

A River, A Man: The State Responds to Dr GD Agarwal's fast to save Ganga



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In a response, the likes of which we have not seen in the last few decades, both the Government of Uttarakhand and the Government of India responded to 76 years old Dr. G. D. Agarwal's fast-unto-death. Retired professor of Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Kanpur, Dr. Agarwal, was protesting planned projects on the Bhagirathi which threaten the perennial flow of the Bhagirathi and the Ganga.

Both central and the state governments have suspended work on the three projects and promise the maintenance of the perennial flow of the river under all circumstances. The central government has promised review by a high level committee before any further action.

Dr. Agarwal's fast prompted delegations by two independent groups (who could not be more unlike the other) to meet with state and central governments requesting action. The Alumni Association of IIT Kanpur and All India Associations of Sadhus met with the Central Government while representation was also presented to the Government of Uttarakhand.

The letter from the Ministry of Power, Government of India says:

"The Ministry has received the representation sent by the Alumini Association of I.I.T. Kanpur to the Hon'ble Prime Minister of 27th June 2008. This is with reference to your meeting in the Ministry with the Hon'ble Union Minister of Power, today, and on 25th June 2008, and your memorandum of the same date in respect of river Bhagirathi, and in continuation of this Ministry's D.O.No. 37/47/2008-H.II of June 26, 2008. I am directed to say that the government of India commits itself to suitably ensure perennial environmental flow in all stretches of river Bhagirathi. I have to inform you that the Chairman and Managing Director, NTPC has been directed to constitute a high level expert group, including your nominee to examine the various technical issues involved in ensuring the required flow in the river Bhagirathi to keep the river alive. The high level expert group will give its report within three months. We shall invite you for discussion as soon as the recommendations of this high-level expert group are received, in order to arrive at a mutually acceptable solution. We would request Prof. D. D. Agarwal to give up his indefinite fast. The Government assures you of the highest consideration of your concerns."

A letter written in Hindi, and signed by Shatrughn Singh, Secretary of the Uttarakhand Government points out that two of the three proposed projects on the middle section of the Bhagirathi (Bhairav Ghati of 381 MW and Pala Maneri of 480 MW) are state initiatives. The third -- a 600 MW unit at Lohari Nagpala -- is a central government effort. It says that Rs 80 Crores has already been spent on the Pala Maneri Project.

It adds that the state government has decided to stop all work on the two state project with immediate effect and that the state government is committed to ensuring that the river stays unviolated and its perennial flow is maintained and will act to do so, requesting Dr. Agarwal to end his fast.

This has been a major decision by both state and central governments. Acting on this, Dr. Agarwal and his colleagues are planning future steps to raise public awareness about the eco-sensitivity of this region and the importance of maintaining the flow of all of India's rivers. The group led by Dr. Agarwal feels that local mobilization and awareness is necessary to ensure that this is achieved.

When Dr. Agarwal announced his decision to fast-unto-death to protest projects that would end Bhagirathi and Ganga as we know them, many (including this author) wondered whether this would be in vain. The success of his protest is perhaps a sign of the strength of his belief but also the strength of the technical background that was used to critique the projects and predict their impact on the river systems.

Numerous energy projects have been started or have been proposed on the Bhagirathi, Ganga and numerous other rivers that define the Gangetic plain. While energy is a real issue and must be addressed, the human, economic and environmental costs of death of these rivers far surpasses energy benefits -- any community can attest to that. While an energy crisis looms, this is not the choice that benefits anyone.

Dr. Agarwal's effort was successful -- but this is not the end of the story. Conservation of our rivers requires community involvement. Now.

- Dr Sanat Mohanty

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