THE SACRED ACTIVISM OF SUNDERLAL BAHUGUNA

By George Alfred James

George Alfred James received his PhD in History and Philosophy of Religion from Columbia University in 1983. He is author of *Interpreting Religion*, and *Ecology is Permanent Economy: the Activism and Environmental Philosophy of Sunderlal Bahuguna*. He is also edited the volume *Ethical Perspectives on Environmental Issues in India*. Over the past 25 years he has traveled extensively in India researching Indian environmental movements. His research is published in such journals as *International Philosophical Quarterly*, *Worldviews*, and *Zygon*. He has contributed to the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, and the *Encyclopedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy*.

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When I heard the title for this panel I was pleased to see that it was “The Sacred Activism of Sunderlal Bahuguna” and not the religious activism of Sunderlal Bahuguna. There are subtle differences between popular uses of the word religion that can be unsettling. Students sometimes tell me “I am spiritual but not religious.” These students are ambivalent or resistant to religion, but open to spirituality or to the sacred. In contemporary usage the word religion even has connotations that tend to put genuine spirituality in the background. Religion often stands for a particular religion or group of religions, especially the monotheistic religions. Religion often means adherence to doctrines or to the promotion of the identity and the perceived political agenda of a particular religious community. In India, and in the career of Sunderlal Bahuguna, the word religion has sometimes led to confusion about the mission and purpose of his activism.

At the height of the struggle against the Tehri Dam—certainly one of the most visible challenges to the Himalayan environment in the 20th century—the movement against the dam received support from a number of quarters. Bahuguna opposed the dam as (1) technically inappropriate to the problem of water shortage in India, (2) dangerous because an earthquake (not at all uncommon in the region) could cause a breach in the dam that would result in colossal material damage and loss of life to people downstream from the project, and (3) unjust because it placed an inordinate burden upon the people of the region who would, if the dam were built, be deprived of the home, heritage, and livelihood they had enjoyed for centuries. These were matters of dharma or righteousness, the sacred duties enjoined by the Hindu religious tradition. For Bahuguna these reasons were not separate from explicitly religious objections against the dam. He acknowledged Mother Ganga (the Ganges River) as a sacred reality, a deity that ought not to be desecrated.
Sacred bathing ghats of the Bhagirathi River at Gangotri (See picture credit and license in footnotes.\(^1\))

In addition to Bahuguna and his followers others opposed the dam on security grounds. Professor Shivaji Rao, the Director of the Centre for Environmental Studies, in Visakhapatnam, visualized another threat to the Tehri Dam and to the population below it. In 1992 he had published a book entitled \textit{Tehri Dam Is a Time Bomb}. After the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Towers in New York and on the Pentagon in Washington DC on September 11, 2001, he published an abstract of this book in which he pointed out that the Tehri Dam would be an easy target for terrorists and that such an attack should be anticipated because terrorists would value the ability to destroy the dam and with it the life and culture of the Hindus.\(^2\)

\(^1\) "Bhagirathi River at Gangotri" by Atarax42 - Own work. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bhagirathi_River_at_Gangotri.JPG#/media/File:Bhagirathi_River_at_Gangotri.JPG].

The thought of an attack by enemies of India infused a new element of nationalism in the discourse concerning the viability of the dam. It also gave support to those concerned with the Ganges for its religious significance. Among the groups for whom the religious significance of the Ganges was especially pronounced were members of the “Hindu Right,” known collectively as the Sangh Parivar or “family of organizations.” British scholar Emma Mawdsley explains that the principal constituents of this family include the political Bharatiya Janata Party; the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a cultural organization founded in 1925 that among other things promotes paramilitary and martial arts training; and the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), or World Hindu Council set up in 1964 to bring together diverse elements of Hindu belief and practice. Mawdsley explains that the core ideology of the Sangh is “Hindutva” (Hindu-ness), but it has come to stand for the more narrow agenda of Hindu nationalism. “Essentially,” she says, “Hindutva represents a ‘blood and soil’ vision of the sacred land of Hindustan for the Hindus.”

Members of the Sangh Parivar, the VHP in particular, in opposition to the dam focused on the sanctity of the Ganges River and its potential desecration by the dam. For them the Ganges is not simply a sacred river, but a river that is sacred to the Hindus, and a symbol of Hindu identity. For them construction of the dam was a threat to the land of the Hindus and to the sacredness of the Ganges understood as a particularly Hindu symbol. In January 2001, Ashok Singal, the then President of the VHP, pointed out that the damming of the Bhagirathi would result in the loss of the purity of the Ganges. Public opposition to the dam now seemed to have support in the VHP.

Bahuguna’s protest against the Tehri Dam centered on social, ecological, and ethical issues for which he found support in the teachings of the Hindu religious tradition. But for him it was a religious issue as well. He recognized the support of those concerned with the religious significance of the river as an appropriate religious concern. In January 2001, in a speech at the Kumbh Mela, a Hindu festival in Allahabad at the confluence of the Yamuna and the Ganges rivers, an event that attracts the largest gathering of human beings on the planet, Bahuguna observed that Hindu rituals are not performed in stagnant water. He stated that the damming of the Bhagirathi River would mean “the original waters, descending from Gomukh, will no longer reach Allahabad and other centers of pilgrimage. . . . Once you dam the Ganga and contain its waters in the proposed 42.5 km lake, the river will lose its sanctity, and the consequences of that on the psyche of the people cannot be calculated.”

In an interview at the same Kumbh Mela, when he was told that the VHP had passed a resolution that condemned the proposed Tehri Dam, Bahuguna expressed gratitude for the support of VHP and others. On March 26 of that year Ashok Singhal announced to the press that he would undertake an indefinite fast “in defense of the Ganges,” to begin at the end of the month. Before the threatened fast, however, the then Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee assured Singal that a new committee of experts as well as religious figures would be constituted to reconsider the question of the safety of the dam and the impact of the dam on the sanctity

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of the river. Journalists and academics then seized upon Bahuguna’s approval of the VHP opposition to the dam and began to interpret his concern for the religious aspects of the Ganges as an alliance with the exclusionary religious and political objectives of the VHP. Referring vaguely to Bahuguna, Mukul Sharma, a Delhi-based writer, pointed out that those opposed to the dam spoke the language of ecological politics but also invoked certain metaphors to engage with religious practices and mythical beliefs: “In their use of these metaphors and myths, the environmentalists often come close to the beliefs of conservative Hindu forces and their chosen communal path.” He further wrote that especially in the later part of the movement, anti-dam politics was persistently “constructed through a conservative Hindu imagery, often in partnership with Hindutva politics. Ganga becomes holier and holiest. The ecological reasoning is blurred and goes beyond logic, eliciting Hindu support, patriotism and xenophobia.”

Writing about the hazard of the involvement of the VHP with the protest against the Tehri Dam, Emma Mawdsley states that while Bahuguna had fought all his life for the wider goals of social and environmental justice for people of the hills, to many he had become “disturbingly compromised by his ties with the VHP.” Mawdsley failed to demonstrate any ties at all between Bahuguna and the organization of the VHP, its personnel, or its nationalist objectives. Nevertheless, given the increasing sectarian rhetoric at this time in India, the religious imagery that had been persuasive and meaningful in the context of the Chipko movement tended to undermine the credibility of the anti-Tehri Dam movement.

When this was happening, I asked Bahuguna about VHP’s views on “Hindutva,” and about its opposition to the Tehri Dam. He said there is a critical difference between spirituality and sectarian religion. “They [the VHP] had made it a political thing in order to get support of the people, in order to arouse their emotions [in favor of Hindu nationalism].” He then said: “You know in (the) practical, if one follows Hindu traditions then there should be austerity. They should use less and less things. And austerity should be practiced not only in private life but in the public life also, and again with respect for nature. The modern civilization converts nature into cash. This is the trouble with the present day society.” When I asked him whether he considered Ashok Singhal or the VHP to be a part of the anti-Tehri Dam movement, he replied emphatically that Singhal was not a part of the movement, that “Singhal has a movement of his own.”

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6 Interview with Bahuguna, June 14, 2002, Old Tehri.
Bahuguna’s commitment to Gandhi’s principle of truth through nonviolence has obvious implications concerning the elevation of one religious tradition over others. Bahuguna’s attitude toward other religions was very much shaped by Gandhi’s famous eleven vows or commitments which he promoted as the rule of life in all his ashrams. One of these is called Samanalok. It is also called Sarva Dharma Samantva. It is the recognition of the equality of all religions. This goes beyond mere tolerance of other religions. It entails respect and even more than mere respect for other religions. The word tolerance suggests that I may find the religion of my neighbor to be wrong, even to be an abomination, but in the interest of peace I choose to tolerate it, to put up with it. “Tolerance,” said Gandhi, “may imply a gratuitous assumption of the inferiority of other faiths to one’s own, whereas ahimsa teaches us to entertain the same respect for the religious faith of others as one accords to one’s own, thus admitting the imperfection of the latter” (emphasis mine). To recognize the equality of religions is to go beyond the practice of toleration. For Gandhi: “The principal faiths of the world constitute a revelation of Truth, but as they have all been outlined by man, they have been affected by imperfections and alloyed with untruth.” Therefore, one must entertain “the same respect for the religious faith of others as one accords to one’s own.” And “where such tolerance becomes...”

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the law of life, conflict between different faiths becomes impossible, and so does all effort to convert other people to one’s own faith. One can only pray that the defects in the various faiths may be overcome, and that they may advance, side by side, towards perfection.”

Gandhi states that reverence for other faiths need not blind us to their faults, but we ought, therefore to be the more conscious of the faults of our own. He argues: “We must be keenly alive to the defects of our own faith also, yet not leave it on that account, but try to overcome those defects.” Moreover, looking at all religions with equal regard, we should not hesitate, he says, “to blend into our faith every acceptable feature of other faiths.” Bahuguna finds the same injunction toward austerity in the use of Earth’s resources in all of the great religions. The difficulty is that religion today is used to divide human beings rather than unite them. He states: “Unfortunately, religion today has been reduced to the level of certain rituals and this great unifying force has become a weapon in the hands of sectarian vested interests who use it to create enmity between man and man.”

This appreciation, this regard for the faiths of other people is something that I experienced in my conversations with Bahuguna. In many of our conversations, which on the face of it were intended to inform me about his activism, I often found that Bahuguna’s answers and remarks would turn into subtle admonitions from the Bhagavad Gita which he seemed to be directing toward me. In these experiences I would be reminded of affirmations which I had derived from my own religious up-bringing in conservative evangelical Protestantism. Sometimes when I would be expressing frustration about the challenges of getting my research on the activism of Bahuguna finally published, he would remind me of the conception of the ideal man which he found in the Bhagavad Gita. “He whose mind is untroubled in the midst of sorrows and is free from eager desire and pleasures, he from whom passion, fear, and rage have passed away, he is of settled intelligence” (Bhagavad Gita 2:56). From that I could only be reminded of the many trials and frustrations in his career in environmental activism, and of his perpetual optimism. Other times he reminded me that work is sacrifice. “Save work done as and for a sacrifice this world is in bondage to work. Therefore, do thy work as a sacrifice, becoming free from all attachment” (Bhagavad Gita 3:9). And that reminded me of the teaching of Saint Paul in Romans 12:1 that the true followers of Christ present themselves as a living sacrifice.

But lest I should be inclined to think that he is preaching to me from the Hindu tradition he would often remind me that is his daily devotions with his wife Vimla they used prayers derived from all of the world’s religions. I finally asked him about his favorite prayer from the Hindu

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tradition. It was the Asatoma Ma Sadgamaya Mantra. From the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. It says:

Lead me from the error to truth.
Lead me from darkness to light.
Lead me from death to immortality
Om Peace Peace Peace

And that reminded me of a prayer not from my childhood but more recently from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer that acknowledges the same transformation of human consciousness from error into truth, from sin to righteousness, and from death to immortality. When I asked him about his favorite prayer from the Christian tradition he said it was the prayer of Saint Francis:

Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace;
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

I will close with one short story about Bahuguna. The book about his philosophy and his activism on which I had been working for several years was now finally finished. I had given Bahuguna a revised final typescript just to check it over for any factual errors. It was also his 85th birthday and Anil Joshi, the founder of an NGO in Dehradun called HESCO (Himalayan Environmental Studies and Conservation Organization), had arranged a special puja at the temple on the HESCO compound to mark the occasion. I was running late and arrived just as the mantras were beginning. Vimla, Sunderlal, and Anil Joshi were already there. As I approached the temple I could see the image of Lord Shiva, Nandi the Bull, the trident, the flags, and the Altar. On the altar were the objects I would normally expect to find: the incense, the vermillion paste, the coconut, the flowers, the fruits, all offerings to the Lord. And then I saw the offering I wasn’t expecting which brought tears to my eyes. There on the altar marked with vermillion paste and surrounded by the other symbolic offerings to the Lord was the typescript to the book. Ecology is Permanent Economy: the Activism and Environmental Philosophy of Sunderlal Bahuguna.