

A Woman with Rocklike Determination

Interview with Vimla Bahuguna



Vimla Bahuguna is not known to the world outside as is her husband Sunderlal Bahuguna. This, she told me, is the first ever interview she has given at length. This frail and diminutive woman has been a full partner with her husband in the Chipko movement and she asserts it with the calm confidence of someone who has selflessly given her life to the cause of her people. Every line on her face speaks of her compassion and the mammoth struggle that her life has been.

—Madhu Kishwar

How did you and Bahugunaji come together in this field ?

Bahugunaji and I come from nearby villages. I was born in Malideval in Tehri. He was born in a nearby village called Sirai—the vil-lages are two kilometers apart. He was born in 1927 and I was born in 1932.

My father worked in the Forest Department. We spent a lot of time amidst nature in dense forests. I got my love of nature from these early

experiences in the forests. Tehri was then aprincely state. We hadnoproper provision for educating girls. Even for the boys there was just one intercollege in the district. For, the girls there was just one school that went up to eighth standard.

During our youth there was a rebellion against the monarchy in Tehri. At the same time the entire country was swept up in the rebellion against the British. Both my brothers, Budhisagar and Vidyasagar Nautiyal,

one elder and one younger than me, joined in this rebellion. My elder brother had,given up his education to join the movement. Both of them had to serve prison terms. I used to think about how I could become a meaningful partner in this struggle. Being a young girl at that time I could not do very much. I participated in the movement by collecting rations from house to house for men involved in the movement when they came to our village, as well as organising meetings for them.

What form did the rebellion against the local ruler take ? What were the difficulties that you had to face ?

First of all, as I have said, the doors of education were completely closed for most people. The ruler feared that if the people got educated they would ask for their rights. But the martyrdom of Gurudev Sumanji did not go in vain and Bahugunaji, my brothers and many other youth like Harpuranandaji, Ramchandra Uniiyal, and Anand Ratanji raised the banner of revolt.

Were you with the Congress or were you working separately ?

We were with the Congress. Narendra Shah was our king. His rule ended in 1949. Unlike my brothers I did not get an opportunity to go to jail. Therefore, I turned my attention to-wards my education. Mean while Sarla behn, a European woman, had started an institution in Kosani. Being in-spired by Gandhiji, she had come to India. She had stayed with Gandhiji at Wardha for five years. There she frequently suffered from malaria and could not adjust to the heat. So she chose to live in the mountains. Here she came into contact with the people involved in the anti-Maharaja freedom movement and she started working with them. She would visit the families of those men who had been arrested for participating in the freedom struggle and find out how she could help them. Even though she was born in Europe, she went to jail twice for the independence of the people of India.

She found the women in the mountains to be very courageous

and hardworking, woman who ran their households with determination when their menfolk were in jail. But she was distressed when she found that the same women had to shoulder the entire responsibility of the household, looking after the children, attending to the fields, but would not come to attend a meeting if Sarla behn called one. They would say, "Behnji, we are like animals. All we know is work, Meetings and other such social activities are meant only for men." This low self-esteem of women made her decide that along with the struggle for independence she would also work for educating women to instill self confidence in them. So she started an institution for educating women. My brothers sent me to her institution in 1950, after I passed the eighth class exam. Till now we had been in touch with the views of Gandhiji through reading. But after going there we saw how Sarla behn's life was an embodiment of Gandhiji's ideas. She led a very simple life, she only wore clothes made from hand spun yarn.

What age group of females did this institution cater to?

From six years onwards. She

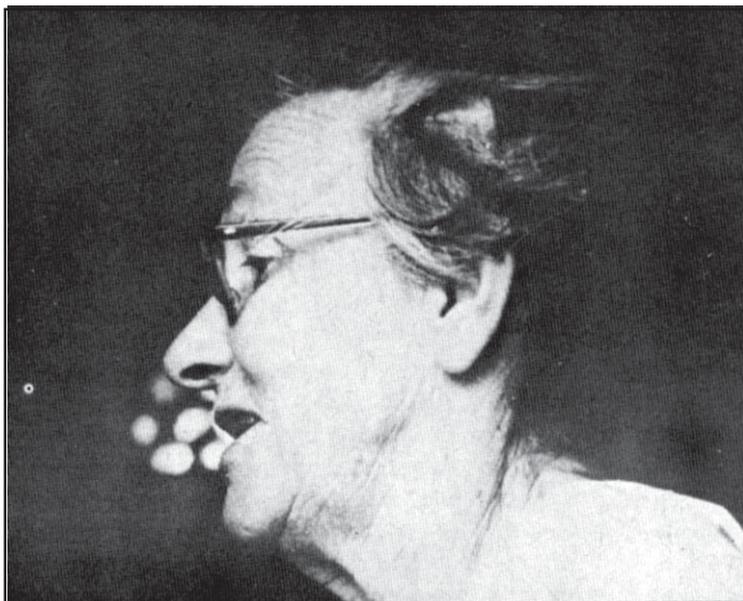
established her ashram on the basis of Gandhiji's concept of basic education. We were taught to read and write. Besides this we were taught all the skills that we need in our daily lives--like cooking, gardening, spinning, health care. In addition, we given training for social work, so that when we went back to our villages we could start a health centre and work there.

Where did the money come from to run the ashram?

Those children whose families could afford to pay for their children's education and upkeep did so. My two sisters came there after me. We three sisters got money from our family. For those children whose parents who could not afford to pay, behnji got a grant from the education department. The name of the institution was *Kasturba Mahila Utthan Mandal, Lakshmi Ashram*, Kosani. Radha behn, who also studied under Sarla behn, is running it now. Sarla behn was live till 1982.

Looking at Sarla behn's felt that if this woman who has come from a far away country can so dedicate herself to the service of Indians, I too should dedicate my life to serving my country's people. She had told Gandhiji that she had started the institution keeping in view his ideals and that she would give proof of her work in 20 years when the girls from her ashram would go back to their villages and spread a w a r e n e s s amongst the women there.

In the meanwhile in 1953,



Sarla behn

when Vinoba Bhave started the Bhoodan (voluntary gift of land to the poor) movement, he needed some volunteers. At a discussion in our institution we decided that one of us should join in the effort. I said I would be most happy if I was given the chance. So in 1953 I was sent to work with Vinobha Bhave.

For one year I travelled with Vinobhaji in Bihar for the Bhoodan movement. There was a lot of work to be done with Vinobhaji, but we had to run our institution also and the area in which we were living also had to be improved. Sol returned to our ashram and with Sarla behnji and other women we formed a group and started going from village to village for the village uplift programme.

During this time my father began pressing me to get married and settle down. I said that I would get married only if I found someone whose ideas were in harmony with mine. I did not think that marriage was a must as I was a disciple of Sarla behn and she had dedicated her entire life to social work.

My father knew Bahugunaji as we were both from the same place. He was a rebel from his student days. When Sumanji was in jail and was being tortured, Bahugunaji managed to smuggle this news out to the news-papers. He was arrested for this and jailed. As Sumanji was in the Tehri jail, he was not kept in that jail but in a lock up at Narendranagar. The police was constantly after him. He was studying for his inter exam at that time. He would be sent under police escort to the examination centre. It was at Narendranagar police lock up that he got the news of the martyrdom of Sumanji.

While in jail, Bahugunaji had developed boils all over his body as there was no provision for bathing. As the doctor refused to treat him in prison, he was released; He was quite

weak when he was released. He tried to improve his health and went to Lahore for studies. Even in Lahore the police trailed him. He went underground for a year disguised as a Sikh. He returned to Tehri after completing his B.A.

By then the king had been over-thrown and Bahugunaji became the secretary of the Congress committee and took up social work. He started a school for the *harijans* in the sweepers' colony. He was involved in a lot of activities such as taking out *prabhat pheris* (early morning processions), organising camps, and conferences. I also used to take part in these programmes. We knew each other as we were both from nearby villages. My father put the proposal of my marriage to him and he agreed. He had a lot of proposals before him but he had so far not agreed because he did not want to get tied down with marriage. In this case he thought that I would be more of a partner and together we would be able to do much more. After he had agreed, my father wrote to me that he was very happy to inform me that I was getting married on such and such date so I should come home immediately. I found this very strange as I had not been given the chance to be mentally prepared for marriage. I told him that I needed one year to think over the matter of whether I wanted to get married or not, whether I should marry Bahugunaji or not. My father was very angry at this and he said if I declined to marry the doors of his house would be permanently closed to me. *How old were you then?*

I was 23 then. He was very angry and said that Bahugunaji was such a good man, qualified in all respects, shared the same values as us, then what more did I want? I said that I wanted to be ready from within myself. My doubt was whether after entering into marriage I would be able

to keep up with my social work.

I was a little afraid of marriage. I felt that we had to take the work of Sarla behn ahead, work for our institution. When I asked for a year to think about marriage, Bahugunaji agreed. But my father was very upset. I told my father that since he had said the doors of his house would be shut for me if I refused to get married, I would come to his house only if I was ready to marry. After one year, in 1955, I agreed to the marriage. It was decided that we would get married in 1956. We got married on June 19. I told Bahugunaji that I had no interest in his politics. Nor did I want to live in big cities. At that time he was living in Tehri town. He was the president of the Congress in Tehri and had built a students' hostel for *harijans*. It was called *Thakkarbaba Chhatravas*. This was part of his work against untouchability. He himself lived in the same hostel.

How did he meet with the expenses of the hostel?

In some cases parents of the students paid for the expenses. Some students got scholarships from the Social Welfare Board or the Harijan Welfare Union.

I told Bahugunaji that Sarla behn had promised Gandhiji that all the girls from her ashram would work in the villages. If I left the Kosani Ashram, I would do so only to live in villages. He agreed and he resigned from the Congress Party.

On this issue alone?

Yes, for this very reason he gave up party political work. Then we looked around to see which area would be best for our services. We looked around in many places and we finally found this place 36 km from Tehri which was among the most backward. You had to walk miles to reach there as there was no bus link. Educationally, it was very deprived. On June 19 we organised a camp there

and built two huts. That is how we got married and made it our home and workplace.

Who had chosen this particular village?

Bahugunaji had chosen it. Through correspondence with Sarla behn and me he used to tell us about different places he was seeing. He wrote to us why he liked this place. Sarla behn and I gave our consent. He had two huts built where the camp was held. In fact there was just one hut, the other was still being built. Sarla behn, my family, and his family all came there and we had a simple marriage there on June 19 and founded the institution— *Parvatiya Navjeevan Mandal*. We decided that we would not take any grants. He worked as a newspaper correspondent from his student days and that provided us with some in-come. He said that if we got used to filling our stomachs with grants, then we would have to do what the people giving grants wanted us to do. We would not be able to do the work we wanted to do. Therefore, we began to live with and depend on the people of the village and did not accept any external grants. We would go with the local people to their villages, work with them in their fields and show them new methods of farming. Through collective and voluntary labour we would construct canals for irrigation and would teach their children at night.

People gave little or no thought to girls' education in those days. Sons' education was acceptable as they were expected to get jobs and help their parents. They saw no point in educating their daughters. Life in the mountains is totally dependent on the labour of women. The menfolk often go out to the cities to earn a livelihood. All the work in the village has to be done by the woman. She gets up at four in the morning, tends



Vimalaji in her younger days

to the animals, cooks for her children, works in the fields, collects firewood from the jungles—all this and more she has to attend to all by herself. A daughter gets channelised towards all these chores right from her childhood.

It starts with looking after her brothers, tending to the cows and sharing her mother's chores like fetching fodder and water. Knowing this, I wanted a way out for the girls. Therefore, I told the villagers, let the girls work during the day, but let them come to me and stay with me in the evenings. In this way I started educating them at night.

Weren't the girls too tired by the time they reached you?

No, the girls in the mountains are very energetic and brave. Bahugunaji and I used to visit different villages. We would hold evening prayers in the village amidst the village folk. Then Bahugunaji would teach the boys at night while I took the girls to my ashram for teaching. Slowly we started teaching both boys and girls during the daytime.

How many girls came to you?

Initially there were five girls, but gradually their numbers increased.

Later on the both boys and girls started coming in the afternoons.

Today we have 120 pupils.

Are you still in the same village where you started?

Yes, we are still there. But now most children come from different villages and return to their homes. When we started, we thought that we too would make a big educational institution like Sarla behn. While we were constructing the building, Sarla behn came and asked us what we were building. We said that we were making a mess and a place for 50 students to stay. She replied that in that case we would get buried in merely running this one institution, arranging money and looking for teachers. We would have no time for working on spreading awareness among the villagers. Therefore, she suggested, it would be better if we had a small place which housed no more than 10-12 people—the average size of a village family. She advised that in this way we would be able to spend as much time as possible working with people.

We agreed to her suggestion and made the place for just 10-15 people. Some girls come and stay with us. Other children come from the village and return home. As I told you, we do not accept grants from any source. The villagers know that and so in the early years they used to support our work by giving us a part of their harvest. This way we would manage for ourselves and also for those who were staying with us. The parents of the girls who were staying with us in the hostel gave some money with which we met their expenses.

At that time there were three of us, Bahugunaji, me, and our *greha niata* (house mother), who looked after the children. For 20 years the villagers supported us by giving us their grain from their harvest. Then slowly Bahugunaji's writings started earning more and our own farm started yielding more.

I believed that to instill self confidence in the women of the hills, it was necessary that I should live like one of them and show them by my experiments how to get a balanced diet from ordinary farming. We have a small farm, animals and even arrangements for training. This was to demonstrate to them that progress did not have to involve giving up the lifestyle of the hill people.

We do not hire any farm hands because of the teachings of Gandhiji, who believed that if we want to succeed in developing the intelligence of everyone in this country, then we have to combine education with labour. The reason why we have so many educated unemployed in this country is that we have separated labour from learning. Today's farmers or workmen do not want their children to follow them in their vocations because they are not socially respected. They see that those who do not labour with their hands and only use their brains, using just a pen, are respected. A farmer or labourer does not command the same respect. Moreover, a person who has not laboured for 16 years, from his childhood, does not remain fit for labour, so that the educated children of farmers cannot return and work with their parents in the fields.

Gandhiji wanted everyone to spin some yarn on the *charkha* so that every person would know how to do some manual labour. Keeping this in mind, we do not hire any help for farming. We and all the children together work in the fields. When there is a heavier load of work, the women from the village come collectively to help us.

How much land do you have?

We have three acres of land but the land that we have was originally useless as it was full of rocks. We didn't have money to buy good land. Moreover, we were aware that since

everyone from the mountains cannot settle in the plains, we had to demonstrate to the villagers how the hilly land could be made more fertile, how to get a better yield from it, how to grow things on their own farms for a balanced diet. We taught them that it was necessary to have vegetables and fruits side by side with grains. We would go and give the villagers the seeds at the right time and exhorted them to grow vegetables and fruits. Slowly, people have been encouraged to do this. Similarly, we tell the villagers how they can get more milk from their animals by giving them nutritive fodder from their fields, thereby raising their grain and milk output. The people of our region used to grow enough grain for their own needs. At times, they would even have enough for selling. But they were not aware of the fact that fruits and vegetables are also a necessary part of a healthy person's diet.

What fruits do you grow there now?

Even though our land is not very good, we have planted oranges, sweet lime and guavas. This way the faith of the people in us grew. Our main

mission is to solve their problems. A major problem of women in our area is liquor. The menfolk go out to cities to earn a livelihood and when they come back to the village for a short visit, they just get drunk. The women were very unhappy because they had to toil so much and the men would waste all the money on liquor. The women got together on this issue and stalled prohibition campaign in the area.

In which year did this campaign start?

I do not remember the exact year. Before 1971, women had gone to jail twice. In Sahaganpur, Dehradun and Tehri the women went to jail in large groups pressing for prohibition to be declared in the area. Seeing the agitation, the government had to declare prohibition.

So is there now total prohibition in the area?

The government has opened a few permit shops recently. There has been a little reduction in the consumption of liquor. When liquor is freely available, everybody will drink openly. Then there can be no control on liquor consumption. But if there are curbs on liquor drinking and it is



Children studying at the ashram shala

only available to permit holders, a non-perm it holder will be afraid to drink it. You won't find a person drunk at ordinary *melas*, festivals or on the road. We have to deal with mountain roads which are full of risk. If the driver is drunk, many lives will be endangered.

After this prohibition, accidents due to drunken driving are rare. But women have to be constantly in-volved in the struggle for mass awakening. Women's groups have to remain active in the closure of illegal liquor shops. People have recognised the strength of women in the movement for prohibition. The awful feeling of hill women that they were considered to be like animals (something that had distressed Sarla behn so much) has begun to change. The women have realised that they can change the government's poli-cies if they are organised. They now feel that they are as strong as men, in fact even stronger because their strength lies in *afimsa*.

Has your social work affected your married life?

After I got married I realised I wasn't able to do as much of the outside work as Bahugunaji was doing. I decided that one person has to stay in the house and also manage the institution which we had started and that I would take charge of that. I felt that Bahugunaji should handle the work in the outside world.

Even within the house, it wasn't that I was only taking care of my own children. I was also taking care of the school as well as the work of the neighbouring villages. I didn't confine myself to my own family because I had committed myself to what Sarla behn had taught me—that you must stay amidst these women and help them become self confident.

It seems to me from your description that Sarla behn has had a much greater influence over your life than your own husband.



Vimlaji and Sunderlalji at Gandhi Sannidhi, Delhi

Yes, absolutely. She played a very big role in shaping my life. All the creative activists in Uttarakhand who are involved in social work organisations accept Sarla behn as a mother figure and drew inspiration from her. She had taken this whole idea of swaraj very seriously and had gone from village to village propagating that idea. When the movement for prohibition started, she took her rucksack and went from vil-lage to village and collected women for *satyagraha*.

Tell me a little more about Bahugunaji's life. Did you ever get time to spend together as husband and wife?

Most of our life has been spent in this running around. He is hardly ever at home. Every second and minute of his life is so busy in writing, making public contact, travelling, in moving from village to village and a hundred other things such as addressing meetings and other programmes. He goes all over the country and also abroad. But in Uttarakhand itself and in the entire Himalayan region, he has

covered every inch of the region on foot. Firsthe wentfrom Kashmir to Kohima by foot. He has been up and down this region so many times that there is no path that is unknown to him. He has carried a rucksack on his back even in the hardest terrain.

He has even taken his sons on these travels. He has also taken many other young people on these trips, to encourage a new generation to become active in the Himalayan environment protection and movement.

He is very self sufficient. I don't have to take care of him at all. The rucksack he carries on his back is his home. It's always ready. He keeps his basic requirements in it, and can get up any minute and leave at a minute's notice. He doesn't expect much nurturing or caring from me and doesn't expect me to tend to his few requirements.

I do consider myself very lucky even though our life has been very difficult. We didn't have all the conve-niences that most families have. I am sure that my children did

feel the pinch of it. But in order to keep my children from respecting their father any the less, I never communicated any of my difficulties to the children. At no point did I give them a reason to become resentful against their father, to think that he wasn't taking on his full share of the responsibility for the family.

He is very firm in his ideas and has a great deal of respect for me in his heart. It is primarily because of me that he has been able to go ahead in his social work without worrying. If he had been married to someone else, he would have had to face hundreds of problems from the point of view of money, child care and taking care of the house. He never, for instance, even paid any attention to the education of our children, nor did he pay heed to what was happening in the family, how we were fending for ourselves.

We pulled through days of extreme poverty. I doubt whether any woman except me could have coped with the kind of poverty we had to live through. I had a very important role to play in all of this and I could only do it because I had the determination that I had to do something for society. But I have the satisfaction of knowing that he has a great deal of respect for me and that our *grihasthi* has its own sanctity.

How did the Chipko movement begin?

It began against certain contractors who were cutting down certain valuable trees for sale in the cities to make badminton rackets and other luxury goods. The hill people use these trees for making ploughs and for other basic requirements. So we said that we will cling to the trees and not let the contractor take them away.

Whose idea was it to cling to the trees?

The idea came from all of us. We decided that we would protect the

trees by clinging to them. So when the contractor came, all the women immediately collected. On seeing this, the contractor ran away and we didn't have to resort to hugging the trees. The main person in this movement was Gaura Devi.

At that time the Chipko movement was based on economic considerations. Later the women realised that the cutting down of trees for commercial purposes had led to diminishing water resources and soil erosion. Landslides had occurred in several places and several lives had been lost on account of such landslides. That is how, under the leadership of Ghoom Singh Negi, the women of that region tied *rakhis* on the trees, and said that they would protect them by clinging to them, even if it meant giving up their lives. The contractors had brought the Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC) and the police along with them. The women would go to the jungles. As soon as a tree was ready to be cut, they would cling to it. That's how our slogan arose, "*Kya hai jungle ki pukar? Mitti, pani aur bayar. Mitti, pani aur bayar, zinda rahne ke adhar.*" (What is the call of the jungle? Earth, water and trees. Earth, water and trees. They are the basis of our existence).

Have the jungles been saved?

Yes, the jungles have been saved. After this, a big struggle was carried out and the women stayed for one month in the jungles located at a great height. At that time also Bahugunaji fasted for 24 days. We had pitched our tents in the forest. During his fast, Bahugunaji was arrested and taken to Dehradun jail.

The whole area had been made into a police encampment. Sometimes things would come to such a pass that labourers would be sent to cut the trees at night. In those days we would cook and eat *khichri* only once a day

because we would have to be pre-*pared* to run at short notice. As soon as we heard the sound of axes, we would run in the direction of the sound and stand in front of the trees that they were ready to cut down.

The poor Nepali labourer brought in by the contractor was compelled to use his axe. The contractor would say to him, "You don't want to work. You only want to get your wages." When we would go and stand in front of the trees, he had an excuse: "Babuji, I cannot cut down human beings." So this is how the struggle carried on for one month in some of the jungles of the Tehri Garhwal region. The women did not call off their struggle until the government banned the cutting of trees and declared that the cutting of green trees in the hills would not be permitted for 10 years.

Is this ban still in force?

Yes, cutting trees for commercial purposes is still not permitted. The everyday requirements of hill people are to be met by cutting dry trees. And if they cannot be met by cutting dry trees, they can be given green trees. But green trees cannot be cut for commercial purposes.

Has it made any difference?

Yes, some difference. Had that ban not come into force, you wouldn't have seen even a single tree in the jungle. All the trees would have been taken away for commercial purposes. And the women would not have got even a single piece of wood. The contractor would have taken away every little scrap. Slowly, as the movement spread to other areas, the government ordered a ban on the felling of trees located above 1,000 metres.

Yet, much of the reforestation is not genuine, it's just completing paperwork. None of its benefits reach us. That is why the sisters of the hill region are saying, "Hand over this task to us. We will show you how to

dig proper pits. The Forest Department will dig a one foot deep pit but show it to be several feet deep so that they can make money out of it. Our lives are intimately connected to the forest. We will do all the tasks. We will make our own manure for these trees and put the right kind of manure in those pits. And we will take care of these trees in the jungles and show you how they can prosper.” The women have had to struggle a lot to get these points accepted. But in a few places this work has been handed over to the *mahila mandals*.

Please describe the last dharna lead-ing to Bahugunaji’sfast.

On December 14 a lot of people came from far off places. Some of the women who had come stayed the night at the site of the last *dharna*. We saw that the blasting machines were working there. This was going on despite such a big earthquake and such a laborious struggle against the dam. The women went forward and stood in front of the machines. It was 10 p.m. I went along with them and we stopped the work. We stayed the night at the site where the machines were standing. From December 14 to February 27, 1992, we managed to keep the work from reopening.

On the night of February 27, at 1 a.m., the police came and without any notice said that they had imposed Section 144 and began to take us away from there. When Bahugunaji asked to see a warrant of arrest, they paid no attention and forcibly took away about 40 of us in buses and trucks. They put us all into one room where there were no proper toilet facilities. The next morning, when we requested that they present us before the district magistrate, Bahugunaji was lifted up and dragged to a jeep. They put him in the men’s jail and I was sent to the women’s jail. If the police can mete out this kind of treatment to us, how can the ordinary citizen demand his

rights? We were very distressed and decided that we would keep a protest fast.

The jail where we had been lodged did not have any facilities. We were very badly treated in Tehri jail. For example, during our fast, we needed boiled water. For this we had to make a great deal of effort. They tried to harass us in this and so many other ways.

We were shifted to Roorkee jail on March 2. There for the first time we were given an opportunity to give a statement to the magistrate. We were well treated at Roorkee jail. We got hot water and DeekshaPalji, and I began to lake lemon and salt in the jail. Our health began to suffer because of our fast. The jail authorities realised that it was not good for our health to stay in Roorkee. So they sent us to the Meerut Medical College on March 5, where we continued our fast. Bahugunaji was drinking only water. On March 8 we learnt from the district magistrate that we were being released. Bahugunaji said that he would only go if he was sent back to the same place where he had been

taken from. The district magistrate from Roorkee contacted his counterpart in Tehri and then told us that we would be sent back. With that assurance, on March 9 we set off from there. The fast was continuing and we decided we would break it only when we were ached Tehri.

It was during this period that we went to meet Swami Chidanandaji. He made some *rasaharfar* us and tried to persuade us to break our fast. I gave up my fast in his presence but Bahugunaji said that he would first go back to the same spot from where the police took us away when we were on *dharna*. So he didn’t drink the fruit juice prepared by Swami Chidananda. Even so, Swami Chidananda insisted on giving him some lemon and honey and said, “This at least you will have to take.” And since Bahugunaji never refuses anything to his guru, he took a spoon of honey and lime from Swami Chidananda on the twelfth day of his fast. From then on he continued to take the same amount of lime and honey every day during the fast.

When we reached Tehri we were confronted with an unexpected



Sunderlal Bahuguna breaking his fast with honey and lime being offered by Swami Chidanandji

situation. The PAC had surrounded the entire bazaar and they were obstructing all possible ways to enter. But the local population of Tehri had been waiting to welcome us for a long time, and we managed to have the meeting despite them. After the public meeting, when we tried to proceed towards the *dharna* spot in our jeep, we were told that Section 144 has been imposed. So Bahugunaji sat there by the roadside, right where the trucks were going up and down, and said he wouldn't move from there. His fast kept going at that very spot until it reached 45 days.

This was my first fast. I had never fasted before this. But didn't feel any stress. Eleven days passed very easily. Neither did I feel any great weakness, nor did Deeksha, who was with me in jail and who also fasted for 11 days. This despite the fact that throughout this fast we were put through many inconveniences because the administration and the contractors used to harass us a lot.

One needs *shanti* during a fast and you need your environs to be clean and peaceful. But the administration would go out of their way to ensure that trucks kept plying on the road where we were sitting for our fast. In fact at night they would make more trucks go up and down so that Bahugunaji couldn't sleep all night. There was a lot of dust and pollution. The government would sprinkle water in other places, but they would never allow water to be sprinkled where we were sitting and Bahugunaji was fasting. There was a lot of dust and we would be bothered. The administration would come back again and again and tell us how we must break the fast, otherwise we would be arrested. They also threatened Bahugunaji with force feeding.

Towards the end they were so determined to subject him to force

feeding that Bahugunaji had to say, "Look, I know my body. I know the rules of fasting." He used to, for instance, keep *maun vrat* (silence fast) through the day and would speak only during the morning and evening prayer time. Otherwise he kept busy in reading and writing and corresponding with various people. We were quite confident that if they left him in peace, he would be able to carry on his fast with determination.

But weren't you afraid that he might not survive the fast?

I was a little afraid, but I had this great faith that he would be able to pull through this because he hadn't done any unnatural things. It was very *praktik*, that is, nature's methods were being followed. But towards the end when the administration began to harass him a lot, and the PAC began to bother him with a view to somehow get him to give up his fast, it became extremely difficult.

They got a doctor's certificate saying that force feeding was necessary. Bahugunaji, in response to that, gave a written statement to the district magistrate that if he were made to go through force feeding, the government would be responsible for his death. For his own safety he asked for another team of doctors to be near him and made these doctors give a written statement that he shouldn't be subjected to force feeding. But those last three or four days when they were all set to break his fast by force feeding were very tortuous days for us. They had even gone to the extent of emptying out a whole hospital ward where they planned to admit Bahugunaji after his arrest, where he would be force fed.

Does your movement draw more support from men or women?

It's about equal. But women are more sensitive because they know that once a hill woman is uprooted from her environs and pushed off to

the plains, even if she is not starving there will be no end to her troubles. The woman of the hill regions is brave and fearless. Even when her husband is out working in the city, she takes care of the entire household's needs, the fields, the farming, all by herself. She is used to roaming around the jungles by herself and is unaccustomed to leading a confined life. She is very innocent and the moment she comes to the plains she has to deal with all these crooks, robbers and all kinds of unsafe people. The atmosphere in the cities on the plains is very unsafe. She is not able to adjust to it. That is why women prefer to stay back in the villages even when the men go away.

We need to keep in mind that there is no guarantee from the government that the people who are uprooted from their villages are indeed going to be provided employment. When the family shifts to the plain, what is the husband going to do? Is he going to do *chowkidari* of his wife or is he going to go and look for a job?

This woman who right now leads a life of freedom in the hills—she is like the queen of the forests and the hills—will be reduced to a very pitiable status when she is thrown out of this environment and sent to the cities and the plains. How is she going to make a living in that situation? And then they will have no land. Whatever money they get will be so pitifully little that they will not even be able to construct a little hutment with that. *How much money does the government pay as compensation?*

There are different criteria for determining the levels of compensation. But the main thing is that those who are willing to bribe government officials are able to get lakhs. Those who don't bribe don't even get the basic minimum compensation for the property that is being taken away from them; there is a lot of corruption in this.

Is there a new generation of activists that is ready to take on the tasks you are facing?

The new generation is not gravitating towards social work. They don't have that sentiment in them anymore. The question that is a bit worrying is how will this incomplete work be carried forward, if new people don't come and carry it on. Our only sense of satisfaction is that a few young people have come up, among them our own son. Many more are needed.

What are the hurdles in the way of these people coming up?

I know more about women. Our government is not making plans in a way that will reduce the drudgery and misery of women, that will take into account their needs and free their energy for their own intellectual and mental development, and involve them in the social planning process.

Are you able to do so much because you were trained as a child to hard physical labour?

In my childhood I never had a tough life because my father was an officer in the Forest Department, and we weren't used to hard labour. I learned how to work hard only after I went to Sarla behn. Watching her work, I learned to do simple labour. I am mentally very strong. Like any hill woman, I am very fast in doing the household and the *ashram* work. At present I can't do hard physical labour in the fields because I have not been well. But I still take care of the *ashram* work.

It's been the experience of activists the country over, that whenever they try to organise women, they get demoralised after the first flush of success. Women have so many domestic responsibilities that it is very hard to keep them involved in sustained sociopolitical movements; they are only involved sporadically. What has your experience been?

I've already mentioned that one of the sources of great anguish for me is the very harsh life rural women lead, and the very hard work they are constantly doing. That's why I feel very strongly that the planning and development that we do has to be geared towards reducing the drudgery of these women, it has to make their lives a little easier so that they can take an active role in social affairs. It's true that at harvest time we can't have any movements; most of the mobilisations of the movement have to occur in the lean agricultural season.

Movement organisers feel that it is very hard for them to find women activists who can take on the job of going from village to village. Not those who can just come to attend a few meetings or movement gatherings, those who can do sustained work.

That is true. They are able to come only occasionally. However, it also depends on how much they feel the issue affects them. For example, take the *sharab bandi*. That affects them very directly, because they do the earning and the men blow it up. It has a very bad effect on the upbringing of the children. That's why they participated in full force in the anti-liquor movement. At the time of the June harvest, the women who were arrested couldn't do their own harvesting and it's the neighbouring women who did the harvesting for them.

Likewise, women are more active in the anti-dam movement because they recognise that if their villages are uprooted they will have to leave their homes. Then the freedom to roam around the jungles will no longer be available to them. They will have to lead very constricted lives when they are sent off to other places as resettlers.

But it is a fact that it is very hard to get full time activists. Even so there

have been a few women, like the 84 year old Mangsari Devi who has continually been involved in this agitation. She has even been to jail. Even during the time of the *sharab bandi andolan* she went to villages, over-taken by the spirit of do or die.

Did the men oppose the anti-liquor campaign?

Not too much, really. Earlier there was some kind of opposition from the men who said to the women, "Why did you go for it?" Also, the cash is in the hands of the men. How do these women travel or have bus fares? They only have grain under their control. So they would take some rice, tie it up in their bundles. They wouldn't even have money for their bus fare. But later on they became so bold that when the men said to them, "Get out of the house," they would say, "We need to decide whose house it is. Is it only yours or is it equally mine? If you were to take a vote in the house, the children are going to vote with their mothers. They are not going to vote with you. And so the work that we are doing is a good influence on children, not like drinking which ruins their lives. It is not enough that you give food to children. The kind of upbringing that you give to the children is also important. Take a vote and you will find that the majority is on our side in this house. So who is going to get out?"

How is it that this is the first interview you've ever given?

Because I live in a very remote corner of the country. I am not like Bahugunaji, a *duniya bhagat*, going from one place to another. The reason I left my village and came and sat in Tehrt with him is because of his 45 day fast. Otherwise, except for some movement activities, I stay in my ashram, in my *grihashthi*, and take care of them. Who is going to come to my remote village and interview me? □

(Translated from Hindi)