



# “Bahuguna Lives”

## ***Aparna Phadke***



“Sunderlal Bahuguna” by Sandy & Alan

Department of Geography  
University of Mumbai  
aparna.phadke@geography.mu.ac.in

Mr. Sunderlal Bahuguna's death came as a tragic shock to the entire world. A pioneer of environmental movements in India who taught the world to save the environment through nonviolent forms of protests. Himalayas, one of the most peculiar geographies and delicate systems had been experiencing reckless deforestation in 1960. The same invited frequent landslides, deluge and flash floods. The correlation between the rapid disappearance of the forests and increase in the number of natural calamities was proved by Bahuguna. Disturbed with the continuous degradation of Himalayan ecosystems, he initiated talks with the native people who voluntarily got involved in the Chipko movement to save their forests from reckless felling. The most vital element of Bahuguna's movements were the involvement of people, especially women. The people involved were from rural

environments, may not have had great educational background, but were extremely passionate towards the Himalayas. So, it was a grassroots movement that challenged the very logic of 'development' and the idiom of 'Big is Beautiful'. His belief of "Ecology is Permanent Economy" laid the foundation of ecologically sustainable thinking.

Born on 9th January, 1927, he spent his entire life in Garhwal Himalayas. He lived for decades in his Silyara Ashram in Tehri, Garhwal, as he had decided to spend his life in rural settings. The Ashram was open to all, especially for the youth who were inspired by his courage and dedication towards environmental protection. Though he was known for his commitment towards the environment, he had also been a part of anti-liquor drive and was a strong supporter of abolition of social ills like untouchability.

He was an ardent Gandhian who believed in the principles of non-violence and continued to garner similar spirit into the environmental movements he led. Thus, Chipko movement emerged to be a guiding epitome for all the environmental movements that later emerged in India. He was against the construction of big dams as he strongly believed that construction of big dams in the Himalayas would adversely interfere with the fragile ecosystem and seismological balance. His staunch opposition to Tehri dam construction forced the government to emerge with several revisions in the original planning to reduce its environmental impact. Alas! in spite of a fierce opposition by him and many other environmentalists, the construction of Tehri Dam started in 1978 and was completed by 2006.

He believed that the solution of present-day problems lies in the reestablishment of a harmonious relationship between man and nature. While exploring on his understanding of development he proposes, “to keep this relationship permanent we will have to emerge with the appropriate definition of development. Development is synonymous with culture. When we sublimate nature in a way that we achieve peace, happiness, prosperity and ultimately, fulfilment along with satisfying our basic needs, we march towards culture”. The definition given by him

adheres to the intimacy between environment, society and culture keeping the communities at the core of development paradigms. This probably is one of the best definitions of sustainable development.

The real tribute to Mr. Bahuguna would be a caption as “Bahuguna Lives”. I can see him alive in millions of people who are unnamed and believe in protecting their environments. Bahuguna was seen recently in those thousands of young people who gathered to protect Aarey forests, hugged trees and continued a fearless movement “Save Aarey”.

The pandemic has taught us many lessons. People were starving for oxygen... We know who can give us Oxygen free of cost. The real tribute to Mr. Bahuguna would be by strengthening our voices for “Rights of Nature”. As one of the poets suggest, trees are our lives. Bahuguna still lives in those thousands of trees saved by him and his followers.

“Embrace the trees and  
save them from being felled;  
The property of our hills,  
Save them from being looted”  
(Mr. Ghanasyam Raturi, Poet, Chipko  
Movement)