

Hugging the Trees: Chipko Movement (1973 - 1981)

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Abstract Chipko movement was an ecological and social movement concerned with the preservation of forests and thereby with the maintenance of the traditional ecological balance in the Sub-Himalayan region. It started in 1973 in the Garhwal Himalayas under the leadership of men like C. P. Bhatt and Sunderlal Bahuguna. It was a wide spread movement that resisted excessive cutting of the trees and destruction of forests by outsiders by hugging the trees. Local men and women also played an important role in the movement. Gandhian techniques of nonviolent protests were used in this movement. Chipko movement continues to inspire environmental movements in India and globally even today.

Keywords Gandhi, Women, Chipko Movement, Himalayas, Sarvodaya

INTRODUCTION

As late as 1980, Lester Thurow the noted MIT economist wrote that countries interested in environmental issues or individuals supporting it are generally from upper middle class. 'Poor countries and poor individuals simply aren't interested' (Guha 2016). But poorer countries have seen considerable rise in

movements relating to gender, ethnic and environmental issues. Seven years before Lester Thurow's statement Chipko movement in India had decisively demonstrated the involvement of the poor into the domain of environmentalism. The Chipko movement was an ecological and social movement concerned with the preservation of forests and thereby with the maintenance of the traditional ecological balance in the Sub-Himalayan region. Here people share a natural and spiritual bond with nature and for them forest preservation or river preservation becomes synonymous with a movement for protecting their own local and marginal identity against outside encroachments. The hill people traditionally maintain a positive relationship with nature and a strong veneration for environment. H. Rangan suggests that Chipko movement had taken on an iconic status and is certainly seen by many as an inspiring example of local action against the alienating and destructive incursions of modern development state (Rangan 1996; Escobar 1995; Bandyopadhyay 1992; Ekins 1992; Redclift 1987).

In the recent times Chipko movement have been analysed from different dimensions. Ramchandra Guha has viewed Chipko in terms of the changing relationship between the state and peasantry. He also emphasised the social changes that created a 'money- -order' economy and an asymmetrical

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demographic profile in the villages of Uttarakhand. According to Guha it can be understood as a response to the fragmentation of village community in recent times. It was an organised and sustained social movement which embraced other social issues and sought alternative strategies of resource use and social development. Women participation was also an important aspect of this movement (Guha 1989a). Vandana Shiva employs an eco-feminist perspective to assert that Chipko struggle was “explicitly an ecological and feminist movement” (Shiva 1988). Tom Brass has however, argued against these perspectives. According to Brass the new social movements in India, such as the farmer’s and environmental movements are mainly neo-populist and middle class in nature trying to uphold structures of power and privilege to their own benefits rather than transforming them to the advantage of the oppressed communities (Rangan 2000a). Gail Omvedt argues somewhat differently when she pulls up the Marxists of big Communist Parties for characterising the ecology movements as ‘petty bourgeois’ rather than delving into the social base of the peasant of farming community and tribal people (Rangan 2000b).

CHIPKO MOVEMENT – ROLE OF CHANDI PRASAD BHATT

The Chipko movement was initiated by a group of Sarvodaya workers (followers of Gandhi’s disciple Binobha Bhawe). It officially began on April 24, 1973 at Mandal, Chamoli district of Garhwal Himalayas. Inspired by Gandhian ideals Sunderlal Bahuguna and Chandi Prasad Bhatt played a very vital role by involving

the poor people into the domain of environmentalism (Guha 2016). In 1956 Bhatt heard a speech by the Gandhian leader Jayprakash Narayan and adopted the Sarvodaya movement and the Gandhian campaigns of Bhoodan and Gramdan.

Sarvodaya members led by C.P. Bhatt became active in the field of social reconstruction. While many young men had left the Garhwal Himalayas in search of new employment, Bhatt stayed back to deal with the growing social problems. He decided to accept the challenge of community building. He wanted to find alternative source of employment for the younger generations so that they live a dignified life in their own homeland (Mishra and Tripathi 1978).

In 1960 the Sarvodaya workers established workers’ co-operative which organised unskilled and semiskilled construction workers. The group established Dasholi Gram Swarajya Sangh (Dasholi Village Self-Reliance Cooperative) in 1964 with the aim of starting village industries based on the natural resources of forest. He believed in development without destruction and creating a right atmosphere of work. The cooperative entered the market by buying forest rights through auctions to supply its small workshops manufacturing farm tools for local use. The scale of production in these units was not only relatively low but also dependent to a large extent at the mercy of the forest Departments production and management policies. However, after initial success they were being out manoeuvred by wealthy contractors.

Meanwhile DGSS started a project of collecting roots and herbs from the forest and in their endeavour they gave employment to 1000 villagers amid 1969 to 1971. In 1971 it opened a small processing plant in Gopeshwar, which manufactured turpentine and resin from pine sap. The government was not co-operative enough and did not allot adequate supplies of pine sap even when the price paid for it was higher than that paid by a partly state owned producer in the plains. For eight the plant had to be closed because of the paucity of raw material. The plant was operational for only four months. On 22 October 1971, the Sangha workers held a demonstration in Gopeshwar against government forest policy. In the meantime the Forest Department turned down the Sangha's annual request for ten ash trees for its farm tool workshop and instead handed over a contract for three hundred trees to Symond Company, a sporting goods manufacturer from the Allahabad to make tennis racquet. In March 1973, the agents from the Symond Company arrived at Gopeshwar to supervise the cutting of trees. On March 27 1973, at a meeting at Gopeshwar local people decided not to allow a single tree to be felled by the Symond agency. A month later on 24 April the DGSM workers marched from Gopeshwar to Mandal, beating drums and singing traditional songs. A compromise was struck whereby the government would allot DGSM ash trees on condition that the goods firm could take its quota. But the stiff resistance of the Sangha workers could not be broken and the Symonds Company was forced to turn away (Guha 1989b).

In June a new set of ash trees was allotted to Symonds Company near the village of Phata, in the Mandakini valley, en route to Kedarnath 80 kilometres from Gopeshwar. When the DGSS workers came to know of it they contacted late Kedar Singh Rawat, a prominent social worker of the region. On June 24, 1973 despite heavy rainfall the Sarvodaya workers organised a Chipko demonstration in Phata. The Company's agents returned to Gopeshwar and complained at the forest office that despite depositing the guarantee money they were unable to fell trees assigned to them (Guha 1989c).

The government however, did not heed these early protests and continued with the yearly auction of forests in November, 1973. One of the plots earmarked was the Reni forest, located near Joshimath in the Alakananda Valley. The area was already affected by floods in the recent past. It was inhabited by the Bhotiya community who had opted for settled agriculture instead of nomadic pastoralism. When the news was disclosed the DGSS workers contacted Govind Singh Rawat of the CPI party and found that 2000 trees had been earmarked for felling. Meetings were organised and C.P. Bhatt suggested the adoption of Chipko technique (hugging of trees).

The felling were scheduled to be held at the last week of March 1974. On March 25 a massive demonstration was organised in Joshimath where college students threatened to begin a Chipko movement unless the felling procedures were called off. Sensing trouble the forest department took to deception. On March 26 the men of Reni and neighbouring villages were

called to Chamoli to receive the compensation for lands appropriated by the Indian army after the Chinese invasion of 1962. Taking advantage of this situation the lumbermen proceeded to the forests. But in Reni they faced stiff opposition from the women who refused to bow down. The lumbermen had no option but to retire (Guha 1989*d*).

The movement in Reni will be remembered in the annals of the history of Chipko movement. Firstly women participation took place in a major way and secondly government could no longer dismiss it as a reaction 'of the motivated local industry deprived of raw material.' (Guha 1989*d*). It was hailed as a peasant movement in defence of traditional forest rights. The Chief Minister of U.P. H.N. Bahuguna agreed to set up a committee to look into the incident. Commercial felling procedures were banned for a decade in the upper catchment of Alakananda River and its tributaries. C.P. Bhatt and his followers continued the mode of reconstruction through afforestation camps, installation of bio-gas plants and other low cost energy saving devices. The rate of survival of saplings by afforestation camp was 65 to 80 percent in comparison to government which was 10 to 15 percent (Guha 1989*e*). DGSS workers claimed that it was done through the participation of local people. The Chipko movement spread to different parts of Himalayas namely the Tehri, Kumaon, Chamoli and Badyagarh. The success of the movements here depended to a great extent on the role of Sunderlal Bahuguna.

SUNDERLAL BAHUGUNA: THE DEFENDER OF HIMALAYAS

Sunderlal Bahuguna played a very important role in the preservation of the forests. He joined the Indian politics in 1947 and was elected as the general secretary of Tehri Garhwal branch of the Congress party. He moved away from formal politics and set up an ashram on Gandhian principle. Initially he followed the policy of Bhatt and DGSS in organising forest labourers in the fight for economic independence from big forest contractors. But very soon Bahuguna witnessed that forest contractors were replaced by forest corporations and growth of forest based industries. He now realised that all industries based on felling of trees was harmful. Bahuguna wanted all commercial green felling to be stopped and no new contracts to be entered with industrialists to supply raw materials. Here Bahuguna deviates from Bhatt who believed in fostering local industries based on conservation and sustainable use of forest wealth for local benefit. Bahuguna thought of Chipko movement as a humble effort to materialise the messages of Indian culture as revived by Gandhi. The tactics involved in the movement were nonviolent strategies like Satyagraha, fasts, rallies of protest and persuasion. Bahuguna organised several Chipko protests and gave wider publicity to Chipko cause by his foot marches, fasts, writings and lecture tours. He used popular idioms and Gandhian aphorisms in all his narratives and public meeting. Bahuguna very skilfully blended Gandhian maxims, environmental doom sayings, and populist critiques of western models of development and asserted the

spiritual relationship between humans and nature (Rangan 2000*b*).

During 1975 he spent most of the year on padayatras or hiking, interacting with the villagers and witnessing the destruction of nature with his own eyes. He believed that the trees must be available by the local people for meeting their needs of fuel, fodder and wood but the trees could not be felled for commercial purposes by any one. According to Bahuguna ecological crisis had taken a great proportion.

In the middle of 1977 Bahuguna and his followers met at Dharam Ghar and demanded the stoppage of the commercial exploitation of green trees in the Himalayas for a decade (Weber 1987*a*). In 1979, before the cutting of trees in the Malgudi forest, sarvodaya workers, trusted lieutenants of Bahuguna came to Badiyargarg to find out the grievances of the people. They travelled through villages informing the people about the proposed felling of trees and its detrimental consequences. The movement started on December 25 1978 but reached great proportion when Bahuguna went on a hunger strike from January 9, 1979 (Guha 1989*f*). In the words of Bahuguna, 'when all our proposals, requests and people's representation failed to persuade the UP State government to stop green felling in the hills and felling of trees started in full strength in the sensitive catchment of the Alakananda in spite of people's protests ...I have started this self-imposed penance to awaken the sleeping spirit of the conservatives to save Himalayas and ultimately the flood devastated country.' (Weber 1987*a*). Bahuguna was taken away by the police and lodged in Tehri jail. The fellers met

with stiff resistance from the villagers in spite of the arrest of their leader had to abandon their plan of felling trees and conceded defeat. On January 31 the cancellation of felling of trees at Amarsar and Badiyargarh was ordered and two days later a blanket moratorium was announced (Weber 1987*b*). This government order did not go down well with Chipko leaders including Chandi Prasad Bhatt who stated his opposition to the abridgement of any of the people's right and quoted a sarvodaya worker that 'no environmental policy can succeed if it ignores the people in that environment, who are as much a part of it as the trees, rivers and mountains' (Weber 1987*c*).

Bahuguna did not perceive Chipko as a movement merely to protect trees. For him it was a movement to re-establish a harmonious relationship between man and nature. He felt economic crisis in the hills could be solved by addressing ecological crisis. In 1981 he went on an indefinite fast urging a total ban on green felling in the Himalaya above an altitude of 1000 mts. In response to this government recommended an eight member expert committee to report on Himalayan forest policy. The government allowed a fifteen year moratorium on commercial felling in the Himalayas. It was a victory for Bahuguna because he held commercial forestry and the close links that exist between contractors and forest officials responsible for the deteriorating Himalayan environment. Ramchandra Guha states that the fifteen year moratorium marked the end of an epoch for the people and landscape of the Indian Himalayas (Guha 1989*g*).

Bahuguna directed his appeal to the national government and succeeded in getting the attention of the politicians in New Delhi. He presented tree protection as the conduit through which Himalayan nature and culture as well as India's integrity and cultural heritage could be defended. Following Gandhian model he criticised modern science and technology which led to unbridled exploitation of nature. He believed in spiritually infused science and technology which can enable all living beings to use the fruit of nature like food, fodder, fuel, fertilisers and fibre trees (Rangan 2000c). Sunderlal Bahuguna preferred to connect Himalayan deforestation with national and global environmental concerns rather than limiting it to local issues.

ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE CHIPKO MOVEMENT

In the words of Ramchandra Guha a unique characteristic of hill agriculture throughout India is the prevalence of women and the important role assigned to them. Joint participation of men and women are extremely important in the difficult terrain to sustain a family. Hence women of the house become equal partners in the struggle to attain economic security. Except ploughing, women helps in all other work like working in the field with men, domesticating animals, household and husband and child care. In the Chipko movement the women also played an important role (Guha 1989h). In Reni village Gauda Devi a young child widow played an important role in warding off labourers who had come to cut trees. The forest officials in a planned manner had asked the menfolk to come to

Chamoli on March 26, 1973 and collect their compensation cheque for the land that had been appropriated during Chinese war. While men from Malari, Reni and Lata villages were absent the axemen moved in. Gauda Devi rushed to the spot with twenty seven women and young girls to combat the men who were rude and even brandishing a gun to frighten them. Gauda Devi moved to the front and challenged the gunman. She compared the forest to her mother's home and persuaded them not to cut the trees. The women guarded the pathway to the forest whole night. The axemen returned the next morning. Four days the villagers guarded the forest. The trees of the Reni forest were thus saved by the bravery of the hill women (Weber 1987d). However, this unforeseen release of women power was frowned upon by their male counterparts who wanted final control of policy making and planning (Weber 1987e). Yet their bravery and strength cannot be undermined.

CONCLUSION

The uniqueness of Chipko movement lay in the fact that instead of being led by professional leaders it was guided by common rural population. Chandi Prasad Bhatt and Sunderlal Bahuguna were the two important leaders of the movement. Both wanted to protect nature but their views were different. The movement has also been generated a lot of debate and has been analysed by environmental historians from different angles. Irrespective of Chipko's grassroot achievements, it has accomplished a lot in the national and international domain. Chipko had put

forests on the political agenda of our country. The Forest Conservation Act of 1980 and the creation of Environmental Ministry was possible because of the movement. Yet it may be said that Chipko movement had the potential to be a radically political movement for self-determination and self-management of the resources yet it remained a purely conservationist one.

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