

Shri Sunder Lal Bahuguna

Recipient of Jamnalal Bajaj Award for Constructive Work-1986

Shri Sunder Lal Bahuguna was born in 1927 in a small village in Tehri Garhwal District. He had his early college education in Tehri and graduated from Lahore in Political Science, History and English. He was initiated into public life by Shri Shridev Suman, a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi. He started taking active part in the freedom movement at the age of 13 and was imprisoned when only 17. Soon thereafter, he entered politics and worked as General Secretary of the Tehri Rajya Prajamandal and District Congress Committee. Even while in politics, his main interest centered on constructive activities.

In 1949 Shri Bahuguna came in contact with Mira Behn and Thakkar Bapa. Inspired by them, he started a school for the scavengers, a move that evoked the wrath of relatives and friends and severe opposition from the upper castes. However, he refused to submit to the pressures. He established the Thakkar Bapa Hostel at Tehri for poor students of all communities and also led temple entry movements for Harijans. Since then he is actively engaged in almost all the activities included in the constructive programme of Gandhiji. In 1954, he met Sarla Behn. Two years later, he gave up party and power politics. He and Vimla Nautiyal, a disciple of Sarla Behn, married in 1956 and settled in village Silyara of Tehri Garhwal District. He founded the Parvatiya Navjivan Mandal and continued with his above-mentioned endeavours. He added women's uplift also in his schemes.

In 1960, on a call from Vinoba Bhave, Shri Bahuguna went on long padayatras all over the hills and propagated Vinobaji's message in 7 districts. It was during these foot marches that he got a chance to understand the seriousness of forest devastation in the upper catchments of the Himalayan rivers. He drew the country's attention towards the new danger of floods from the Himalayas. During his campaign he inspired several dedicated social workers to undertake constructive activities.

In 1971 Shri Bahuguna fasted for 16 days as a protest against re-opening of liquor shops in hilly districts. Thousands of women joined the movement and 5 districts were declared dry as a result of this campaign launched by Uttarakhand Sarvodaya Mandal under Shri Bahuguna's guidance. In 1972 Shri Bahuguna took up the forest problem and started mobilizing people against felling of trees by asking them to resort to non-violent way of protest. He gave the call "Chipko" which means "hug the trees". That is how the movement came to be known as Chipko Movement. In the beginning, it was restricted to the problem of conservation of forests, but gradually other aspects of environmental protection were also covered. Chipko movement is the manifestation of India's ancient culture in which nature is worshipped and not destroyed for short term economic gains. Shri Bahuguna's Herculean efforts for rousing the consciousness of people and the government for a better and healthier environment make a saga of heroic proportions. He walked and walked to cover the entire hilly regions stretching over thousands of kilometers from north to north east notable among his padayatras were : 120 days and 1400 kms in 1973, 2800 kms in 1975, both in Uttarakhand and 4870 kms from Kashmir to Kohima during 1981-83. He also went on long fasts in protest against felling of trees and courted arrest. The Andolan caught the imagination of India's scientists who invited him to attend the Science Congress at Varanasi in 1981. The scientists appreciated his ideas. Ultimately, the U.P. government had to stop felling of green trees in hilly tracts above the height of 1000 metres for commercial purposes.

His ceaseless struggle and inspiring stewardship of the Chipko Movement earned him laurels from various international institutions including the UN organizations _ UNEP, FAO, ILO and United Nations' University. He was invited as a distinguished speaker at several international conferences/seminars on environmental problems. He also attracted the attention of world famous Man of Trees, late Richard St Barbe Baker, who spread the Chipko message all over the world through the Branches of Man of Trees in 108 countries.

Shri Bahuguna was awarded the Padmashri award in 1981 but he turned it down saying:”he would remain unfit for such an award till the flesh and blood of Mother India in the form of precious top soil from Himalaya is flowing down to the sea due to tree felling.” He won the Conservation Award by Friends of Nature, U.S.A. in 1980, National Integration Award in 1984 and 'Man of Trees' Award by Friends of Trees, Bombay, in 1985.

Shri Bahuguna works as a freelance journalist and has been supporting his fellow workers from this income. About his life's mission he says: “My heart is full of anguish due to the wounds on the body of Mother Earth and the miserable life of women. I have dedicated myself to serve these. “As a swimmer against the stream, he has been accustomed to receive ridicule, neglect, isolation and insult, but this he says “has strengthened me.” He moves all over the country and abroad as the messenger of India's Aranya Culture and tries to bring together humanitarian scientists, social activists and compassionate literary men, who, he believes, can bring about social change. He continues to work for his conviction that “Ecology is permanent economy” and I can solve the triple problems of war, pollution and poverty facing humankind today.

