

Scrapping Bhagirathi Dam

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After the moratorium on bt Brinjal –which could have been India's first poisonous GM food crop—the scrapping of the 600 MW Loharinag Pala hydroelectric project on Bhagirathi river in the lap of the Himalayas (in Uttarakhand State) is another firm but major decision that has been swayed by public opinion.

Faced with a wave of religious sentiments, opposition from environmentalists (spearheaded by the respected environmentalist Prof G D Agarwal who sat on a 31-day fast on the banks of the river), academicians and local villagers, a three-member Group of Ministers (GoM)—headed by Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee and comprising Power Minister Sushil Kumar Shinde and Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh—reversed its earlier decision of continuing with the construction of the hydel dam project in view of the financial implications involved.

This decision assumes terrible importance, and may actually serve as a precedent, since Rs 650-crore had already been spent on the controversial project, and another Rs 2000-crore is locked in supplies and future orders. Also, this decision is not going to evoke any strong reaction from the industry because the project was being laid out by the public sector National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC). But if it was, for instance, being pursued by Reliance Industries, the Finance Minister would have dug his heels, and the media would have cried hoarse.

"The decision to shut down the hydel project comes after the Congress leadership showed it was ready to lend more political credence to environmental concerns," writes Nitin Sethi in a front page dispatch in *The Times of India* (Aug 21, 2010). Maybe, this is the reason why the UPA-II has actually been forced to reverse its own decision taken a few months back.

Everybody knows that with the Congress high command intervening, the GoM reversed its decision. It does evoke a curiosity to know who do people mean when they say Congress high command. After all, the government itself had given a go-ahead in June, and then who in the Congress party could have over-ruled that decision. Well, when the newspapers say Congress high command they actually mean the UPA President Sonia Gandhi.

Sonia Gandhi has very rightly donned the robe of an environmental watchdog.

While the decision also means that the mighty Ganga would not be tamed for 135-km stretch from Gomukh to Uttarakashi, and as Jairam Ramesh stated: "It will be a no-dam area and the government will declare it an ecologically sensitive zone in the next four to five weeks." This is an important decision, and will go a long way to protect the fragile ecology of the Himalayas. More and more such ecologically important decisions need to be taken to ensure that the persons in power do not play havoc with the environment any further.

Strangely enough, environment protection has suddenly taken a hot seat. If the instrument of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) used properly it can be really helpful in balancing the needs of development vis a vis environment protection and conservation. At times when the world is confronted with the grave implications of global warming, and the destruction of the natural habitat, Jairam Ramesh has single-handedly taken upon himself the role of protector of India's environment. He has very effectively used EIA to bring out the concerns, and is also ensuring that the companies are made to behave.

The UPA-II cabinet (also a section of the media) wouldn't have allowed Jairam Ramesh to function if it was not for the unequivocal support he is receiving from the Congress president Sonia Gandhi. Her recent observation on illegal mining is encouraging : "It is a menace with profound political, economic and social implications... What is most worrying is the high degree of convergence between areas that are mineral and forest-rich and areas that are arenas of tribal deprivation and Left-wing extremist violence."

Very well said indeed. As she rightly added: "Dealing with the Naxalite challenge will call for fundamental innovations in the manner in which the mineral resources are exploited and forests are managed." Whether the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and the Home Minister P Chidambaram, as well as the BJP leadership are listening is not known. □□□

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