



# A Rebel Without Pause- Sunderlal Bahuguna

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"Sunderlal Bahuguna" by Sandy & Alan

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I met Shri Sunderlal Bahuguna for the first time in 1999 in Tehri, Uttarakhand, where he was protesting against the construction of Tehri Dam. I was with my elder brother, Dr. Sunil Kainthola, who lives in Dehradun. We had gone to meet Bahuguna ji regarding a meeting we had organized in Mussoorie, to initiate a community rights movement- Vanaadhikar. This meeting was organized to bring the village communities of Uttarakhand, especially, tribal communities, environmental activists and like-minded organizations under one umbrella,- Alliance for People, to assert the traditional forest rights of the communities. The issue was closely connected with environment protection and the role of local communities in the same. And if we are talking about environment,

especially in Uttarakhand, then Bahuguna ji had to be a part of it.

When people told me that he lives in a Kutia, (a handmade, basic hut), I brushed aside the information as an exaggeration because the last time I heard of someone living in a Kutia was Ram, Laxman and Sita, during their Vanvaas. But when we met him in Tehri, indeed his dwelling was a Kutia, at the edge of a bridge, where he lived with his wife, Smt. Vimla Bahuguna. There was no other habitat anywhere in the vicinity, nor were there any other people, just the two of them! The Kutia was a very basic, hand-made shelter, made of dry grass, with basic bamboo support, the floor was thatched with cow dung, with no facilities, whatsoever!!! I observed

Bahuguna ji, a frail man, who had become extremely weak due to the long physical hardships, but his aura was vibrant, his voice was full of determination and spirit was very high. He was very happy with the initiative of Alliance for People, but humbly excused himself, due to the protest to save Tehri. But ensured that one of his disciples participated in the meeting. We understood his point, he had to be physically present at the site to register his protest. He was kind to discuss the issue with us, gave us some very important inputs and valuable advice. Vimla ji also came and joined us for some time and shared her journey of awakening through associations and working with various prominent Gandhian activist who were working towards making a new India at the grassroot level. While discussing the anti-Tehri Dam protest, he did mention an accident which had taken place some time ago, in which a number of anti-dam activists died. According to him, rather than being a freak accident, there was a possibility that it could have been a Sabotage. 'After all, it is not easy to fight against powerful politicians, there are consequences of every struggle, some big some small!!!' I couldn't believe my ears, because he spoke about a possibly

planned conspiracy, which killed his fellow activists, without an iota of hatred or agitation!! He was calm, composed, sad about the loss and yet determined...Imagine, although he knew that protesting against the dam could be life threatening even for him, this threat did not bend him or break him, nor could it stop him, here he was a seventy two year old man with his wife, all alone, fighting against the mighty powers!! He was aware of the fact that with all its resources and muscles the hydro power projects could influence everyone, the politicians, unions including students union and other stakeholders.

After discussing the details of Vanaadhikar, we took his leave and went to the main Bazaar in Tehri.

After leaving from his Kutia, for a long time we were discussing Bahuguna ji. A Gandhian to the core, he spent his entire life taking up causes for the wellbeing of communities. He took Chipko Andolan, which started in Reni village, Chamoli district in 1974, to the world, he started movements for environmental protection, he spearheaded Anti Liquor movements, to create awareness about ill effects of liquor consumption, which even today is a

bane for Uttarakhand, and of course the Anti Tehri Dam movement.

He initiated the anti-dam movement when the protest was at its peak. About 100 villages in Tehri district, a habitat for around one lakh people, were to be displaced and there were mass agitations to protect the rights of people, to protect the environment and to save the geologically fragile mountains. Bahuguna ji; started leading the anti- Dam movement; after V D Saklani; fell seriously ill. Soon Bahuguna ji and the people from the hundred villages were on one side and surprisingly the villagers, - who were not getting directly affected by the dam were on the opposite side. The ones who were outside the displacement plan, were supporting the dam and were vehemently criticizing Bahuguna ji for taking an Anti-Development and anti-Pahad stand. They tried to vilify him and he was targeted consistently. He tried to make the picture clear to them, that the impact of such a huge dam would not end at merely displacing the 100 villages, there will be many indirect impacts, some visible, some not visible, some instant and some will start impacting after few years, but all of it fell into deaf ears. The villagers were displaced, hundred villages were vacated, the dam was

built and those who were calling Bahuguna ji names, who declared him to be the villain of this anti dam protest, became the worst hit population. Those displaced were rehabilitated in New Tehri and in villages around, they were completely uprooted and had to change their way of living. But those who remained in the surrounding areas, are living in the back waters today. There is such a huge water body between them and rest of the region, that the distance which they could cover in a matter of couple of hours, now takes a couple of days!!!

The impact of huge water reservoirs created due to the dam on local climate is yet to be researched, however, there is a definite change in the rainfall pattern and increase in cloud bursts. Further, new disaster-prone zones on the periphery of the Tehri Dam are appearing and there is no science to probe the origin of this crisis. In due course of time couple of more villages might be forced to vacate while the civil engineering lobby keeps celebrating the positive impacts of the Dam in terms of minimizing the impacts of flashfloods. Bahuguna ji continued his protest relentlessly from the day he joined it in 1989, although, those displaced due to the dam, took the

compensation and left, those who got new land, took it and left, those who got construction contracts in the dam grabbed the opportunity to make some quick money, finished their work and they too left. In fact, the displacement process became an industry with Babus, politicians, middleman and real estate mafia joining hands to grab the prime lands allocated to the displaced families. But one man who remained there till the last day, till water reached his humble abode, till he had to be physically removed from the vicinity or else the flow of the dam water would take him along, was Bahuguna ji, he was there till 2001, not even for a day did he take a break, not even for a day did he rest or not even for a minute did he think of giving up. That is what he was, a man of conviction, grit, courage and selflessness.

We have seen many people carving out a carrier from the public protests, Chipko Andolan and anti-Tehri Dam protests were no exceptions. There were people, who projected to be the voice of the community against the policies of the government, but soon we saw them sitting with the very government, making policies for the same communities, for whose sake they were fighting with

the government!!! Fake Gandhians in Khadi preaching swadeshi and presiding over big NGOs, some good but mostly fake. But Bahuguna ji never lost focus, nor did he get lured by a promising carrier of an Andolanjivi. He raised issues, pertinent to the communities, pertinent to Uttarakhand, pertinent to India and humanity, he stood by the principles he believed in and did not compromise with them at any point for his selfish gains. Rarely do we come across people like Sundarlal Bahuguna ji, who are selflessly dedicated to the wellbeing of others and continue serving others till the end.

The glorious history of Chipko and its relevance for native communities was in my mind when I decided to do my D. Phil on similar issues in Garhwal. There were few awakened souls like Bahuguna Ji, V.D. Saklani ji, Ghanshyam Sailani Ji and some others, who started the discourse on environment but now, the consciousness of Chipko is a global phenomenon. I dare to write that Sunder Lala Bahuguna is still alive through his dedication and contribution to save mother earth. In fact, he is becoming more relevant with each passing day!