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LOCATING ENVIRONMENT IN SUNDERLAL BAHUGUNA'S THOUGHT: A STUDY FROM POLITICAL ECOLOGY PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Sunderlal Bahuguna (born on 09/01/1927) is widely considered as the forerunner of Indian Environmentalism. Whereas his predecessors like Rabindranath Tagore, Radhakamal Mukherjee, J. C Kumarappa, Patrick Geddes and others had developed a purely intellectual approach with an elitist tilt in their thought, Sunderlal Bahuguna, by contrast, had a very down to earth approach because his environmental concern actually emanated from his pro-poor concern and broadly his altruistic vision much like Gandhi's 'Sarvodaya'. It is this distinct genre that enables us to apply Political Ecology perspective to unpack his thought. This article thus seeks to interpret Sunderlal Bahuguna's dwelling on environment from an ensemble of his multi-faceted engagement - a view that comes out of Political Ecology approach.

Introduction

Nowadays there is an oeuvre of literature on Indian Environmentalism although it seems that we have forgotten the pioneering activities of Sunderlal Bahuguna—an unsung hero who always maintained a low profile, but whose involvement from Chipko to Tehri Dam movement, to the march from Kashmir to Kohima won world attention to elevate Indian environmentalism at its heydays. Sunderlal Bahuguna, however, didn't begin his career as a committed worker of environmental cause. It is clear from his life history that in his youth during 1940s he was much attracted to radical political action in pre-independent India. Yet, when he learnt through experience the futility of such approach, in his later life he switched over to Gandhian mode. It was this significant transformation that guided his philosophy and activities in the quest of peaceful reconstruction. Seen from this perspective it becomes clear that Sunderlal Bahuguna's environmental activism constituted part and parcel of his broader vision that can be elaborated from the standpoint of the political ecology approach.

Objective of the Study

Here the objective of the authors is to study Sunderlal Bahuguna's philosophy in order to contextualize his ideas and activities particularly with regard to environment so as to demonstrate the utility of Political Ecology approach for understanding India's environmentalism at large and Sunderlal Bahuguna's environmental activism in particular.

Methodology

It is a historical study. For the purpose of the study the authors have worked on the basis of primary and secondary data. Primary Data have been gathered from books, articles of journals, and newspaper articles written by Sunderlal Bahuguna himself. Here the secondary sources refer to writings on Bahuguna by various scholars and commentators. This study is a result of thoroughgoing interpretation of his publications and textual sources.

According to R P Neumann, "Political Ecology emerged in the 1980s as an interdisciplinary field that discussed environmental problems using the concepts and methods of political economy. A central premise of the field is that ecological change cannot be understood without consideration of the political and economic structures and institutions within which it is embedded. The nature–society dialectic is the fundamental focus of analysis. Marxian political economy provided the initial primary theoretical influence, while the development of post-structural social theory and no equilibrium ecology infused new ideas and concepts in subsequent years. A range of methodological approaches characterize political ecology research, including multiscalar analysis, political-economic analysis, historical analysis, ethnography, discourse analysis, and ecological field studies. Political ecology's approach to nature–society relations has explicitly linked capitalist development with ecological change across multiple temporal and spatial scales. The field has been an important source of critical analyses of the social and ecological effects of economic development and conservation initiatives, focusing particularly on the material and discursive aspects of property rights. Recent trends and future directions for research include an expanding urban political ecology theme, critical responses to environmental security theory, an engagement with the philosophies of ethics, and a focus on environment and identity.''

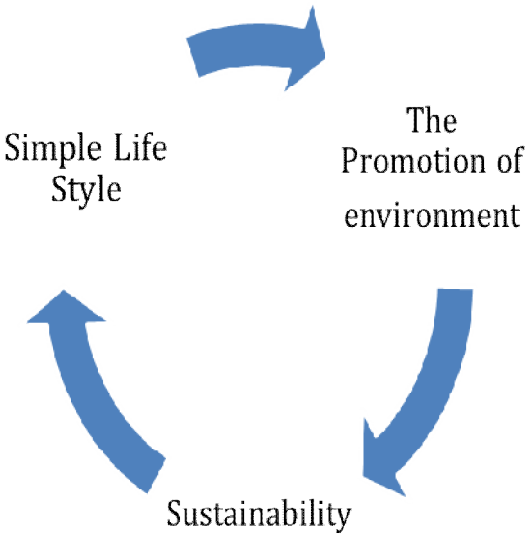
Understanding of Sunderlal Bahuguna's thought needs to be premised on conceptual distinction of Western and Indian environmentalism. According to Ramchandra Guha, Western environmentalism arouse out of a desire to protect engendered species and natural habitats. In India environment is part of the culture and social ecology at large. Here environment is integrally connected

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to human life, culture, rituals and particularly it is a means of survival for the subaltern masses. This pro-poor orientation and the inherent tension between development and consumption are the leitmotif of Indian environmentalism. Even it is true in the case of Sunderlal Bahuguna's environmental activism. That is why, Sunderlal Bahuguna's environmental thought can't be viewed in isolation of his overarching concerns for the wellbeing of local folk. Herein the framework becomes important insofar as Political ecology stands for an interlinkage of environment, economy, politics and culture which in combination offers a holistic view of things. It thereby overcomes the inadequacy of the traditional approach to single out and to put focus on environment per se. So, the concept of political ecology helps to broaden the vision to understand environment in the context of a network of relations instead of insulating environment and stressing on it from some idealistic standpoint. Bahuguna's ecological turn, indicating his evolution from an activist who expressed his 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. George Alfred 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". However, some prominent activists have pointed to a time in the history of Chipko when tapping of forest wealth was not considered to be a sin or offence but that relationships between people and forests began to be defined in a new way. This poses several intriguing questions to the researchers: 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"? That is why environmental activism of Sunderlal Bahuguna can't be simply seen from the point of view of conservation of nature rather his thought reflects empathetic insight that favored use of forestry for the livelihood of the needy local people. So, the application of political ecology perspective unfurls a completely different view of Sunderlal

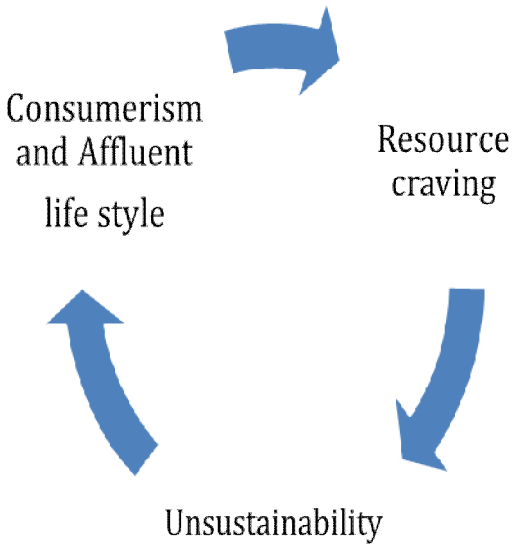
Bahuguna's environmental activism. It seems that he was aware of the fundamental class contradiction as the local poor people had no other option except felling of trees to run their livelihood. But this class contradiction did no impel him to question the logic of action—viz. felling of trees, which could not, in the long run, put an end to socio-economic oppression, rather in him we find an attempt to reframe and rethink the vital correlations between ecology and economy, so that a different line, altogether different from either radical political action to resolve the contradiction or the unsustainable instrumentalist idea of nature, could be reached. The solution that he found out, came from the Gandhian teachings of simply life style and ecology as the permanent economy. Its parallel can be found in E. Shoemaker's famous idea of 'small is beautiful' which in a way does not conflict with capitalism but seems to offer an ethical refrain that if the life can be self-restrained, then ecological balance would automatically be achieved and it simultaneously ensures economic stability.

In this context it seems pertinent to posit and juxtapose Bahuguna's synthetic view of nature and its diametrically opposite model that pulls us towards unsustainability, conflict, tension and crisis:



Pic – Bahuguna's Philosophy of life or A synthetic view of Nature

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Pic- Alternative Model

Suggestions and Findings

It is evident from the foregoing analysis that Sunderlal Bahuguna's environmental activism is different from as often it is depicted in the traditional discourse. Maybe his thought is marginalized in the present age of hyper-consumerism, but Political ecology approach brings about a complete picture of Bahuguna's life, maturity of his thought and his multifaceted social activism of which environmental activism was but a part. His saintly manner of engagement showcasing a strand of environmental movements is sui generis. His is an image of a lonely Gandhian crusader who harps upon the spiritual force to underscore the urgency to put Development Discourse into a new paradigm. It tends to create a new identity and a new ideology but it does neither deny other identities nor does it propagate that local is an insulated space, ready to be devoured or weak to be engulfed into the gigantic mainstream of capitalist consumerism qua development. Rather in Bahuguna we find a voice of protest, a cogent claim of the reality that it is not homogenous or that it is not orthodox in its impulse for liberation or quest for synthesis.

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