

George A James., *Ecology is Permanent Economy: The Activism and Environmental Philosophy of Sunderlal Bahuguna.* SUNY, New York 2013, pp. 266.

This book is about “the first ‘guru’ of India’s environmental consciousness” (12), acclaimed worldwide for his contributions to the forest conservation movement in the Western Himalayas called the Chipko (Hug the Tree Movement). Even as a grassroots activist, Sunderlal Bahuguna has attracted global attention primarily because of the methods he employed for raising environmental consciousness in India: prolonged fasts, extensive foot marches covering several thousand kilometers across hostile terrain, speeches at national and international events, articles in English in the national and international press, and catchy slogans one of which is enshrined as the title of this book. Yet, there exists little interest to understand his philosophy and its relevance to contemporary ecological concerns. Moreover, despite the accolades he has received for his crusade against the cutting of trees and building of a large dam at Tehri, Bahuguna is often misunderstood in his home country and labeled as an “anti-development junkie.” *Ecology is Permanent Economy* fills a major gap in both Western and Indian understanding of Bahuguna and his philosophy.

Instead of a static conceptual analysis of Bahuguna’s philosophy, the book actively surveys the intellectual and moral context of his life and works. The narrative accompaniment adds valuable information not only about Bahuguna but also about those who influenced him. We thus learn about the little-known contribution of a figure in Indian environmental history, Mira Behn (Madeleine Slade), the famous English associate of Gandhi. While the chapter on Mira Behn conflates her ideas wholly to that of Gandhi, it does provide a useful biographical sketch of her life. Here, we learn about a woman from the British gentry who had lived and worked with Gandhi for thirty-three long years, helped to improve and expand Gandhi’s constructive program, and played a remarkable role in social and ecological sustainability in the Himalayan hills. While contact with the Indian freedom fighter Sri Dev Suman revealed to Bahuguna the essence of Gandhi’s Satyagraha or nonviolent resistance against injustice, the real philosophical message of Gandhi’s rural constructive program came through Mira Behn. It was through this association with Mira Behn that Bahuguna came to understand Gandhi’s philosophy which he realized “was quite different from what he had known [before]” (58). Further, Mira Behn initiated Bahuguna to ecology, inspired him to work for the mountain villages, and developed his understanding of the “relationship between the life of the villages and the life of nature” (61). The second major influence on Bahuguna, particularly his activism, was Sarala Behn (Catherine Mary Heilemann), another British woman who dedicated her life to the education and empowerment of hill women of Uttarakhand. This influence came mainly through Bahuguna’s wife to be, Vimla Nautiyal, one of Sarala Behn’s first students at her educational center, Lakshmi Ashram. Nautiyal was instrumental in shaping and directing Bahuguna’s course of life first by making him give up a career in politics and second, by founding an ashram in the remote hills, to work

towards the upliftment of people. The ashram eventually became the powerhouse of many of Bahuguna's future activism.

James's book addresses a question of paramount significance today. Abstract processes of global environmental thinking often tend to ignore subjectivity with the result that contributions of individuals in general and especially those of the South go overlooked. James' volume corrects this tendency. It highlights the role of biography depicting individual character, principles, and religion that provide practical and motivational lessons of living in global encounters of sustainability and ecological conservation. In this way, James' book not only emphasizes the struggle for the environment in non-Western countries, but also how such struggles can contribute to the growth of an environmental ethic that can be lived and practiced. Moreover, the book provides a "better understanding of the significance of Indian environmental philosophy." Bahuguna's religious significance of nature does not pertain to any exclusive religious worldview or complicated metaphysics but brings out an intimate relationship between "the earth as our mother and human beings as her children, who should ... recognize their dependence upon her bounty" (225). The essential part of his spirituality is not merely the ability to see divinity in "birds, beasts, trees, mountains, and rivers," but also to be able to translate that "seeing" into an active relationship with nature (219). Such philosophical-religious ideals evince an influence of Gandhi and a religious consciousness that originates in village India and which is a departure from Hinduism as an urban phenomenon. An Indian environmental ethic is thus not bound to readings of esoteric religious texts but is a dynamic and evolving worldview that represents a vision of a sustainable relationship between human beings and nature that is globally significant.

In this connection, James reveals the continued relevance of Gandhi's moral philosophy in inspiring and catalyzing social change and in sustainable development. James' analysis of Bahuguna's philosophy and activism underscores the practical and philosophical significance of the eleven vows of Gandhi and not just his nonviolence. For instance, the vow of *swadeshi* or self-reliance and *asteya* or vow not to misuse one's own resources and misappropriate what belongs to another becomes relevant to environmental ethics. Meeting Delhi's water needs by "exploiting resources at great distances, and at the cost of distant local economies" is a violation of the principle of *swadeshi* (211). Moreover, Delhi has polluted its own waters, that of the Yamuna, and has thus misappropriated water from the Ganga to meet its own needs. Today in the West, the plan to bring water to Southern California through diversion tunnels, draining the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and depriving the Winnemem Wintu peoples of their water rights is a similar case in point. This case illustrates the destruction of local self-reliance and the colossal misuse of resources in the moving of waters in California: cutting trees; killing beavers, delta smelt, and salmon; murdering wolves, damming rivers, depriving traditional water rights, all for growing almonds and pistachios in the desert for export.

While the book presents a broad-based and intimate study of the philosophy of Bahuguna, it has some limitations. The chapters on Chipko demand attention in this regard. I contend that if Bahuguna's activities in the Chipko Movement emerge

from and reflect his philosophy of nature as the author indicates, then a deeper analysis of Chipko could be a helpful guide to understand and appreciate Bahuguna's philosophy and activism. A philosophical biography needs to consider not merely the self-conscious responses of the person to external events and ideas that influenced him but also those which he is unaware of or which he inadvertently omits or insufficiently addresses. These hidden influences may emerge through careful analysis of events, which could reveal significant aspects of one's values, ideas, and motivations.

James follows the general trend and account of the Chipko narrative generated by Delhi academics such as Vandana Shiva, especially about women's role in the movement and its feminist mantle of romance with trees, which is historically questionable. Despite the impressive participation of women in Chipko, the fact remains that the motivators, organizers, and decision-makers in the movement were primarily men. In this regard one wonders, did the rural women generate the famous Chipko slogan (What do the forests bear?/soil water and pure air) extemporaneously and relayed it in chorus as a rebuttal to a forester's view that the forests bear resin, timber, and profit? Could the local rural women, though aware of the importance of forests as source of biomass, be familiar with the fundamental environmental processes and intangible values of forests, such as production of atmospheric oxygen through carbon sequestration? Who generated the slogan? Under what circumstances? A much more intellectually engaging historical analysis of Chipko events and source of Bahuguna's philosophy could have been made than merely reinstating the selective views of Bahuguna and other scholars about the protests in the forests of Henwal valley. In this regard, Bahuguna's rather interesting remark, "the Chipko Movement was an expression of the program of rural development for which Mira Behn and Sarala Behn had worked" (92) escapes scholarly critique.

Furthermore, Bahuguna's ecological turn, indicating his evolution from an activist who expressed his explicit support for the felling of trees for local forest-based industries by even fasting for the cause and organizing a ritual worship of local woodcutting machines to a conservationist supporting a ban on all felling is an interesting cognitive transformation that needs greater attention and analysis. James reiterates Bahuguna's version that there were no opposition between ecological and economic interests of the movement adding later that a realization that forests need to be protected first led Bahuguna and other activists to move "from an economic approach to an approach to conservation for a stable and permanent economy" (168). However, some prominent activists have pointed a time in the history of Chipko when tapping of forest wealth was not considered to be a sin or offense but that relationships between people and forests began to be defined in a new way. This poses several intriguing questions to the researcher: what made Bahuguna realize that "it makes no difference whether outside contractors were cutting down the forests or whether local forest contractors were doing the job"? (121). Equally so, what made Bahuguna shift from forest-based industries as a means to address local economic conditions of the hill people to tree farming with an emphasis on food, fodder, fuel, fertilizer, and fiber trees? Were these his own ideas? In other words, is "Ecology is Permanent Economy", an idea

that Bahuguna originated? Moreover, one wonders why did he revoke the Government of India Padma-Shree award after initially accepting it? James does not provide satisfactory answers to these questions. Interestingly, the award originally went to both Bahuguna and Sarala Behn, but the latter promptly refused to accept it on grounds that such accolades to particular individuals could spoil peer environment amongst workers.

Finally, the book elicits little scholarly comment on differences of opinion between Bahuguna and his Gandhian comrades. For instance, James observes that Bahuguna's Kashmir to Kohima foot-march for spreading the message of Chipko was not welcomed by many "arm-chair social workers" and others because of the hardships and hazards such journey entailed (149). This runs the danger of being a one-sided view of Bahuguna as it fails to see why in fact many of the local activists and his ardent followers did not welcome his ambitious march. Similarly, the discussion on the Anti-Tehri dam struggle exalts the nature of Bahuguna's individual satyagraha fasts for economic and environmental justice. Yet, there were Gandhians who raised legitimate concern over Bahuguna's choice of fast as a "mode of resistance". Such fasts were considered undemocratic and alienating, undermining the movement's organizational base.

Sunderlal Bahuguna is not the product of the influence of one person. While I do not deny the importance of other individuals in Bahuguna's life, it is surprising to note that there is no analysis of the influence of Sarala Behn. This points to a significant gap in the analysis of Bahuguna's philosophy and activism. For instance, the Stop Alcohol movement in the hills was a result of Sarala Behn's teachings and organizational efforts, Vinoba Bhave had little role to play in this initiative. Yet, James is emphatic about Bhave's influence on Bahuguna in this movement (77). Moreover, James argues that Bahuguna's "emerging emphasis upon ecology" in the Chipko Movement is indebted to E.F. Schumacher's book *Small is Beautiful* and to Richard St. Barbe Baker. This claim is not convincing since Sarala Behn through her writings, speeches, and letters had been emphasizing the role of ecology in village economy of Uttarakhand as well as popularizing the work of several Western scholars including Schumacher for more than two decades. Bahuguna himself acknowledges her as the "Mother of the Sarvodaya activists" and her influence even on the slogan that is the title of James's book. It is true that a biographer cannot include every detail, and here one sympathizes with James' omission. Yet, failing to examine the intellectual and moral stimulation that Bahuguna received from Sarala Behn, James neglects a crucial dimension of his thought and activities.

While the scope of the book may limit exploration of all the influences on Bahuguna's life, some deserve special mention and may guide future research on Bahuguna. For instance, James devotes a whole chapter on Bahuguna's marriage and the establishment of his ashram. Yet, he says relatively little about the impact of his wife, Vimla, on his philosophy and activism except that she was instrumental in his giving up of a prospective political career and his settling in the villages. On the contrary, it is well-known amongst Gandhian social workers of Uttarakhand that without Vimla Bahuguna's intellectual and moral support Sunderlal Bahuguna

could not have achieved what he has. It is unfortunate that we do not learn much about the incalculable influence of this other remarkable woman on Bahuguna.

Critical changes in Bahuguna's life certainly have to do with his religious thinking. One such change is clearly visible in the later phase of his life and activism when he became a follower of the Hindu spiritual leader, Swami Chidananda. James mentions Swami Chidananda as Bahuguna's spiritual guide (180), but he goes no further. This gap is especially prominent in the chapter on the Tehri dam and in his discussion of the religious roots of Bahuguna's spirituality. One here might expect some analysis of when and why this influence became significant and how it contributed to his activism.

Future research on Bahuguna and his environmentalism has to address these unanswered questions and omissions among the diverse intellectual and practical ideas and influences on his life. This would provide clearer insight into the concrete contexts in which Bahuguna's thought evolved and help construct a coherent and critical narrative. Human experiences in biographical research become persuasive when the nuances, tensions, inconsistencies, and ambiguities of human life are taken into account. This can come about not simply through an examination of Bahuguna's own words and published writings in English but through the opinion of other activists closely affiliated with Bahuguna and those who opposed him, as well as the extensive vernacular literature and texts, both published and unpublished.

Despite these considerations, James' *Ecology is Permanent Economy* has many gems to offer. James asserts that the book is not a biography yet the significant biographical details are helpful to understand Bahuguna's philosophy and activism to preserve the Himalayan ecology. These details show how personal experiences inspire philosophical insights and social action. It illuminates an important relationship between biography and philosophy. The book evidently clears misconceptions about Bahuguna and better equips the reader to understand his role and significance as a philosopher. Moreover, James' engaging, fluid narrative guides the reader to the events and concepts foundational to Bahuguna's thought and activism. *Ecology is Permanent Economy* is an original work on environmental activism, grassroots movements, and a new environmental philosophy that bears significance for both Indian and Western readers, particularly the younger generation and those who wish to see a better world.

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