 49 days, respectively, the-then Prime Minister Narasimha Rao had promised a review of the project. However, the government blatantly violated both of these assurances by refusing to appoint the promised review committee and permitting the work on the dam to continue. Bahuguna waited nearly a year after the May 1995 promise for the government to honor its word before undertaking his third indefinite fast beginning April 13, 1996, which he said was a *prayashchit satyagraha* — “a measure of repentance of the sin of nonfulfillment of the promise to review the Tehri dam project.”

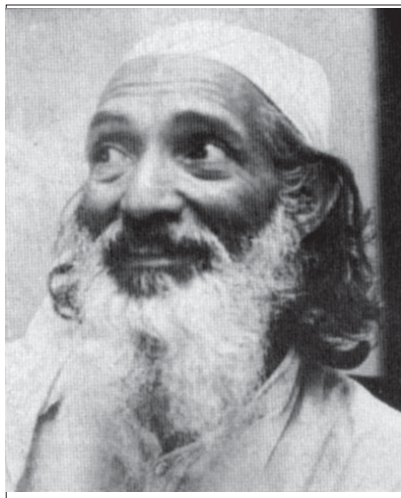
According to Bahuguna: “Even though the main responsibility of this sin falls upon those who had made the promise, yet, I regard myself as a party to this because my [earlier] prayerful fast had awakened the hope — that an independent review will bring to the surface the lies surrounding the Tehri project.”

Bahuguna resorted to this do-or-die method for the third time because the government had already begun the process of evacuating people from the Tehri township as a preparation for its submergence. Even though Motilal Vora, the-then Governor of Uttar Pradesh, had himself gone as the Prime Minister’s emissary to promise a comprehensive review following Bahuguna’s second fast in 1995, the Chief Secretary of Vora’s government, Mata Lal Prasad, was the one who issued a notice for all government,

FOLLOW-UP

A Victory for Satyagraha

Prime Minister Concedes to a Review of Tehri Dam



Sunderlal Bahuguna

semi-government offices and educational institutions of Tehri to be shifted to the New Tehri town to pave the way for the submergence of the old Tehri town.

During his 74-day fast, Bahuguna lived on one *bael* fruit and one spoonful of honey a day. However, while his spirit stayed strong to the end, his health began to break down. Finally, on June 18, the new Prime Minister Deve Gowda promised in writing that his government is “willing to have the ecological aspects, including its impact on the people of the area and resettlement of displaced persons examined by a fresh group of experts” including those nominated by Bahuguna. His letter stated that the government “will give the highest considerations to the recommendations of the expert group.” On June 25, Bahuguna travelled to Delhi to break his fast at Rajghat, the *samadhi* of Mahatma Gandhi.

There has been a long history of opposition to the Tehri dam project since 1972 when the Planning Commission approved it. The opponents of the dam have the endorsement of many leading national and international scientists who have expressed serious doubts about the wisdom of building this dam on the following grounds:

1 The dam is being built in a highly earthquake-prone zone, which the International Commission of Large Dams has declared to be one of the most hazardous sites. Top independent seismologists from within the country and abroad have confirmed that the likelihood of a big earthquake during the lifetime of the dam is very high, especially after the Uttarkashi earthquake of October 1991. If the dam were to collapse, the havoc it would cause downstream is unimaginable.

1 The dam’s design is technically outdated since it was conceived in the 1940s and designed in the 50s and 60s when the available seismic information was limited. Therefore, several scientists have reservations about the basic size and design of the dam which they believe does not adequately cover the various risks involved in building a dam of such magnitude.

1 The Himalayas are a very young and fragile mountain range. Scientists have expressed doubts about the Himalayan mountainside’s ability to hold such a mammoth structure — believed to be the fifth highest dam with a water reservoir that is 260 meters

deep and spread over an area of 45 sq. km. Recent deforestation has made the slopes extremely vulnerable to landslides, which add to the risk of dam failure and major flooding.

1 The building of this dam will kill Ganga, the most sacred river of India. Its water will lose the quality it is revered for — (it stays fresh indefinitely even when bottled), if the river is dammed so close to its source and the water made to go through closed tunnels. Fish and other water creatures which keep the water pure cannot survive in closed tunnels and deep reservoirs.

1 The Tehri dam planners have made no provision to provide water and electricity to surrounding Himalayan villages, who need them most — both for daily needs as well as for greening the Himalayas. All of the electricity generated is meant for Delhi and cities of western UP.

1 The claimed irrigation potential

(2.7 lakh hectares) as well as the expected electricity-producing capacity (350 MW) of the dam is too small to make it economically viable.

1 Due to Ganga's heavy siltation rate, the life span of the dam is expected to be no more than 30-40 years against the claimed 100 years. This, too, makes the dam uneconomical especially keeping in mind the astronomical escalation in dam cost — from 197 crores in 1972 to nearly 5500 crores at 1992 estimates.

1 There are serious allegations of corruption resulting in the use of substandard materials, making the dam even more unsafe. The project is a gold mine for politicians and contractors, but of little use to the people in whose name it is being executed.

1 The resettlement package offered is not only ridiculously inadequate but being carried out in the most ham-handed fashion, allowing large scale corruption and misuse of funds.

In Issue No. 91 we had issued an appeal to **Manushi** readers asking them to carry out a signature campaign in their respective areas in support of the demand for a comprehensive review and to send the petitions to the-then Prime Minister.

Now, with a new government in power, we need to redouble our efforts to ensure that the assurances given by the new Prime Minister Deve Gowda does not follow the pattern of all the broken promises of the previous governments. This dam is not just an issue for the local people of Tehri, but will affect people all over India because the destruction of Himalayan rivers and ecology affects the ecology and well-being of the entire country.

Therefore, we make a special appeal to our readers to send the following petition to Prime Minister Deve Gowda with as many signatures as possible.

PETITION

The Prime Minister
Shri Deve Gowda
1 Race Course Road
New Delhi.

Dear Prime Minister,

We congratulate you on your promise to ensure that a comprehensive review of the Tehri dam project will be carried out within three months by a committee of independent experts. We hope that your government will honour its promise both in spirit and content and make the working of the review committee fully transparent and open to public scrutiny. This dam affects not just the people of Tehri but the entire country as it will adversely affect the survival of the sacred river Ganga and the ecological balance in the Himalayas, apart from jeopardising safety of millions living downstream. Any damage to the Himalayan region affects the environmental well being of the entire population of India. We also demand a thorough probe by the CBI into charges of corruption and misuse of funds in the building of this dam.

NAME:

ADDRESS:

SIGNATURE: