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Passages from Nature to Nationalism: Sunderlal Bahuguna and Tehri Dam Opposition in Garhwal

MUKUL SHARMA

This paper focuses on the shifting contours of the anti-Tehri dam movement in the past three decades. It examines the changing declarations of environmentalists, especially Sunderlal Bahuguna and other leaders of the movement on the one hand, and the involvement of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad in the anti-dam politics on the other. Exploring the evocations of nature, religion and nation in different phases by these two groups of actors, it argues that through a regular use of certain mythical beliefs and simplified dichotomies, there was an inadvertent collaboration between green and saffron. The Tehri dam became a means of combining sacredness with impulse, gravity of high politics with solemnity of daily worship, and nature with nationalism.

The Chipko leader Sunderlal Bahuguna, and his long-standing opposition to the Tehri dam in Garhwal, have been significant markers in the environmental movements of India in general, and for struggles against big dams in particular. This paper explores the evocations of nature, religion and nation by various actors like Sunderlal Bahuguna, the Tehri Bandh Virodhi Sangharsh Samiti (Committee for Struggle against Tehri Dam, henceforth τBVSS), and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), in their opposition to the dam. It argues that visions of Ganga as holy-mother, as national security-unity, as fear-revenge, criss-cross other debates like costs-benefits and displacement-rehabilitation regarding the dam, and at times undermine far more complex issues of democracy, social justice and sustainable development. The paper shows that through a regular use of religious myths and simplified dichotomies, fundamental differences between environmental movements and conservative political forces are often obscured.

In the long journey of opposition to the Tehri dam since the 1970s, much has been written about the dam and its safety, Sunderlal Bahuguna, and the movement. However, the language and politics of the movement, its visions towards nation, history and culture, and its alliance with certain political forces has received scant attention. Least heard are the shifts in the movement after the 1990s. This paper specifically focuses on these alterations and their implications.

1 A Brief Historical Context

Even though the opposition to Tehri dam deals with complex issues, for example, analyses of technical and environmental variables, benefit-cost ratio, geology and seismicity, Sunderlal Bahuguna and the τBVSS have alongside taken important cues from the history of the region in shaping their arguments. Here are some snippets of the region. Uttarakhand has a rich Hindu cultural history.¹ The venerated rivers of India's cultural history, Ganga and Yamuna, have their sources here.² The location of various sacred places of Hindu gods/goddesses in the region has made it a symbol of the Hindu mainstream. There is large-scale recruitment of army jawans from the area, and a perception of them being "defenders" of the nation.³ However, Uttarakhand has also been seen as "backward" in the official discourse, and thus its development and progress has been a regular prescription.⁴ Besides these, the region has been a witness to a series of social movements in both the pre- and post-independence eras.⁵ The most famous of course has been Chipko in the 1960s.⁶ This was followed by movements against large dams, mining and

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illicit liquor. Politically, Uttarakhand had the distinction in 1991 of giving the highest percentage (40.3%) of votes to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which made a clean sweep of all the four parliamentary seats. The feat was repeated in 1998. Uttar Pradesh (UP) of course has also been the hotbed of the Ram Janmabhumi campaign of the 1990s.⁷ Here religious processions were the foremost instruments of Hindu mobilisation, in which the VHP used a repertoire of rituals and symbols, including the sacredness of the Ganges.⁸ In the process, communal and religious organisations came to exercise a new influence in the everyday life of UP towns.⁹ This brief context is important while analysing the changing contours of Tehri dam opposition.

2 Sunderlal Bahuguna and Tehri Dam: A Profile

Sunderlal Bahuguna and his opposition to the Tehri dam have been a reference point for environmental movements in India. Diversely acclaimed as the father of the Chipko movement, a freedom fighter, a true disciple of Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave, an environmental thinker and writer, a gentle crusader, an unobtrusive messiah, a rishi, the face of TBVSS, convenor of Himalaya Bachao Andolan and much more, Bahuguna has maintained an important presence in the environmental movement of the country, and in Uttarakhand.¹⁰ A prolific writer and communicator, Bahuguna has himself written many articles, leaflets and booklets.¹¹ His remarkable physical endurance, sage-like appearance, simple living, personal asceticism and effective communication are constantly marvelled at.

For Bahuguna, the construction of Tehri dam is related to a development system which is based on two lies, i.e. nature is a commodity and society is only of human beings. This system he claims was born and developed in the west, where the state had vast colonies to exploit, less population, and a big area. However, its application to densely populated countries has created a host of problems, and the crisis of Ganga is one of them. The basis of development, he argues, should be cultural values, and its objective should be the achievement of peace and fulfilment, instead of affluence. It is not the dam, but Ganga that can solve the problems of the region. He stresses the tradition of worshipping the Ganga, which should be strengthened with scientific support.¹² Bahuguna's concerns also gave birth to the Save Himalaya Movement, which asks for "a Himalayan policy in which inspiring aspect of Himalaya is maintained". It states that Himalaya should remain a living space for its permanent residents, spiritual seekers, pilgrims and tourists, visiting for peace and enjoying scenic beauty. There should be a ban on indiscriminate exploitation and on construction of big dams.¹³

Bahuguna further relates the opposition to the dam with the broad cultural and religious beliefs of Hindus. According to him, there is a legend that the waters of Bhagirathi can be contained only with the matted locks of Lord Shiva. The villagers believe that if there is any attempt to interfere with the flow of this sacred water, Bhagirathi will exact a terrible vengeance.¹⁴ While evoking this spirituality, Bahuguna puts forward alternative agendas for action against the dam. The real spirituality for him is to see life in all living beings – trees, rivers and mountains. Spiritually informed science can ensure that all enjoy their birthright by

giving priority to the plantation of five "Fs" – food, fodder, fuel, fertiliser, and fibre trees. This will re-establish a harmonious relationship between man and nature – that of child with mother.¹⁵ This is the only way to bring about a *sanskrit samaj*, and an evolution from nature to culture (*prakriti to sanskriti*), a long cherished dream of humankind.¹⁶

Tehri Dam: Irrigation planning had been high on the agenda of the Indian government after independence. By 1979, the country had 1,554 large dams. Of these, UP had one prior to 1900, 22 in 1901-51, 49 in 1952-79 and 12 under construction, of a total of 84.¹⁷ Amongst them, the Tehri dam was the most ambitious one, one of the highest dams in the world to harness the waters of two important Himalayan rivers – Bhagirathi and Bhilangana.¹⁸ The project was conceived in 1949 by the Geological Survey of India, though the dam was finally commissioned only in 1972, and work began in 1978. The dam is finally expected to be 260.5 metre high. The reservoir is likely to irrigate 2,70,000 hectares of land, and generate 346 MW of hydel power. The dam submergence area is the Tehri town and 23 villages in the vicinity, while 72 other villages are partially submerged. Nearly 5,200 hectares of land is lost to the reservoir. In addition, about 85,000 persons have been fully or partially displaced.¹⁹ The irregularities and injustices in rehabilitation have been widely reported.²⁰

3 Opposition to Tehri Dam

Tehri bandh ki denei char:

atychar, begharbar, bhrstachar, narsamhar.

(There are four gifts of Tehri dam:

atrocities, displacement, corruption and genocide.)²¹

Ever flowing from Gaumukh Himalaya

O! Mother! Bhagwati your name

the Saints ever chant at Gangotri

from the lotus feet of Vishnu you issue

to disappear in the forest like locks of Shiva....

I am your undeserving son but you are my very own Mother.²²

The Tehri dam has witnessed continuous protests by various people, including the noted environmentalist Sunderlal Bahuguna. He has virtually made it his lifelong mission, by living at the dam site and by going on fast off and on.²³ Rising at the crest of the Chipko movement, the opposition against the dam coincided with a time when organised opposition to new, big projects was gathering force in the early 1970s.²⁴ Movements like Chipko, Tehri, Silent Valley, and Fish Workers' struggles were transforming a passive environmental consciousness of Indian subalterns into an organised power.²⁵ The Tehri dam movement was particularly seen as demonstrating the growth of grass roots mobilisation and forging of transnational linkages among big dam opponents.²⁶ The unusually heavy monsoons of 1970, devastating floods in Alakananda valley, other upcoming big projects in the region, and a brewing discontent against their perceived impact also became anchoring points for the dam opposition.²⁷

The movement tried to establish connections between ecological and social-mythical values through scientific studies, environmental campaigns, and cultural-religious references, thus engaging in a wide gamut of environmental politics. They emphasised the economic life and structure of the dam, its geology and

seismicity, displacement and rehabilitation, cost and benefit. They talked about the cultural and religious values of Ganga and Himalayan region. They used scientific knowledge to explain their perceptions of imaginative and emotional truths. They went on fasts and demonstrations. They were speaking a language of ecological politics that was the universal language of anti-big-dam movements of the period.

Vivid accounts of the movement are littered in its long journey. The TBVSS was formed in the early 1970s under the presidency of veteran freedom fighter Virendra Datt Saklani. When officers and engineers arrived to inaugurate the construction of the first diversion tunnel of the dam in early 1978, thousands of men, women and children blocked their way.²⁸ The Samiti, with the active participation of anti-liquor movement activist Kadambari Devi, Sunderlal Bahuguna and others, collected 10,000 signatures against the dam. The writ petition filed in the Supreme Court of India against the dam was signed by many, including the Communist Party of India district secretary Vidya Sagar, Saklani and Bahuguna. Later, two prominent non-governmental organisations, the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) and the World Wildlife Fund-India (WWF) joined in the writ petition.

Through appeals to political leaders of diverse affiliations and different central governments, the Samiti and Bahuguna forced the governments to constitute several committees, and managed to halt or slow down the project several times. However, in spite of adverse reports by the Roy Committee in 1986, Hunumantha Rao panel report on rehabilitation, various fasts by Bahuguna in 1992, 1995, 1997 and 2001, promises of various prime ministers at various stages, and Chamoli earthquake of 1999, work on the dam continued in spurts. But Bahuguna's fasts became a rallying point for the opposition. He stated that fasts and *vratas* were the truly *satvik* (righteous) methods to solve complex problems of our society. They were developed by our ancestors in their researches on the science of *atma gyan* (inner self).²⁹

The visions and controversies against the dam involved complex issues and a multiplicity of stakeholders, who had divergent perceptions of development. However, these positions were simplified and narrowed, obscuring many other fundamental arguments against the dam. By invoking certain metaphors, emotions and faiths, and reaching out to particular religious sections and practices, the environmentalists at crucial junctures came close to the politics of conservative Hindu forces, and co-opted their ideas and values. In effect, certain metaphors and myths acted as Trojan horses, through which communal politics entered and re-entered green politics. For the anti-dam forces, and particularly for Bahuguna, the politics of anti-dam became a "normal" collaborative relationship between what is "factual", "environmental", "natural" and "sustainable", and what is "religious", "emotional", "national" and "Hindu". It was this, rather than any other aspect of environmentalism, which changed the form and function of the movement, especially in its final stage.

3.1 Ecological Discourse and Tehri Dam

One important and popular impulse of the movement, like many other environmental discourses of the 1970s, was to use facts and figures, scientific methods and techniques, to challenge a project

that also claimed to be based on scientific assessment. These concerns found earlier expressions not only in TBVSS, but also in several studies and articles. Through an analysis of technical, social and environmental variables,³⁰ it has been argued that the economic life of the dam will not exceed 61.4 years, and it will not give its results within the next 50 years at least, by which time the reservoir might be substantially silted up. The design of the dam is unsafe, justifying the fears of local Garhwalis about the possibilities of a catastrophic collapse. There are many other lacunae pointed out in the project formulation.³¹ Regarding the situation of dam oustees, problems of land alienation, destitution, inequality, forced changes in agricultural patterns, joint family breakdown, lack of village commons, education and health have been emphasised.³² Further, an informed discussion has been carried on the special susceptibility and serious geological hazards of an engineering project in the Himalayan range.³³

3.2 The Aesthetic Impulse

Environmental politics against big projects is often also a pursuit of what is "natural" and "beautiful". Aesthetic issues revolve around what is pristine and heavenly and what constitutes natural and harmonious living. The region and the project site have been repeatedly referred to as pious, peaceful and solitary places. The Himalayan region and Ganga are seen as symbols of a divine force, a thing of beauty and a point of contact with the infinite. This landscape appears on the canvas of environmentalists regularly, but is not necessarily associated with religious symbols. Bahuguna during his "prayerful fast" against the dam in October 1997, concludes one of his letters:

Sitting on the lap of Mother Bhagirathi with the inspiring sight of her murmuring flow, a holy dip and drinking her nectar like water, gives me a unique pleasure. I have the desire to enjoy it until the last breath.³⁴

The landscapes are given meaning and form with reference to people. For the anti-dam activists, sublime dignity lies in people's contact with, and appreciation of, the environment. In a vivid description, Swami Chidananda Saraswati, who has actively taken part in the anti-dam agitation and whom Bahuguna refers to as his mentor, explains:

Himalayan region is a pious region. People come here in contact with the Supreme. For their self-realisation, for their knowledge, they come to this peaceful place.... Himalaya is your father.... You have grown up in His lap.³⁵

Similarly, the pictorial and emotional representations of Ganga become a way of presenting the politics of anti-dam activists. Virendra Dutta Saklani, a pioneer of the anti-Tehri dam movement, narrates:

Even the murmuring of the word "Ganga" fills us with a splendid smell. Tides of emotions come. From innumerable times, Indian people have been singing songs in praise of the river.³⁶

An aesthetic impulse echoed throughout this period of the movement. However, it had a marginal position. Hindu myths and faiths were not the central elements of this aesthetic sensitivity; it was nature and its contours which were providing both a confirmation and an affirmation of individual and collective concerns, and a capability of appreciating beauty and fighting for it.

3.3 Creating the Past

Myths of a glorious past are another important metaphor of the movement. In the land of rivers and hills, a fertile, peaceful region is carved out. The narrative oscillates between two poles: a place of greatness and sacredness, and a place where people, society and work situations are ideal. The central importance of the past is explained in unequivocal terms. Kameshwar Prasad Bahuguna says:

This is not only a question of drowning or displacing. It is a question of being attached to one's honour, to preserve our cultural heritage, to save Ganga from being poisoned. It is a question of being attached to our past.³⁷

The history of this mythical past is revoked beyond time and place. Says Bahuguna:

It has a long history. Its roots are in the forest culture of India. Our *rishi-munis* were living in ashrams within the forests. In this environment, they got a new vision of life.³⁸

This history has variations. It is a place of mythical figures, of healthy-happy people, of one's ultimate being and living. Referring to a historian of Uttarakhand, Bahuguna narrates about Garhwal a century ago:

Every member of the family was busy. The work related with agriculture and cattle rearing were so much that nobody in the family had the chance to sit idle.... Life was busy, people were happy.³⁹

Often this perceived past has concrete-earthly references. There are images of people's achievements in this historic town, which became a centre of Garhwali culture. It produced eminent poets, scholars, art critics and sculptors. Tehri was also the place of penance for the famous Vedantic saint, Swami Ram Tirtha.⁴⁰ A past, created on the basis of theology and myths, and relying on forests, mountains and rivers, is often used to justify the ecological dimensions of the movement.

3.4 Tehri Dam and Nation

For the state and the pro-dam people, nation and nation-building has been intimately related to completing the construction of the dam.⁴¹ However, even for the environmentalists, national security and unity are no less important. Bahuguna and other anti-dam activists have throughout emphasised that a safe-secure nation, free from outside threats, comes from water and forests. A threat and enemy perception occupy a special place in their environmental identity. This observation never remains fixed; it is always in a flux. Sometimes Bahuguna cautions:

The most expensive item of expenditure in this region is the guarding of Himalayan borders.... China has adopted a clever strategy of defence in Tibet.⁴²

His worries take another shape in a memorandum to the Parliamentary Standing Committee:

Another threat to the safety of the dam is from the defence angle. At least three ex-army officers... have indicated that this dam is in the missile range of neighbouring countries.⁴³

Threat perceptions have been voiced by other activists. Rajendra Singh Dhotiyal, advocate and convenor of the Jan Jagaran Manch, says:

Tehri dam can be fatal from the viewpoint of national security. The air distance of [the] dam is 100 kilometre from China. If there is an Indo-China war, this dam will be the centre of attack from Chinese missiles.⁴⁴

Threat has a negative posture, but its positive aspect is to protect national unity. Environmentalists argue that a dam on Ganga-Bhagirathi constitutes a process by which the nation loses its character. We often hear: "Bhagirathi binds the whole country into one unit",⁴⁵ or "Ganga is not only a holy river, but is most important for national integrity, cultural unity and oneness of India".⁴⁶ If the pro-dam people see the dam as an important marker for a national landscape, environmentalists see national unity of the region in the preservation of a truly Indian ecological landscape.

3.5 Holy Mother Ganga and Tehri Dam

In environmental politics, traditional values and ancient beliefs abound. There is an identification of men with plants and animals – emblems of whale, seal and panda are widespread. There is also an understanding that people belong to a particular place, and they express it with a sense of cosmic relatedness, deeper than that of familial and ancestral solidarity. There are holy lands and rivers, sacred groves and forests⁴⁷ in the vocabulary of environmentalism. In effect, this environmentalism moves at will through a vast cultural treasure-house, its shelves loaded with numerous beliefs and practices of the past. It is the element of choice, which distinguishes the green from the saffron. What the green mythologies seek to achieve is a new union, specifically between man and nature, through the integration of two divergent traditions: technological-scientific and mythical-imaginative.

Perhaps more than any other region, the Himalaya and the Ganga have a key role in the environmental politics of India, and in the making of a national identity. They are real – culturally rich, environmentally sensitive and distinct from the rest. And they are myth – an assemblage of religious faiths and beliefs, ideologically laden signs and images. We know that they are great, immortal and symbols of devotion, closely interwoven with the culture and civilisation prescribed in the Hindu scriptures.⁴⁸ Himalaya and Ganga are not just physical entities, they have also been created. In the movement, environmentalists and religious leaders go for a culturally imaginative representation of Ganga and Himalaya, which often get "Hinduised" and become a part of environmental politics and identity. In the latter part of the movement especially, anti-dam politics has persistently constructed a conservative Hindu imagery, often making partnership with Hindutva politics. Ganga becomes holier and holiest. The ecological reasoning is blurred and goes beyond logic, eliciting Hindu patriotism and xenophobia. The religious-cultural creation of Himalaya and Ganga combines Hindu values, holiness and uniqueness of Ganga water, economic and practical significance, holy places, temple complexes, and rishis-munis at vantage points. Ganga stems and extends from some golden period into the nationalist one. It floats with voices of Jawaharlal Nehru, along with those of sadhus. We are sometimes told that the main reason for the dam issue remaining unresolved, in spite of various efforts, is that it is viewed through a narrow angle. However, it should be seen in the context of the overall condition of Himalaya, which is the source of economic prosperity, ecological security and spiritual inspiration to more than one billion people.⁴⁹ There is the "Ganga Abhiyan", which mostly emphasises

the rich topography of the Himalaya and the Ganga region, and gives information about the ill-effects of the dam.⁵⁰ We are occasionally referred to Nehru, with certain qualifications:

The belief among the Hindus about the holiness of the Ganga is so strong that every Hindu wishes his ashes to be immersed in it. The popular feelings about the Ganga have been very aptly put in words by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in his last will and testament: "The Ganga especially, is the river of India, beloved of her people, around which are intertwined her racial memories, her hopes and fears, her songs of triumph, her victories and defeats".⁵¹

Remarks Chidananda:

India is a holy land; and holiest of the holy and greatest of the great is the Himalaya especially its Uttarakhand region.... Uttarakhand is *devbhumi* (a place sanctified by Gods) and *tapobhumi* (a sacred land of penance and austerity).... A land of Gods, it is called. It makes its dwellers God-like.⁵²

To oppose the dam, some environmentalists have increasingly started using Hindu myths about the Ganga. These myths integrate the identity of a river and a "Hindu" country together. In the backdrop of solidarity with the anti-dam movement, narration continues of how Lord Shiva agreed to help in bringing the holy Ganga, and by catching it in his tangled locks, saved the world from her impact. It is linked to the nation:

The emotions created by her [Ganga] have integrated the nation into one. To wound this feeling would be most unfortunate for the Nation.... We should not think of Holy Divine Mother Ganga in terms of kilowatts, in terms of hectares of irrigated land.... Ganga is not only a holy river, but is most important for national integrity and for cultural integrity and the oneness of our nation.⁵³

The cultural creation that was hitherto a combination of several overlapping agencies, seems to be culminating, especially in the 1990s, into a narrow environmental politics. The appeal to Hindus and their organisations becomes an important and readiest expression of the mood of *ṛvss*. For what the anti-Tehri dam agitation subscribes to is not only an identifiable, expressive Hindu religious culture, but also a conviction that only through the recovery of a Hindu religious platform could a successful case be made against the dam. The bond uniting the environmental and religious-political concerns now makes up the mainstream of the movement. Its targeted call is to arouse the Hindus for a greater cause.

The *ṛvss* thus appeals to pious *sadhus-sants* to stop the catastrophe:

Tehri dam is the murder of our culture, religion and tradition. Whenever there has been such a crisis, our *rishis* and *avatars* have protected us.... It is natural that India's highly respected Jagadguru Sankaracharyas, Mahamandaleshwars and thoughtful *sadhus-sants* are worried over the direct interference in our religion by the Tehri dam.⁵⁴

At the time of the sacred Mahashivratri festival, they go to *kawarias* – Hindus, who travel on foot, carrying the Ganga water on their shoulders to pour it in their temple or on Lord Shiva. Arousing Hindu mythologies on the river, combined with the faith of *kawarias*, anti-dam activists arouse them:

The free, holy flow of mother Ganga is being disrupted by constructing the Tehri dam.... Is it not your pious, Hindu duty to oppose it? Awake devotees, it is the call of your God! Fulfil your duty to Mother Ganga!⁵⁵

The movement also sometimes invokes popular stereotypes about Muslims. During one of his fasts in 1996, Bahuguna's references were quoted in a report:

Sample the story narrated by Bahuguna at one of his evening sermons. The environmentalist said Muslim emperor Aurangzeb refused water to his dying father, but "we Hindus" even offer water to the dead. The analogy by this "Gandhian" stunned two local Muslim women who silently walked out of the meeting even as the audience, including some VHP activists, burst into an applause.⁵⁶

In a conversation, he further says:

The Hindus are praiseworthy. They give water to their dead. Oh Muslim! Are you so cruel that you cannot give water to your own father in jail?⁵⁷

The campaign for the holy mother Ganga, on the dotted lines of a conservative Hindu politics, gets wider in its ideological reach. The movement shifts from Himalaya to Ganga, and from Ganga to a Hinduised holy mother Ganga. Making common cause with *sadhus-sants* and their organisations, it says:

We should take initiatives for the preservation and beautification of Rameshwaram, Kanchi, Vraja (Mathura-Vrindavan), Kashi and Haridwar, to place an ideal before the entire Hindu community.... To embrace the Vedic system of water conservation, according to our *tirth* tradition, can only ensure pure and pious water to all Indians.⁵⁸

3.6 A Thing to Fear

Fear from the Tehri dam has been a strong element in the movement. Fears regarding safety, geology and hydrology are based on a comprehensive and technical analysis of the project. It is said that the mountains on which the dam is being built are criss-crossed with geological faults. The region is seismically too active to site such a large dam, that the dam is not designed to withstand the intensity of an earthquake which may strike the region, that the project can place at great risk many cities and their population downstream of the dam. They have warned:

Should the Tehri dam ever collapse, the 700 billion gallons of water in the reservoir would crash down the river, towards the holy cities of Rishikesh and Haridwar, 50 miles or so away.⁵⁹

However, the basis of fear is marked by a transition in the later period of the movement, and it has become an environmental metaphor for propagation of certain images and values. There are now wild imaginations regarding the effects of the dam. Not geology, seismicity, hydrology or earthquake, but Ganga turning into a *jheel* captures the thoughts. Contact with the dam is a contact with the worst social values, effecting family, morality and dignity of women. For Chidananda, saving the mother Ganga from the dam is like "saving from Ravan".⁶⁰ There are now new, created reasons for an opposition to the dam:

Now the question arises that if Ganga is turned into an artificial lake, what would be its impact on Ganga *jal*?... The purity of Ganga *jal* and her greatness will be destroyed.... Will people of India, who chant the victory of Mother Ganga, silently and helplessly, like impotents, watch this horrible act?⁶¹

4 RSS, VHP and Tehri Dam

A notable feature of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and VHP activities in the 1980s-90s has been their active campaign against the Tehri dam, and subsequently their alliance with

Sunderlal Bahuguna. In early 2000, Bahuguna joined a delegation of VHP against the dam and at times positively evoked VHP president Ashok Singhal's religious pledge to stop the murder of Ganga.⁶² The campaign has been a mixture of Hindu faith and emotion, mythical beliefs and metaphors, concerns of national unity, constructions of a glorious past and a threatened present, culminating in a clarion call to Hindus. References from the anti-dam movement are culled at different times by RSS and VHP, which when yoked together, are intended to inflame an aggressive Hindu identity. Himalaya and Ganga's salient landscapes for example are haunted not only by an aggressive China, but also by a Muslim Pakistan, a communist Russia, and a conspiring west. Myths about the Ganga take many forms – from the holiest mother to the crisis-ridden, crying for help. The dangers regarding the dam go into imaginative projections, like Ganga turning into a lake, which are lifted from environmental narratives. However, its most prominent characteristic is the association of an environmentally mapped area of holy mother Ganga with the Hindus.

For these forces, Ganga and Tehri dam are conscious political constructions, embodying certain beliefs and values. They cover a wide field – from a simple-minded religious text to an imaginative account, from the river in danger to a community and country in danger. The expressions are loaded with emotional overtones, which creep not only into common parlance but also curiously into scientific usage. There is continuous hailing of “O Holy Mother Ganga” and references to the “mysterious powers of the Ganges water”.⁶³ Holiness and sacredness are absolute commands, beyond history and ideology. It is reasoned: “To understand Ganga, we need such minds and hearts that consider mythology more credible than history.”⁶⁴ Their theories combine sacredness with spirituality. Writing on the twin aims – “Save the Holy Ganges and Stop Tehri Dam: The Time Bomb!” – T Shivaji Rao says:

Unfortunately a few Indians are looking at this Holy and Divine Mother Ganga as a material resource to be exploited by diverting its holy waters for irrigation and hydro-power generation.... Since this holy river is the only sacred symbol of our culture and national integrity, we have to protect it.⁶⁵

There have been several articles against the dam in various publications of the Hindu Right.⁶⁶

VHP marked the anti-dam politics with its own brand of aggressiveness. Their writings and speeches hallowed its environmental substance and transformed it into a Hindu nationalist idea. Highlighted Ashok Singhal:

To us *Bharatvasis*, Ganga is no river; it is a deity.... The human monsters that conceived the “damming” of the holy Ganga have displayed a monumental insensitivity to the very soul of Bharat. The VHP had launched Ganga *yatras* to every village and city.... The intensity of love and faith with which Ganga *jal* was revered during the *yatras* by every son and daughter of this soil transcending all barriers of caste, creed and religion is our precious treasure.... The enemies of Hindu heritage and Hindu *sanskriti* seem determined to destroy the Ganga in the name of progress, disguised in the garb of the Tehri dam.⁶⁷

By using myths of Ganga, these forces are not employing an idea that is simply false, but rather one that is embodied in Hindu beliefs, influencing their perceptions of reality. For all its factual

currency, dam on a river has become a metaphor, and a remarkably sinuous one at that. Its essential purpose is to connect Ganga to Hindu community and community to nation. Apparently dissimilar – the politics of saffron and green – are intertwined.

There have been many ground activities. In 1995, VHP organised a pilgrimage in the name of *Ekatmata Yatra* in many parts of India. Its aim was to teach Hindus the importance of Mother India, Mother Cow and Mother Ganga. In their mandate, the leaders claimed that the pilgrimage would remind Hindus the importance of Ganga for the advent of Hindu civilisation.⁶⁸ VHP, Bajrang Dal, Ganga Sabha, Dharmayatra Mahasangh and Ganga Raksha Samiti took up a series of programmes, not only in UP, but also in Delhi and its nearby states against the construction of the Tehri dam. Their proclamations stated that it would destroy the Hindu pilgrimages and holy spots on the river, where the mortal ashes were immersed.⁶⁹

4.1 VHP, Ganga Raksha Yatra and Tehri Dam

Their activities reached a peak in 2000 when on 19 October at the Ramlila grounds in Delhi, hundreds of sadhus and activists of VHP sat on a week-long dharna against the Tehri dam. Addressing the gathering, a sadhwi stated:

Tehri dam is being constructed to imprison the Ganga forever. This is an organised conspiracy to demolish our religion and culture. We demolished the Babri mosque. Now we have to get ready to demolish the Tehri dam.⁷⁰

Before this, at a weeklong dharna in Tehri Garhwal, Ashok Singhal threatened to launch an Ayodhya type movement if the government did not stop further construction of the dam. Bahuguna joined the meeting.⁷¹

The most ambitious of these activities was the Sri Ganga Raksha Yatra carried out from 26 to 31 July 2000.⁷² A few hundred sadhus and prominent mahants arrived at the *vip ghat* in Haridwar, carrying their burdens of water pots and tridents. Prominent leaders of VHP joined in and Hindu rituals of worshipping the river took place. Thus took of the six-day long yatra, from Haridwar to Delhi, via many villages and *qasbas*. Three well-carved *raths*, carrying an idol of mother Ganga and an earthen pot of immortal Ganga water, led the caravan of over two-dozen vehicles. During their route, which is otherwise totally closed to any vehicular traffic in this particular season, they passed 1,000 of devotee *kawarias*, who at this time mostly travel on foot, carrying the Ganga water on their shoulders. Huge loudspeakers played popular devotional songs. These performances produced a ritualised body of Mother Ganga, blurring the boundaries between a few hundred VHP sants-sadhus, primarily from UP, and thousands of pilgrims across the country, allowing the yatra to broaden its canvas and strengthen its appeal. The strategically timed and routed yatra simultaneously produced a particular kind of holy Hindu body. Spoke Singhal in a meeting at Roorkee:

I am here not to talk about the cost-benefit of the project. I am talking about *Gangatva*. *Gangatva* is *Hindutva*. *Hindutva* is *Rashtratva*.

The ritualised Ganga and the dam carried a political soul. The yatra and meetings moved in with the spiritual and sacred, but often conveniently also inhabited the sphere of the material, political and national.

Environmental myths had to be created, combining facts and fancies, which were often (re)presentations of Ganga and Tehri dam. They were carved to encompass the likely impact of Ganga's taming, and simultaneously anchored in a continuous medium of Hindu, aggressive, nationalist meaning. On the very first day of the yatra, announced Singhal:

After the construction of the dam, the Ganga will become a rainy river, and her capacity for self-purification will be finished.

In the following days, through public announcements and renowned speakers, we heard of Ganga turning into a small drain or even a tank. The question was not only "is it true?" but also "whose truth is it?" The myths were portrayed in specific texts of Sri Ram, which provided a rich readymade source for the production of a particular national ethos and social metaphors. Swami Chinmayanand, a BJP MP, recounted:

In his journey through Ganga, Lord Sri Ram decided to bow down before Nishad. He could have made a bridge over it, as he did in the case of a sea but decided against it.... Those who understand the issue of faith towards Ram can only understand the faith towards Ganga.

For Jeeveshwar Mishra, Convenor, Ganga Raksha Yatra, the reservoir of the dam is being built where Hanuman got life-giving herbs for the dying Lakshman.

"Fear" and "conspiracy" are strong elements in the VHP campaign against the dam. There is a fear of wild effects on people and places. Vedanti, in a meeting at Khatauli, spoke thus:

In case of Tehri dam being damaged, from Gangotri to Gangasagar, more than 1,000 cities, including Calcutta, Patna, Kanpur, will be drowned completely in 700 feet water.

The fear also reflected a concern for those maths and ashrams that were making large sums of money in places of pilgrimages. Swami Chinmayanand expressed:

Ganga flow ensures enormous cash flow in our ashrams of Haridwar-Rishikesh. If something goes wrong, the money flow will dry down.

The yatra focused on the conspiracy idea through the use of the "Other" and oppositional archetypes, kept afresh by use and reuse. The logic was simple – first, the dam will be built, then it will be destroyed either by an earthquake or by a bomb installed through an Inter-Services Intelligence agent of Pakistan, and this will wipe out our religious places and people, and will lead to the death of a Hindu country. To stop this conspiracy, Tehri dam had to be stopped. Wall-writings by Bajrang Dal strengthen such clarification calls. In Roorkee, for example: *Pukarti hai Maa, Pukarti hai Bharti, Khoon se Tilak Karo, Goliyon se Aarti!* ("Calls Mother, Calls India, Mark your Forehead with Blood and Worship with Bullets"). In Bahdarabad: *Jis Desh mein Shastr aur Shastr ki Puja Hoti Hai, Woh Kabhi Parajit Nahi Hota!* ("In a Country where Arms and Religious Scriptures are Worshipped, can Never be Defeated").

The yatras took the form of a distinct cultural politics, as they tried to bind only certain groups, while threatening and sidelining others. The yatra leaders were not even ambivalent about this, but stated it clearly. In response to a question on the sizeable Muslim population across the route, and their likely response to a Hinduised campaign, Swami Bhakt Hari, a prominent figure of the campaign, said:

Ganga is our mother. How can those people accompany us who do not consider Ganga their mother? They are unworthy, bad sons. Even then, Ganga blesses them equally.

Thus, within the VHP campaign, feelings for Ganga crystallised around an ethnically and culturally homogeneous, naturally existing nation. Hindu national identity was the pre-eminent sense of belonging, and environmental politics was made synonymous with the protection of that identity. The yatra sympathetically evoked the name of Bahuguna. It was not simply a populist attempt to jump on Bahuguna's bandwagon, but rather comprised an effort to make a common cause with a particular form of environmentalism in India. Singhal repeatedly drove home in public statements that they had the support of existing personalities and environmental movements on this issue.

5 Conclusions

The opposition to the Tehri dam was not just a simple disagreement on the viability-non viability, costs-benefits, displacement-resettlement of a big project. It struck right at the heart of philosophical, cultural, religious, political and moral debates around contemporary developmental efforts. However, increasing references and emphasis by prominent environmental activists and groups on the purity and holiness of Ganga, evocation of mythical beliefs, ideas of cultural pollution and constructed fears and conspiracies became a breeding ground for conservatism. The Hindu Right too, in turn, could move outside of its familiar extremist milieu and make common cause with green issues, giving themselves certain credibility.⁷³ Tehri dam became a means of combining sacredness with impulse, gravity of high politics with solemnity of daily worship, and nature with nationalism. It transformed a river into a political, moral and emotional idea. This inadvertent collaboration between green and saffron raises larger questions on certain facets of the Hindu Right and environmental movements in India. It would be a crude simplification to see the VHP's engagement with the dam as only a political attempt to harness votes for the BJP. Rather it is their comfort and intermeshing with a stream of environmental discourse that needs to be taken into account. The Hindu Right, with its political discourse, had the power to absorb, coopt, and alter the views of an environmental movement, which it turn itself had certain seeds of conservatism in it.

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