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"The Tehri dam is the turning point in the life of the Himalayas and its people," sums up grey-bearded Chipko spiritual environmentalist Sunderal Bahuguna. "Either a Himalayas with a dense tree cover and a happy peaceful and contented people or a Himalayas with artificial lakes, five-star hotels and a flourishing flesh trade."

Damming the sacred Ganges and other great riverways is not new. The controversial Narmada dam project in central India - with a proposed 3,365 dams - got started in 1947. It was going to be India's exciting passport out of the "backward nation" international caste status, and initiate her into the super-power's mega-kilowatt era. Now the project just gets negative international press as environmentally backward.

Political leaders are stuck-damned if they dam and damned if they don't India desperately needs more industry and more control of its water. Dams provide this. But increasingly, India's rural peoples are saying there are creative alternatives of the US Hoover-type dams which swallow whole forests, sacred sylvan valleys, ancient pilgrimage sites and indigenous peoples and their culture and lifestyle. Their solution? Simple. Smaller dams. "You can generate 24-hour electricity from the run of the river to which we have no objection," argues Bahuguna. "This is permanent and generates self-employment which, besides making the hills beautiful and prosperous, will strengthen the economy because hills with a dense tree cover will produce two basic resources - fertile soil and more permanent flow of rivers."

"We the Himalayas' people are not narrow-minded people," he adds. "We have settled here from all parts of the country during the last 14 centuries and regards ourselves as the custodian of humankind's precious heritage - the Ganges and the Himalayas. If we want the Ganga to be killed in the holy Uttarkahand, the land of

her birth what will people feel about us? As far as we are concerned, we will fight with all our devotion and determination, but we are also looking for the help of all those who love the holy Ganga, the Himalayas and Nature and stand for a model of development which makes man a friend of Nature."

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