

ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS IN INDIA: A CASE STUDY OF CHIPKO MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Environmental movement has surfaced itself in the world in the wave of large scale threat to human habitat and ecology. This paper, tries to focus on one such movement in India, i.e. the Chipko movement in the Gharwal Himalayas of India. This paper would largely focus on the specific issues related to the movement, its course and consequence, thereby locating the significance of the environmental issues to the society at large. It will largely focus on the historical trajectory of the movement, the causes that led to Chipko movement in the Himalayas, followed by the events that happened in the course of the movement, and the reaction by various actors involved in the scene. This paper would also focus on the role of the women in safe guarding the natural habitat, as the Chipko movement saw the first large scale involvement of women in the movement.

Keywords: *Environment, Chipko, Gandhian Perspective, Old and New movements.*

INTRODUCTION

The environmental movement, a term that includes the conservation and green politics, is a diverse scientific, social, and political movement for addressing environmental issues. Environmentalists advocate the sustainable management of resources and stewardship of the environment through changes in public policy and individual behavior. In its recognition of humanity as a participant in ecosystems, the movement is centered on ecology, health, and human rights. The environmental movement is represented by a range of organizations, from the large to grassroots. Due to its large membership, varying and strong beliefs, and occasionally speculative nature, the environmental movement is not always united in its goals. At its broadest, the movement includes private citizens,

professionals, religious devotees, politicians, and extremists. The roots of the modern environmental movement can be traced to attempts in nineteenth-century Europe and North America to expose the costs of environmental negligence, notably disease, as well as widespread air and water pollution, but only after the Second World War did a wider awareness begin to emerge. *"The development of green movement in others part likewise Germany and North America in the early 1980s boosted formation of green network and the green movement through the world including India."*

OLD AND NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENT

The human society has passed through the number of changes with the accordance of time and periods. In ancient days movement primarily considered as

local issues like race, caste, and religion trade union movement etc. so these social movements called ancient or old social movement. But in the period of time with the emergence of new society with knowledge and more consolidated structure it change its nature and perspectives like it involves issues like gender, sexuality, rights and freedoms about individuals. But these social movements covers only societal aspects, but further with the development of new mature society others important issues like reservation and ecological issues played significant role. The new emerging aspects can be considered as new social movement. Shah, considered *"The old social movement as old form of movements that basically based on some core demands of organizations and individuals."*(Shah pp. 18) In other words like Pichardo argues that the new social movement concern with culture questions *"Involving matter of sexual identification role of definition and community. New social are also reaction to the expensive growth oriented, nature of position industrialism which need to neglect the social costs of growth to maintain profit inability."* (Pichardo. Pp. 420).

ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT IN INDIA

During the past twenty years, people in various regions of India have formed nonviolent action movements to protect their environment, their livelihood, and their ways of life. These environmental movements range from that which emerged from the Himalayan regions of Uttar Pradesh to the tropical forests of Kerala and from Gujarat to Tripura in response to projects that threaten to dislocate people and to affect their basic human rights to land, water, and ecological stability of life-support systems. They share certain features, such as democratic values and decentralized decision making, with social movements operating in India. The environmental movements are slowly progressing toward defining a model of development to replace the current resource-

intensive one that has created severe ecological instability.

Even with limited resources the environmental movements have initiated a new political struggle for safeguarding the interests of the poor and the marginalized, among whom are women, tribal groups, and peasants. Among the main environmental movements are *ChipkoAndolan* and *Save the Bhagirathi and Stop Tehri project* committee in Uttarakhand, *Save the Narmada Movement (Narmada BachaoAndolan)* in Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat; youth organizations and tribal people in the Gandhamardan Hills whose survival is directly threatened by development of bauxite deposits; the opposition to the *Baliapal and Bhogarai test range* in Orissa, the *Appiko Movement in the Western Ghats*; groups opposing the *Kaiganuclear power plant* in Karnataka; the campaign against the *Silent Valley project*; the Rural Women's Advancement Society (*GraminMahilaShramikUnnayamSamiti*), formed to reclaim waste land in Bankura district; and the opposition to the *Gumti Dam* in Tripura. In addition, there are local movements against deforestation, waterlogging, salinization, and desertification in the command areas of dams on the Kosi, Gandak, and Tungabhadra rivers and in the canal-irrigated areas of Punjab and Haryana. Local movements like *PaniChetna*, *PaniPanchyat*, and *MuktiSangharsh* advocate ecological principles for water use. A movement in the small fishing communities against ecological destruction exists along the coasts of India.

These environmental movements are an expression of the socio-ecological effects of narrowly conceived development based on short-term criteria of exploitation. The movements are revealing how the resource-intensive demands of development have built-in ecological destruction and economic deprivation. The members have activated small plans to safeguard natural processes and to provide the macro concept for ecological development at the national and regional levels. In the rest of this article I will focus on the *Chipko movement* in the Himalaya.

CHIPKO MOVEMENT IN INDIA

The meaning of Chipko, translated in Hindi, literally means "tree-huggers." No one actually knows when this movement began; however, in the 1970's seemed to be the phase when the conflict was heightened most. History tells us that The British government controlled the northern hill districts of India in the nineteenth century. During this period (1815-1947), Uttarakhand was divided into two contiguous but distinct socio-political units, the nominally independent chiefdom of TehriGarhwal and the British administered Kumaon Division. Historically, the Indian Himalayan region has been under the control of expatriates (particularly Germans) since 1855 in order to produce lumber for the railroads. The government nationalized one-fifth of the forest area and enacted legislation," Indian Forest Act of 1878, "regulating peasant access by restricting it to areas of forest not deemed commercially profitable." Sanctions were enacted on those that breach those laws. Although most of the bureaucratic structures of the government maintained that deforestation was specifically deemed for scientific and legal purpose, they paid off forest managers to excavate entire land areas to be used for commercial expenditures. The proceeds were usually put into the governmental treasury.

The Chipko Movement began in 1971 as a movement by local people under the leadership of *Dashauli Gram SwarajyaSangh (DGSS)* to assert their rights over the forest produce. Initially demonstrations were organized in different parts of Uttarakhand demanding abolition of the contractual system of exploiting the forest-wealth, priority to the local forest-based industries in the dispersal of forest-wealth and association of local voluntary organizations and local people in the management of the forests. Although there is no one particular person that takes credit for starting the movement, one name that seems to be synonymous is SunderlalBahuguna, the leader. The protestors, consisting of mostly women and their children, were called on by their leader to form a ban in order to stop the usurpation of trees from the Uttarakhand.

The enduring nature of Chipko has raised several questions. The movement has been instrumental in the social and ecological disintegration of the hill society and also the ideological clashes between subcultures of the movement and the redefinition of gender roles. As early as August of 1994, Chipko huggers wanted to stop the construction of the dam at Tehri because the protestors claim that it will uproot trees and pose a flood threat.

CHIPKOANDOLAN EVENTS

Hastened by increasing hardships, the Garhwal Himalayas soon became centre of rising social ecological awareness against reckless deforestation which had denuded much of forest cover, which eventually resulted in the devastating Alaknanda River floods, in July 1970, when a major landslide blocked the river, and effected an area starting from Hanumanchatti, near Badrinath to 350 km downstream till Haridwar, further numerous villages, bridges and roads were washed away. Thereafter, incidences of landslides and land subsidence became a common feature in an area which was experiencing rapid civil construction. Soonvillagers had started organizing themselves under several smaller groups, taking up local causes with the authorities, and standing up against commercial logging operations that threatened their livelihoods. In October 1971, the Sangh workers held a demonstration in Gopeshwar to protest against the policies of the Forest Department. More rallies and marches were held in late 1972, but to little effect, that is when the decision to take direct action was taken, and first such occasion arrived when the Forest Department turned down the Sangh's annual request for ten ash trees for its farm tools workshop, and instead awarded a contract for 300 trees to Simon Company, a sports good manufacturer in distant Allahabad, to make Tennis rackets. In March 1973, the lumberers arrived at Gopeshwar, and after a couple of weeks, they were confronted at village Mandal on April 24, 1973, where about hundred villagers and DGSS workers beating drums and shouting slogans, forced the contractors and their lumberers to retreat. This was the first confrontation

of the movement, and finally the contract was cancelled and awarded to the Sangh instead. Though by now, the issue had enlarged from procuring the annual quota of three ash trees, and encompassed a growing concern over the commercial logging, and forest policy of the government, which the villagers saw as unfavourable towards them. The Sangh also decided to resort to hugging the tree, which as a mechanism of non-violent protest.

But the struggle was far from over, as the same company was awarded more ash trees, in the Phata forest, 80 km away from Gopeshwar. Here again, due to local opposition, starting 20 June 1973, the contractors retreated after a standoff that lasted a few days. Thereafter the villagers of Phata and Tarsali, formed a vigil group and watched over the trees till December, when they had another successful stand-off, when the activists reached the site in time, and the lumberers retreated leaving behind the five ash trees felled. The final flash point began few months, when the government announced an auction scheduled in January 1974, for 2,500 trees near Reni village, overlooking the Alaknanda River. Bhatt set out for the villages in the Reni area, and enraged the villagers, decided to protest against the move of the government by hugging the trees, over the next few weeks, rallies and meetings continued in the Reni area, and the villagers were prepared for the stand-off.

On March 26, 1974, the day the lumberers were to axe the trees, the men of the Reni village, and DGSS workers, were in Chamoli, diverted by state government and contractors to a fictional compensation payment site, while back home labourers arrived a truckload to the start logging operations. Finally when a girl on seeing them rush to inform Gaura Devi, the head of the village MahilaMangal Dal, at Reni village (Laata was her ancestral home and Reni adopted home). Gaura Devi led 27 women of Reni village, reached the site and confronted the loggers. When all talking failed, and instead loggers started shouting and abusing the women, threatening them with guns, the women resorted to hugging the trees to stop them from being axed. This went on into late hours, and the

women kept a whole night vigil guarding their trees from the cutters, till a few of them relented and left the village. The next day, when with the men and leaders back, the news of the movement spread to the neighbouring Laata and other villages also Henwalghati, and more people joined in. Eventually only after a four-day standoff, the contractors left. (Tripathi 1978).

CHIPKOANDOLAN PARTICIPANTS

One of Chipko's most salient features was the mass participation of female villagers. As the backbone of Uttarakhand's agrarian economy, women were most directly affected by environmental degradation and deforestation, and thus connected the issues most easily. How much this participation impacted or derived from the ideology of Chipko, has been fiercely debated in academic circles. Despite this, both female and male activists did play pivotal roles in the movement including Gaura Devi, Sudesha Devi, Bachni Devi, Chandi Prasad Bhatt, SundarlalBahuguna, Govind Singh Rawat, Dhoom Singh Negi, Shamsher Singh Bisht and GhanasyamRaturi, the Chipko poet, whose songs echo throughout the Himalayas. Out of which, Chandi Prasad Bhatt was awarded the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 1982 and SundarlalBahuguna was awarded the Right Livelihood Award in 1987 and Padma Vibhushan.

GANDHIAN PERSPECTIVE AND CHIPKOANDOLAN

Gandhian methods of satyagraha and non-violent resistance, through the act of hugging trees to protect them from being felled. The modern Chipko movement started in the early 1970s in the Garhwal Himalayas of Uttarakhand, with growing awareness towards rapid deforestation. The landmark event in this struggle took place on March 26, 1974, when a group of female peasants in Reni village, Hemwalghati, in Chamoli district, Uttarakhand, India, acted to prevent the cutting of trees and reclaim their traditional forest rights that were threatened

by the contractor system of the state Forest Department, and inspired hundreds of such grassroot level actions, throughout the region. By the 80s, the movement spread throughout India, and led to formulation of people sensitive forest policies.

They used folk songs during protest:

*"Maatuhamra, pnnihamrahamra
Hi chhanyibaunbhi Pitron no Lagaiboun, humanahi to
bachanbhi'*

*Soil Ours, whater Ours, Ours these forest, Our
Forefathers raised them, it's We who must protect
them." (Bandyopadhyay 881)*

PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN CHIPKO MOVEMENT

The Chipko Movement in the Uttarakhand region of the Himalayas is often treated as a women's movement to protect the forest ecology of the Uttarakhand from the axes of the contractors. But the reasons behind women's participation are more economic than ecological. In fact, the economic and ecological interests of Uttarakhand are so interwoven that it is difficult to promote one without promoting other. In this paper an attempt would be made to explain the reasons behind women's active participation in the Movement and their place within the Movement.

In 1974, in spite of DGSS's protests, about 2500 trees of Reni forest were auctioned by the Forest Department. The DGSS planned to launch the Chipko Movement there. However, the local bureaucracy played the trick and managed to make the area devoid of local men as well as activists of the DGSS. To the utter surprise of everybody, 27 women of Reni village successfully prevented about 60 men from going to the forest to fell the marked trees. This was the first major success of the Chipko Movement. It is after this incident that attempts were made to project it as a women's movement. After this incident, the Reni Investigation Committee was set up by the U.P. Government and on its recommendations 1200 sq. km. Of river catchment

area were banned from commercial exploitation. After Reni, in 1975, the women of Gopeshwar, in 1978, of Bhyudar Valley (threshold of Valley of Flower), of Dongary-Paitoli in 1980, took the lead in protecting their forests. In Dongari and Paitoli, the women opposed their men's decision to give a 60 acre Oak forest to construct a horticulture farm. They also demanded their right to be associated in the management of the forest. Their plea was that it is the woman who collects fuel, fodder, water, etc. The question of the forest is a life and death question for her. Hence, she should have a say in any decision about the forest. Now they are not only active in protecting the forests but are also in afforesting the bare hill-slopes.

CONSEQUENCES: AFFORESTATION PROGRAMME GENERAL AWAKENING

Since 1976, the IGSS started afforesting such which had become vulnerable to landslides. Initially this was also an all male programme. Sometimes local village women participated on some ornamental programme on the last day of the afforestation camp. However, the idea of increasing the association of women got momentum after 1978. In the beginning, the local women were assigned the responsibility of looking after the trees planted in their villages. While planting trees their suggestions were sought about the species to be planted. To solve the fodder problem, grass imported from Kashmir was planted. As the afforestation programme attempted to solve the problem of fuel and fodder, the women welcomed it. They looked after the trees so much so that the survival rate is between 60-80 percent. In these afforestation camps, information about different aspects of local life is exchanged with the villagers. Their basic problems including the specific problems faced by women are discussed and ways of solving these problems are evolved.

Because both the protection and afforestation programmes reflect the needs and

aspirations of women, the women have spontaneously responded to the Chipko call and became the effective links of the movement. In fact recently, due to the awakening generated during the afforestation camps, women have started Mangal Dals in many villages have become very active. *'Previously, the women used to be passive listeners in the camps too. In one of the recent camps, July-Aug 1982, women with breast-feeding children walked about 18 kilometers to participate in the afforestation camp there. The women, who till recently were mere limbs of the movement, have now risen to leadership roles.'*(Gopa Joshi: Sept, 1982)

STATE RESPONSE

When the news of the Chipko reached the state capital, and then state Chief Minister, Hemwati Nandan Bahuguna, set up a committee to look into the issue which eventually, ruled in the favour of the villagers. This then became a turning point in the history of eco-development struggles in the region and also across the world. The struggle soon spread across many parts of the region, and such spontaneous stand-offs between the local community and timber merchants occurred at several locations, with hill women demonstrating their new-found power as non-violent activists. As the movement gathered shape under its leaders, the name Chipko Movement got attached to their activities. As per Chipko historians, the term originally used by Bhatt was the Garhwali language word, "*angalwaltha*", or embrace, which later adapted to Hindi word, Chipko, which means to stick.

Subsequently, over the next five years the movement spread to many districts of region, and within a decade throughout the Uttarakhand Himalayas. Larger issues of ecological and economic exploitation of the region were raised. The villagers demanded that no forest-exploiting contracts should be given to outsiders and local communities should have effective control over natural resources like land, water and forests. They wanted the

government to provide low cost materials to small industries and ensure development of the region without disturbing the ecological balance. The movement took up economic issues of landless forest workers and asked for guarantees of minimum wage. Globally Chipko demonstrated a clear link between environment concerns till now considered a luxury of the rich, in a new perspective as a matter of life and death for the poor, always the first ones to be devastated by an environmental tragedy, and several scholarly studies were made in the backdrop of the movement. In 1977, in another area, women tied a sacred thread, Rakhi, around trees earmarked for felling, in a Hindu tradition which signifies a bond between brother and sisters.

Women's active participation in the Chipko agitation was a very novel aspect of the movement. The forest contractors of the region usually doubled up as suppliers of alcohol to men. Women held sustained agitations against the habit of alcoholism and broadened the agenda of the movement to cover other social issues. The movement achieved a victory when the government issued a ban on felling of trees in the Himalayan regions for fifteen years in 1980, by then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, until the green cover was fully restored. One of the prominent Chipko leaders, Gandhian Sunderlal Bahuguna took a 5,000 kilometre trans-Himalaya footmarch in 1981-83, spreading the Chipko message to a far greater area. Gradually, women set up cooperatives to guard local forests, and also organized fodder production at rates conducive to local environment. Next, they joined in land rotation schemes for fodder collection, helped replant degraded land etc.

CONCLUSION

Chipko movement had a tremendous impact on the political landscape of the country, it consolidated in the later years in the demand for the state of Uttaranchal, which did prove successful. The Chipko movement was too on the universal scale and it did have a great impact for all the subsequent environmental movement in India. However, the

most striking feature of this movement was the mass involvement of the women in the movement, thus many of the environmentalist consider it to be the classic example of feminist movement. Vandana Siva developed her idea of "Eco Feminism" taking deep insights from this very movement. Chipko movement still has a very powerful resonance of the success of the Gandhian way of agitation, which does not rely on the violence but on the path of Non- Violence. Thus, Chipko Movement is one of the most prominent environmental movement in India, which has garnered a lot of attention worldwide from various sections of the society, including activists, academicians, policy makers and the state; this would further pave and enlighten the path of many of the struggles of the people in future as well.

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