

Vimla Bahuguna, Environment Activist and Social Reformer, Is No More

By [Bharat Dogra](#)

Asia-Pacific Research, February 17, 2025

Region: [South Asia](#)

Theme: [Society](#)

Vimla Bahuguna, who dedicated herself at a very young age to leading her life in accordance with Mahatma Gandhi's teachings of serving people, breathed her last at her home in Dehradun on February 14. She was 92. She leaves behind her daughter Madhu Pathak and sons Rajeev and Pradeep. Her husband, the famous environmentalist **Sunderlal Bahuguna**, had died in 2021 at the age of 94.

Although often remembered by people for her work taken up in close partnership with Sunderlal, Vimla was a great social reformer, advocate of justice based concerns and an environmental activist in her own right. She herself participated actively in Chipko (hug the trees to save them) movement in remote forests as well as in anti-liquor and other social reform movements.

A firm believer in the rights of landless people, she started her social activism, under the guidance of **Sarla Behn**, as a bhoodan (gift of land movement) activist, going from one remote village to another to get land for landless people.

Vinoba Bhave, the famous leader of Bhoodan movement, had closely observed the way Vimla used to work in these early days and the impact she was creating in remote villages which she was visiting for the first time sometimes in very hostile conditions to collect land gift commitments. Vinoba's secretary wrote to Sarla Behn conveying these feelings,

"I have not seen a girl activist like her. She is not just a girl from the hills, she is a devi (angel) from the hills."

Sarla Behn also mentions on the basis of her feedback from these villages that despite working in a new area Vimla would often spontaneously get the leadership role in her group which included more experienced local male members.

A firm believer in equality of women, Vimla held her ground firmly at the time of her proposed marriage to Sunderlal, who was at that time the rising star of provincial politics, saying that she would agree to marriage only if Sunderlal agreed to give up political party membership in favor of Mahatma Gandhi's path of serving people directly.



She had her way. Sunderlal gave up all political ambitions. Soon after their marriage the young couple worked hard to build themselves a very modest Ashram in Silyara, a remote village in Tehri Garhwal (now in Uttarakhand state).

Here she became a support and inspirational figure for a generation of social activists who worked for protecting rivers and forests, for equal rights of dalits, against the increasing problems of alcoholism and also promoted a host of constructive activities.

When an earthquake destroyed a substantial part of the Silyara ashram Vimla courageously faced the difficult times till some reconstruction could be taken up.

The most difficult and prolonged struggle was the one against the Tehri Dam Project. In the course of the struggle Sunderlal took a vow to live in a hut on the banks of the river near the dam site. Inseparable companions that they were, Vimla joined him even there.

I met Vimla Ji first when, as a 22 year old journalist writing on Chipko movement and related issues, I visited the Silyara ashram around 1977 or so. She soon became an inspirational figure for our family. Till the last days we continued to speak on phone and she was very happy when I visited their home to present my new book on her and Sunderlal ji to them.

Whenever I visited her home or ashram, I was impressed by her keen interest in not just national but also international affairs. She used to be very involved in catching up with recent developments and getting my opinion on these issues, and of course providing her comments and perspective also.

Hers was a life of truly great commitment to creating a better world and she never wavered from her path no matter how great the difficulties.

Rest in peace Vimla Ji. Your work will continue to inspire people for a very long time.

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Bharat Dogra has been involved with several concerns and efforts of Vimla and Sunderlal Bahuguna for nearly 46 years. His books include 'Vimla and Sunderlal Bahuguna—Chipko Movement and Struggle against Tehri Dam Project in Garhwal Himalaya' and 'Planet in Peril'. He is a regular contributor to Asia-Pacific Research.

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