

Children of the Himalayas

The Message of Chipko

by *Jawahara Saidullah*

"Just as I would bring up my children, I have to nurture these trees..."

L'auteure donne un aperçu du mouvement populaire Chipko qui a été créé en vue d'abolir le déboisement des forêts en Himalaya. Ce mouvement jouit de beaucoup de succès grâce en grande partie à l'engagement des femmes et de plus, il donne l'exemple d'une méthode très efficace pour circuler l'information.

Chipko literally means "to embrace, hug, or stick to." The Chipko movement originated from a form of non-violent direct action developed by hill women in the 19th century who would hug trees to protect them from being cut down (Joshi). The modern movement began in March 1973 in Gopeshwar, the district headquarters of Chamoli (Joshi, 1984; Centre for Science and Environment, 1982). In Mandal, about 10 kilometres from Gopeshwar, representatives from the Symonds company of Allahabad were granted a tract of ash trees for use in making sports equipment. The villagers of Mandal and Gopeshwar successfully hugged the trees to prevent them from being cut down, and the Symonds company left empty handed. However, the company was given another lot of trees in Rampur-Phata, 80 kilometres away. This information reached Gopeshwar, and the villagers marched to Rampur-Phata gathering people along the way. Once again the trees were saved.

Chandi Prasad Bhatt, the founder of Chipko, holds the government accountable for the irresponsible deforestation of the Garhwal Himalayas. According to Bhatt, the development of roads and dams has contributed to massive deforestation in the area. By 1970, 16,082 hectares of forests had been destroyed. As early as

October 22, 1971, the Dasholi Gram Swaraj Mandal (DGSM) organized a procession in Gopeshwar to educate the people about the effects of deforestation and to send a message of discontent to the administration. Similar protests and demonstrations surfaced in other villages in the Uttarakhand region. It was Bhatt who suggested to the villagers that they hug the trees as a form of non-violent protest. The name Chipko was thus adopted by the people of Gopeshwar.

The domain of Shakti

Forests are central to India's villagers. They do not regard them as the dark and dangerous places that their counterparts in more temperate regions do. They are instead a symbol of balance, harmony, and well-being in nature.

Conservation has been the norm in the Himalayas in the past (Pant). Local deities were worshipped on every hill top and the trees around the deities were considered sacred. No one dared to cut them down. Before the advent of technology, villagers in Garhwal took only what they needed from the forests. The women of the region cut off branches for fire wood, stripped leaves for cattle fodder, and tapped just enough pine resin for their needs. Their primitive hand-held tools could not have contributed to large scale deforestation even if they had been so inclined.

The Devi, or goddess, is closely connected with the entire Himalayan range. She is worshipped as Aranyani, Vana Durga, and even as another form of the great earth mother (Beanne). Parvati, Prakriti, Shakti, Dharti: all of them meld

into the "primal Mother Earth," (Crooke, 51) worshipped throughout India even today.

Women are the primary workers of Garhwal. Since they have an affinity with the forest and the great protector herself, the trees do not simply represent a "stock of wood" (Shiva). The forest is a part of a balanced ecosystem and its economic value is not limited to the price of its timber. The forest sustains them and their lifestyle, providing them with fuel, fodder, herbal medicines, and fibre. They respect it and do not exploit it extravagantly.

Agents of deforestation

Ziegler classifies India as a member of the "newly industrialized" third world (7). The second report by the Centre for Science and Environment (1985) states that the Indian government owns and controls almost all of its dams, irrigation systems, power stations, mines, railways, ports, etc.: all the trappings of modern development.

However, this impressive development of India's natural resources, which has taken place in the mere 44 years since independence, has its down side. It has taken its toll on the environment and on the inhabitants of the newly developed areas. Sivaramakrishna interviewed the head of the Centre for Science and Environment (C.S.E.), Agarwal, who stated that Indian tribals, who had co-existed peacefully with their environment for centuries, have now become alienated enough to cut down their trees and sell the wood. The rationale is that if they do not do it the government or the contractors surely will.

Both the Centre for Science and the Environment reports (1982, 1985) and Shiva attribute massive deforestation to dam and road construction. Shiva calls this 'maldevelopment'. This type of unsustainable development means the death of the environment—of plant, animal and human life as we know it. Deforestation has many direct and indirect effects on the people who live in Garhwal, and in particular, on women, the primary workers of Garhwal.

possible explanation for this atypical (according to worldwide standards) ratio is gender based discrimination, such as the misuse of amniocentesis, inadequate nutrition for female children, and even female infanticide (Subtext; Forum for Development of Women and Children).

The status of women of the Garhwal Himalayas is similar to that of rural women in other developing countries. They are the primary workers at home and in the fields. In addition to collecting fodder,

industrialized development became high on the nation's agenda. In 1960, 80 per cent of the green cover in the state of Uttar Pradesh (in which Garhwal is situated) was made up of pine forests. By 1988, this had fallen to 64 per cent. During this time period, the entire forest cover in the state had fallen from 20 per cent to eleven per cent (Awasthi). In 1984, the Delhi-based Centre for Science and Environment estimated that India loses forests at the rate of 1.3 million hectares a year. This figure is



Photo: Elizabeth Smaller

Cutting grass

The status of women in India

The reality of women's status in India is a bitter one. They are a minority in every sense of the word. In a country with a literacy rate of 36.2 per cent (1981 census), environmental preservation is not high on the government's or the people's list of priorities. Women made up barely 25 per cent of the literate populace of India in the late 70's and 80's according to the 1981 census. Perhaps the most disturbing statistic for women is the adverse male to female ratio, one of the worst in the world (Subtext, 6). In 1901, there were 972 women for 1000 men. In 1981, the ratio was 933 females to 1000 males. One

they scavenge for cooking fuel. Men must often migrate to the cities to find work due to the adverse effects of erosion on their lands, creating an even heavier work load for the women (Bahugana; Centre for Science and Environment 1982, 1985). Deforestation means still more work and hardship for these women, since their lives and those of their families are inextricably linked with the forests and the trees.

Effects of deforestation on Garhwal and its women

The forests, and the entire landscape of Garhwal, have changed drastically since

eight times higher than the one the Government's forest department discloses. Forests now cover barely nine per cent of India's total land area, despite a projected goal by the authorities to ensure that 33 per cent of India's land mass is covered with forests in 30 years (Centre for Science and Environment, 1982; Clad).

Deforestation in the Himalayas has become a major ecological hazard. Apart from disrupting the lives of the locals, deforestation poses a threat to the people who live hundreds of miles downstream in the Ganges basin (Hutchinson). Large scale deforestation leads to immediate dangers like landslides, and has increasing adverse effects on daily survival.

Chipko volunteers estimate the number of human deaths due to landslides and floods in 1971 to be ten people. In 1978, this figure climbed to 14 while in 1979, it had risen to 45 (Centre for Science and Environment, 1982).

However, it is the lingering and long term effects of deforestation that are the most disturbing. Conversations with women in Dandagaon in Uttarkashi revealed that they now have to walk further and climb higher to gather fuel wood. The women must follow the receding tree line. Whole mountains which were once green and growing have become brown and barren.

As in most rural areas of the developing world, deforestation has disastrous effects on the availability of inexpensive biomass fuel (Cecelski). The Centre for Science and Environment states that women of Garhwal have to walk extremely far to look for fuel and fodder (1982, 1985). Parvati Devi, 65 of Chamoli, Garhwal says that it now takes her a whole day to collect fuel wood (Chengappa). In Diving, the women walk at least 10 kilometres three days out of four for an average of seven hours a day and return with a 25 kilogram load of wood or grass which they carry on their heads. In the absence of wood they are forced to use twigs and other energy inefficient fuels. These fuels are smoky and lead to diseases of the eyes and the respiratory system (Cecelski). Older women remember the forests being full of fuel wood, fodder grass, and water. Now, unable to believe the depletion, they persecute their daughters-in-law when they do not bring back enough of these basic commodities (Bahugana).

Deforestation has finally been recognized as a major environmental problem in India. Activists range from film actors to tribals, from social workers to politicians like Menaka Gandhi (the former minister of environment and daughter-in-law of Indira Gandhi) (Chengappa). The acknowledged success of Chipko as an environmental movement and in raising awareness has led to an abiding interest in the dynamics of this movement.

Chipko: a women's movement

Shiva was perhaps the first to write of Chipko as a primarily feminist movement. Yet others like Guha call it a peas-

ant movement or an environmental movement (Centre for Science and Environment, 1982, 1985). The first Centre for Science and Environment report did refer to it as a feminist movement, primarily because of the high profile of women in Chipko (1982).

It is interesting to note that the men associated with Chipko categorically deny its feminist nature. Chandi Prasad Bhatt states that "The contributions of the women...are invaluable but that does not make it a women's movement." Referring to protests organized in Reni, he continues:

Even though their actions were great that day, it was a once in a lifetime act....It was only because the women were there at the time that people call it a women's movement. If there had been only men there who knows what form this movement would have taken. Perhaps the women gained courage in the absence of their men.

Mishra (the first journalist to cover Chipko) echoes Bhatt's comments.

I never thought of Chipko as a separate women's movement. It's like if ten college boys get associated with a movement we say it's a youth movement and if they leave we say it's not so anymore...there never was any talk of separating it as a women's movement.

The women in Chipko want to protect the forest because "The forest gives us everything" (Kalavati Devi). All the women interviewed have an almost personal concern for the forest. Sateshwari Devi of Tangsa states: "Trees are like my children. Just as I would bring up my children I have to nurture these trees...." Kalavati Devi of Bachher also says, "The trees are like my children. In fact, a child you bring up can be false to you, but a tree is always faithful and true to you."

Although the women themselves never define Chipko as a women's movement, their experience within the movement has led to increased self-determination, self-confidence, and self-worth. Manshree Devi of Papriyana says, "...It is us common people, specially us women who have made this movement successful."

Kalavati elaborates on this theme, "Before...if we met or even saw a man walking toward us as we worked in the field or the forest we were so shy we would run away...Now I am so sure of myself that I can talk to anybody." Later she adds, "Now we know that we can do something even if we are women." Sateshwari Tiwari of Tangsa proudly asserts:

[We have gained] respect for ourselves. Earlier I thought that I could not do so many things...that I was a nobody because I was a woman.... [Now] I am self confident. So what if I am uneducated? I can still do many things.

When the women of Kalgoth came to a DGSM camp, one of them said "...after so many years of independence, for the first time we have seen that we are free. That we can also talk in front of men."

Chipko is in its infancy as a women's movement, carving out a path parallel to the Chipko peasant movement and the Chipko environmental movement. In this respect, it is intriguing to examine how these busy, often shy and isolated women heard about Chipko and its message.

The flow of information in the movement

Gopeshwar is the administrative headquarters of the district of Chamoli. It is also the headquarters of the DGSM, the organization that gave birth to Chipko as a legitimate movement, and the centre from which information about Chipko is disseminated, primarily because of the presence of Bhatt, who lives in the DGSM office and guest house.

Information links, who are members of the DGSM, connect the centre with the information receivers and adopters in the villages. Since the DGSM is an exclusively male organization, there are no women working in the information centre or acting as information links. They enter the information structure as the receivers and adopters of information in the villages.

Members of DGSM belong to different villages. They retain links with their villages because, in most cases, their families still live there. Manshree Devi of Papriyana says, "There is one person in



Photo: Elizabeth Smaller

our village, Murarilalji...who...told us about Bhattji and Chipko." Murarilal corroborates this when he says, "I belong to Papriyana and visit it many times every week. I also carried the message (of Chipko) to my people. I was the link between my people and Bhattji." Sateshwari Devi of Tangsa says that she and her village came into Chipko because "My husband was in DGSM. He still is. He used to tell us about Chipko and trees and all." Information was carried to and continues to travel between villages like Mandal, Reni, Papriyana, Tangsa, and Bachher.

Once the Chipko message was received in the villages, the women became actively involved in the struggle against deforestation. They also planted trees in their depleted forests. Manshree Devi says, "Muralalji, our leader, told us about Bhattji and Chipko. Now we get wood and grass from our own forest." Their "own forest" is a great source of pride, and reforestation has become a reality in all the villages active in the Chipko movement. Kalavati Devi of Bachher recalls that her inspiration to join Chipko came from Gopeshwar. "We used to see the women of Gopeshwar and see the work they used to do. Gopeshwar's (women) ...prevented the trees from being cut down." Sateshwari Devi of Tangsa simply said, "We are grateful to Bhattji for Chipko." Later she

says, "Bhattji started it (Chipko) but he gave it to the people and it is our movement."

Four steps in the "travel" of information

Four steps which have been identified in the travel of information are 1) processions; 2) contact persons in each village; 3) dissemination of information through "walking and talking"; 4) consolidation through camps.

Processions accompanied by drums, flutes or horns have long been used to attract the attention of the populace of India. Bhatt talks of many such processions, usually just before a major Chipko incident. Even before they decided that their strategy would be to hug the trees, the DGSM organized a procession to show its dissatisfaction with the Government's policy in Garhwal. He recalls, "On the 14th or the 15th of November (1972) we took out a procession of about 1000 villagers. We beat drums and carried banners through the streets of Gopeshwar."

The women recall the processions as being their first contact with Chipko. Kalavati Devi of Bachher states:

The first time I had gone to a procession it was a strange experience. All the villagers and tribals were beating

drums and blowing their flutes and trumpets. There I was along with the other women reciting the slogans. We were all chanting 'the forests awake and the forest dwellers awake.' I had heard of these before and it showed that we were one, that we were united. There were a lot of women there.

Kunwar points out the logic behind the use of sounds and processions in their communication with the villagers. He talks of the dilemma of attracting people in remote villages. People who have had limited contact with others may not be very receptive to the presence of strangers. "We get people together through music...we are not poets but we sing and manage to get people together...when people come to us we talk to them and tell them of our work."

To sustain and keep people in Chipko's fold, contact or link people are indispensable. Since men do most of the travelling in Garhwal, they are the village-to-village links. The link people are lifelines to the main organization, DGSM. Without them the villages would not have been successfully assimilated. Also, news of important incidents would not have reached Gopeshwar.

In the absence of telecommunications basic methods have to suffice. "Walking

and talking" is remarkably efficient. Hayat Singh, the link between Reni and Gopeshwar, explains:

Well, everyone in the mountains travels by foot. Besides Reni is barely 8 or 10 km away. It's like this, someone from Reni will come here or someone from here will go there and bring news. He'll come here and sit at the tea stall and talk to two people and then those two people will talk to a few more. People from Reni might be on their way to Chamoli or Gopeshwar for some work. Then, of course they might have relatives in another village...who might visit (each other) and that's how we get news. That's how it happens...it's no big deal.

Keeping the message alive in villages is probably the most crucial stage of information travel. Chipko solves this problem through the medium of camps. Kunwar says that DGSM holds four or five camps each year. Each has a slightly different agenda.

In the May-June camp we concentrate on building protective walls for the forest. In the rains, July-August we plant seedlings. In the two winter camps we concentrate on weeding the fields and fertilizing them. In the January-February camp we plant trees.

In this way, Chipko helps the host village and talks to the villagers about "education, nutrition and health" along with the environmental agenda.

Manshree Devi of Papriyana says that "We have learned a lot from the camps. We sing songs and work together." Sateshwari Tiwari of Tangsa adds: "In the camps we learn to help each other. In fact, in the villages we hold the camps in, we plant trees and build protective walls for their forests. We listen to speeches and find out how trees help us." All the women also recall feeling a new unity with "meeting people...specially women from many other villages." The camps, therefore, not only educate people but also give the women the opportunity to bond with each other.

Conclusion

Chipko is a multi-faceted movement, and a movement in progress. The men and women of Chipko volunteer their services, and, for them, it is not necessary to define Chipko as a women's movement. Its survival is more important. This does not mean, however, that the women will not and should not continue to carve a niche for their individual rights within the movement.

Chipko is also a fascinating glimpse of one of the most efficient and often overlooked methods of information travel. In this age of telecommunications, the efficacy of talking face-to-face has been overshadowed. The grapevine that links the Chipko villages, however, spreads its message into every home in the area. People walking back and forth between villages and Gopeshwar carry information about the movement.

Women are not represented in the power structure of the DGSM, but it is their work and presence that has popularized Chipko. Therefore, the specific concerns of the women will be addressed—if not now, in the future. Their visibility in the movement ensures that.

In conclusion, Chipko is a model of a grassroots movement that uses all the resources it has to popularize itself, spread its message, and maintain the loyalty of all its participants. Creative use of people and local travel patterns has led to the successful dissemination of Chipko's message, and to the success of the movement itself.

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