

Chapter 1

The Encounter

It was a cool but sunny day in Shimla, a picturesque town on the ridge of a mountain in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh. At almost seven thousand feet, it was once the summer capital of the British. On a day in June 1998, a pleasant breeze was blowing, a nice escape from the torrid heat of Delhi. The songs of birds were intermittently drowned by the diesel engines of massive trucks that plied the narrow roads. "I want to make a call to Tehri," I said to the bearded man in the booth adjacent the telephone booth. He was wearing a shawl that covered most of his head.

"Do you have the number?" he called out to me over the din of a passing truck.

"Yes," I said and showed it to him.

"You please first dial zero, then this code, then the number." He was writing these numbers on the scrap of paper I had given him.

"OK," I said, "Kitna?" I was trying out my self-taught Hindi.

"What?" he said. Another truck passed. I sighed and raised my voice,

"How much is the call?"

"Oh!" he said. "You please just make the call. Then you pay." It was the latest technological breakthrough, a telephone facility that records the length and destination of the call and calculates the charge. I closed the door behind me and picked up the receiver. Crackling sounds and static undermined my confidence. I pressed the numbers on the key pad and waited. Presently, I heard the reassuring sound of rings. They came in twos. I was used to that. Then just with the passing of another truck and the horn of a taxi following him I heard, "Hello." "Hello," I said. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes," the voice said in the distance.

I said, "I wish to speak with Sunderlal Bahuguna."

"This is Sunderlal speaking," he said. Really, I thought! I was elated. He answers his own phone! I had roughly planed out my introduction.

"My name is George James. I am a professor of philosophy from America. I am here in India researching environmental movements. I am very interested in your work . . . I have heard about your work in America. I mean . . . in America I heard about your work . . . to save the trees, to stop the Tehri Dam . . ." The sounds of more cars and jeeps on the road drowned his reply.

"Hello," he said.

"Hello, can you hear me?" I said.

"Yes, speak up," he said.

I continued, "If it is possible I would like to have an interview with you." This, I thought, is a long shot if ever there was one.

"Yes, yes," he said. "Where are you now?"

"I'm in Shimla," I said.

"Where?" he asked.

I said, "I'm in Shimla. I'm doing research on environmental movements in India. I'm at the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies."

He said, "Oh, Shimla! You will need to get a bus to Dehra Dun. From there you can get transport to Tehri. When will you come?"

I had been working in the library of the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies for the past two weeks. I was permitted to work there through the good will of the director. I had planned to spend another three weeks there and then set out on some field work. It was a sharp learning curve, and I was learning a lot, more than enough to recognize how little I understood about the background and motivations behind the movement that had so captivated the readers of environmental literature in the West. Another three weeks would enable me to digest a good part of the material in the library and render me passably conversant with the subject. It would qualify me, at least, to ask the right questions. "I am planning to be here for the next three weeks then come and visit you. Would that be okay?"

"Three weeks," he repeated. Then he continued, "In three weeks the rains will be coming. The roads will be bad. They may not be passable." The static on the line was now gone. Reception was clear. "Please come now!" The monsoon? I thought! The azure sky above me gave no hint of the weather in store. How did I not think of that, the rains of India that wash away roads and bridges and maroon whole villages? Come now, I thought, and risk an insult to the kindness of the director who was permitting me to work here!

Having spent a previous faculty development leave exploring a variety of environmental problems in India, my interest was now focused on Indian environmental movements. My expertise was in the history and philosophy of religion. By then I had been teaching for fifteen years in a Department of Philosophy and Religion studies that had recently begun to focus on environmental ethics or environmental philosophy as the center of its work. People with expertise in different areas of philosophy were exploring it from different perspectives. Having explored the range of the world's religions, I had been captivated by the relationship between humanity and nature that I found in the religious writings of India, and of Hinduism in particular. I had read much on the subject and had poured through debates as to whether Indian philosophy entailed an environmental ethic, supported environmental activism, or supported the neglect of nature. I had read much by Western specialists in environmental philosophy who seemed to know little about the traditions of India. They made their arguments anyway. With some book knowledge of the Hindu religious tradition, and having visited India before, I saw a space for some original research. It made no sense to debate about whether Hinduism or any variety of Hinduism might be a resource for environmental ethics. The question was whether the religious traditions of India had provided any support for the activism that was actually going on. This was the man to see. "Are you there?" he said.

"Yes, I am here." I said. "Yes, I see I must come soon."

"You *must* come soon!" he said.

"Can I call you tomorrow?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, "You can call me anytime! I will be here for the next two weeks."

"OK," I said. "I will call you tomorrow with my plans."

"OK," he said. "Thank you for calling. Bye bye!"

After months of planning for this trip, golden opportunities were falling into place before I was ready. I had read about the Chipko Movement and about the resistance to the Tehri Dam. The Chipko Movement was widely known as the most successful and influential of grassroots environmental movements. Back in America I had conversed with scholars who had actually met Bahuguna and had promised to give me contact information. But follow up e-mails had produced no replies. Now at India's Institute of Advanced Studies, a conversation about research interests had directed me to another scholar researching a similar topic. He knew Bahuguna and had his phone number. Without hesitation he told me, "You just call him! There is no need for an introduction. He is a very friendly man!"

It was time to close the books. Pensive and excited, I returned to the institute, and with apologies to the director and the promise that I would soon return, I quickly packed my bags. Within forty-eight hours, I was on a bus through winding mountain roads and down to the city of Dehra Dun. It was an arduous journey. When the bus arrived in Dehra Dun, the day was all but gone. I lodged at a hotel operated by the then Uttar Pradesh Tourist Development Corporation (UPTDC). I made inquiries about transport to Tehri. "There is no bus," the receptionist said. "You will have to take a jeep."

"Where will I find a jeep?" I asked. "You walk down this road. After two blocks, you turn left. After one block, you will see the stand. Jeeps will be there." It turned out I didn't need to hire a jeep but only purchase a ticket for a seat. After realizing they put three passengers in the front seat next to the driver, I decided to buy two tickets and made myself comfortable, my gear safely stashed on the roof of the jeep. It was eight in the morning when the jeep rolled out of town. With luck I would be there by noon. The route took me through some picturesque country, so beautiful I imposed on the driver to stop and let me take a photo. He was happy to do so. Bahuguna would eventually explain to me that the terraced paddy fields were not native to the area but had been introduced by the British to increase the agricultural productivity. The original economy of the area was animal husbandry with light farming and a strong reliance on the forests for food, fodder, fuel, fertilizer, and fiber. Eventually we crossed a narrow iron bridge and rounded a curve next to a sheer cliff on our right and entered the heart of the town. The jeep groaned to a stop at the side of the road where other jeeps were parked. Farther ahead was a bus stand, the smell of diesel fumes in the air, and dust. Along the road was a line of shops, and far up the hill to the left, the sign I had been told to watch for, Riverview Hotel. "You just come to the town and go to the Riverview Hotel," he had said.

"Will I need to make a reservation?" I had asked. "There is no need," he had said. "There is always room."

"And how will I find you once I arrive?"

"Just ask anyone," he said. "Everyone knows where I live." With a bag over my shoulder and another in hand, I started up the hill.

"Be sure to close the windows when you go out!" The young man who was helping me to my room was talking about the monkeys. "They will take anything they can," he said. "You need to be careful!" He gave me a bar of soap and a towel. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Yes," I said, "Do you know the name Sunderlal Bahuguna?"

“Yes, of course I know him!” he said. “He’s my uncle.”

“Your uncle!” I exclaimed.

“Actually, he is not my uncle, but yes I know him very well. He’s like an uncle to me and to many of the young people here. You see that iron bridge?” We were now standing in the breezeway outside the room. I looked down at the bridge over the Bhagirathi River, the one I had crossed in the jeep on my way into town. “He lives in a small hut just over that bridge to the left. You can’t miss it. He’s expecting you.” I picked up my camera bag with my notebook and my tape recorder inside and started off to see him. I heard the voices of children practicing their cricket moves in an open area beside the bus stand near the market section of the town. They stopped momentarily to look at this stranger passing by and then carried on with their play. The iron bridge shook with the rumble of trucks as I walked along the narrow footpath beside the traffic over the bridge. To the left I could see a makeshift hut and a small temple. As I drew near the compound, a young man approached me. “Can I help you?” he said.

“Yes,” I said, “my name is George James. I am from America. I am here to see Sunderlal Bahuguna.”

“I am his assistant,” he said. “He is busy now. Could you come back . . .” Just then I saw the man emerge from the hut. He looked at the two of us and waved.

“This is him, is it not?” I said. He turned to Bahuguna and then back to me. “Yes,” he said, “please come.” I hadn’t taken the time to imagine what sort of a man to expect. He was a thin man, slight of build, and seemed to stand about five feet six. His long white hair and beard and his white homespun cotton clothing gave me the impression of a saint, but the most striking feature of his appearance was the light in his eyes. I knew about some of the fasts he had undertaken. One had almost taken his life. I wanted to know about the motivation that stood behind such extraordinary deeds. He shook my hand.

“Please come,” he said. “Please sit.” I sat down on the short white-washed wall surrounding the simple temple. “How was your journey?” he asked.

“It was good,” I said. “I understand you are a busy man, so if I may, I shall get right to the point. It is my understanding that you have been an environmental activist for a long time and have undertaken fasts that have drawn a lot of media attention. I’m a professor of philosophy. I’m interested in the philosophy of life and the philosophy of nature that stands behind these activities. What motivates you? What is it that gives you the courage to take such extraordinary measures? These are

questions I don't see addressed in the press." He nodded his head and then smiled.

"My entire philosophy," he said, "comes under three A's and five F's." Counting on the fingers of one hand, he went on. "The first A means austerity. We have a long-standing tradition of austerity, of treading lightly on the earth. The second A means alternatives: where you cannot find the answer with austerity then you have to find alternatives." His face broke into wrinkles as he laughed as though asking me whether I was getting his point."

"I understand," I said.

"The third," he said, "is afforestation, tree farming." He went on to say, "The five F's are about the trees we need for survival: trees are needed for food, fodder, fuel and timber, fertilizer, and fiber." He was now counting the five F's on the fingers of the other hand. I had the impression he had been over this material before, but I hadn't yet seen it in print. I understood that afforestation was what was known as reforestation in America. I needed to get this all on tape.

Fumbling through my camera bag, I asked him. "Would it be alright with you if I recorded our conversation on tape?" I held before him a simple micro cassette recorder.

"Yes, yes," he said. I turned it on, and with it began a conversation that would be continued over the next several days and that would resume the following summer and over visits over the next years with the man who had been described as the first guru of India's environmental consciousness.

I had studied environmental philosophy in the West. I understood the roots of Western environmentalism in philosophical developments in the nineteenth century, in the thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, and others. I understood that American consciousness about the state of the environment had been awakened in no small measure by a book by Rachael Carson largely about the environmental threat to the life of song birds and the specter of a springtime without the pleasure of their sounds. What about India, I thought? What did this environmentalism share with the environmentalism of America? Years earlier I had read an influential essay that put the blame for the global environmental crisis on the religious traditions of the West. Lynn White Jr. had argued that Christianity was the most anthropocentric religion to emerge in the history of humankind. For this tradition, God had created human beings uniquely in his image and placed humans in charge of creation to use it as they pleased. I

wasn't sure he was right, but it raised in my mind the question of other religious traditions, especially of Hinduism, that seemed to see divinity in nature. "For our tradition," Bahuguna said, "there is divinity in everything. Divinity is not just in the heavens, but in the birds, the beasts, the streams and rivers, in the mountains, and in the trees of the forests. In the biosphere there are many species. There are birds, animals, there are trees. There are plants, of many varieties. Rivers are flowing in a natural way. Now we live in a technosphere. There is technology all around. Now we have killed the rivers in order to build dams. And this is all in order to satisfy the never satisfying greed of human beings. And Gandhi in one sentence explained this: nature has enough to fulfill the needs of all, but nothing to satisfy the greed of one." Already I was beginning to see a pattern to his thought. There was the philosophical and religious understanding of nature embodied in the ancient traditions of India, there was a clear appreciation for the scientific insights of ecology, and there was the unmistakable influence of Gandhi. This would be a rich and fruitful journey.