

GAURA DEVI – DELICATE HAND AT ERADLE, FIRM IN STRUGGLE

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ABSTRACT

Gaura Devi came to notice in 1974 when she was told that local loggers were cutting the trees. The man of Reni village had been tricked out of the village by news that the government was going to payout compensation for land used by the army. She challenged the men to shoot her instead of cutting down the tree. They managed to halt their work by hugging the trees despite the abuse of the armed loggers. The Chipko movement was a non-violent agitation in 1973. It is best remembered for the collective mobilization of women for the cause of preserving forests. Thereafter the government of U.P. placed a ten year ban on all tree felling in area.

Key words : Gaura Devi, Hugging, Historic

In this history of environmental activism there is perhaps no other community drivers resistance campaign that will come close to the impact left behind by the historic Chipko Movement. Spearheaded by the villagers of the Alaknanda valley in the seventies, it made the world take notice because of the non-violent way in which the entire resistance was mobilized. While the movement today is quite a prominent part of the psyche, only a few of us know about this valiant lady who braved the government, its gun-brandishing, functionaries and the axe-wielding loggers to save the forest reversed by the Community.



Gaura Devi was born in 1925 in a village named Lata in the state of Uttarakhand. She hailed from the tribal Marccha Family of the Lata village in Chamoli district. Her family was traditionally engaged in the wool trade and she moved to a nearby village named Reni after her marriage near to the town of Libet. Unfortunately by the age of 22 she was a widow with a child. Now she has single

handy shoulder the domestic responsibilities as well as the family's wool trade.

Gaura's experiences has made her conscious towards the struggles of women, which made her active in the panchayat and other community initiative. Because of her engagement in the community and advocacy of forest protection, the women of Reni began look up to her. In the wake of the Chipko Movement, they decided to approach her to head the Mahila Mandal Dal (Women's Welfare Association). The goal of this grassroots organization was to ensure cleanliness in the village as well as the protection of community forests. Even though Gaura Devi was in her late forties, she readily accepted their offer. By then the Chipko movement had already begun to create widespread awareness and inspired by it she started numerous campaign in the nearby villagers, to spread the word about the importance of forests.



The movement first originated in mandal village in 1973, where the then Uttar Pradesh Government had sanctioned the cutting down of close to 300 trees for commercial purposes. Motivated by Chandi Prasad Bhatt, the founder of DGSS, the residents of went ahead and physically embraced the trees to dissuade the loggers from cutting down. Gaura Devi mobilized the women around her to stand up to the loggers, and their combined efforts would go on to

save a whopping number of 2500 trees from being saved.

In 1974 when the state government authorised the felling of tree in the belt and roped in contractors for the job, the villagers were quick to retaliate, with Bhatt and DGSS volunteers joining them to protest against the government. Just like the precursor in Mandal, they hold peaceful demonstrations, which included public meetings, rallies and other such acts of defiance in Reni Village and the adjoining areas.

Because of the earlier success in Mandal, the state government and local contractors, hatched a scheme to divert the attention of the DGSSs and local men to Chamoli under the false pretence of compensation. With the men gone from Reni, the state though it would be easier to go ahead with their plans and sent a group of forest officials and loggers on March 25 as fixed earlier. Fortunately, a young girl from the village saw them approaching and rushed to inform Gaura Devi. Knowing that there was no time to waste, she quickly mobilized a group of 27 women and confronted the men. While she initially tried to reason with them, it soon became clear to her that they would not budge from their stance.

She challenged the men to shoot her instead of cutting down the trees and she described the forest with her Maika (mother's home). They managed to halt their work by hugging the trees despite the abuse of armed loggers. They kept guard of the trees that night and women vigilantly burnt the midnight oil and to guard the trees. And over the next three or four days other villagers joined the action.

The loggers lefts leaving the trees. After this incident, the Uttar Pradesh government established a committee of experts to investigate the issue of falling of trees, and the lumber company withdrew its men from Reni. The committee stated that the Reni Forest was an ecologically sensitive area and that no trees should be felled there. Thereafter the government of Uttar Pradesh placed a ten years ban on all tree felling in an area of over 1150 Km.



Participants of the first all-woman Chipko action at Reni village in 1974, reassembled thirty years later.

When Bhatt met Gaura Devi the next day, she narrated what had happened and specifically requested him to not report the forest officials or their obnoxious behaviour. She felt that they were only doing what was ordered from the top and the complaint would cast them their jobs. Even after the incident, she kept on mobilizing women to organize more, protests and rallies but because she was illiterate, she was never invited or asked about her views on the preservation of forests by policy makers. Gaura Devi died in July 1991 at the age of 66. Except for the people in Uttarakhand who have ensured that the tale of the women revered as modern day 'Reni Ki Rani' gets passed on from one generation to the other, Gaura Devi and her acts, vision of bravery and selflessness became forgotten to the rest of the world.

My aim to writing, this paper is to did people slowly begin to appreciate and celebrate her contribution and launched a wave of environmental activism across the world. On this occasion I remember the historic movement led by the women of Reni. We remember this unsung environmental activist, without whose courageous leadership and heroic actions, the Chipko Movement, or rather, the forests of Uttarakhand would have taken a very different course. Through this article I am suggesting

to the government, develop Reni Village as Home stay tourism and bring it on the map of tourism. So can national and international tourists know about this.

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