



Standing up for trees: Women's role in the Chipko Movement

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The Chipko Movement has attracted world-wide attention. The image of poor, rural women in the hills of northern India standing with their arms around trees to prevent them being cut down is a romantic and compelling one. The reality, in many ways, fits the image: the Chipko Movement can indeed be considered an important success story in the fight to secure women's rights, in the process of local community development through forestry and in environmental protection. But there are more complicated implications as well. It is important to understand the history of Chipko and the context in which it arose - and is still evolving.

- Since no society is found in a state of perfect structural equilibrium, there are always situations of conflict. Each society, moreover, has institutionalized ways and means of articulating and resolving such conflicts. If a need is felt for altering or transforming structures in a certain fashion, some form of collective mobilization of people and their resources is resorted to; such an activity is given the name of "social movement". By contrast, there is also sometimes collective resistance to social change. Social movements, in short, can aim at either changing or preserving the way things are - or both.

In the case of women's role in the Chipko Movement, it is both. (*Chipko*, a Hindi word meaning "hugging", is used to describe the movement because local village women literally "hugged" trees, interposing their bodies between the trees and the loggers to prevent their being cut down.) The Chipko Movement is an ecological movement, concerned with the preservation of forests and thereby with the maintenance of the traditional ecological balance in the sub-Himalayan region, where hill people have traditionally enjoyed a positive relationship with their environment. Thus, it strives to maintain the traditional status quo between the people and the environment. Its proponents have tried to demonstrate that the past and present forest policies of the Indian Government have negatively affected the ecological balance of the area and caused the uprooting of indigenous people who previously depended on forest for their survival and who preserved the forest by maintaining a strong bond of veneration and love toward it.

The Chipko Movement, which has now spread from one end of the Himalayas in Kashmir to the other in Arunachal Pradesh, is endeavouring to alter the Government's forest policy by insisting on maintenance of the traditional *status quo* in the Himalayan and other forest regions of India. In this sense, there is resistance to change and to an opening up of the area for technological development.

The collective mobilization of women for the cause of preserving forests has brought about a

situation of conflict regarding their own status in society. Women have demanded to share in the decision-making process along with men; hence, there has been opposition by men to women's involvement in the Chipko Movement. Women are, on the one hand, seeking alterations in their position in society and, on the other hand, supporting a social movement that is resisting change. To understand this, it is crucial to ask why women support the movement, what the extent of their awareness is, and how many women in the hill areas are actually participating in the movement.

Women and Chipko. Leaders of the Indian independence movement at one stage decided to seek women's participation, and Mahatma Gandhi gave a call to Indian women to come out of their homes to work for the cause. In the Chipko Movement, women became involved through a different process. There was a sustained dialogue between the Chipko workers (originally, men) and the victims of the environmental disasters in the hill areas of Garhwal (chiefly women). Women, being solely in charge of cultivation, livestock and children, lost all they had because of recurring floods and landslides. The message of the Chipko workers made a direct appeal to them. They were able to perceive the link between their victimization and the denuding of mountain slopes by commercial interests. Thus, sheer survival made women support the movement.

Why men did not see these connections and women did have to do with the way the subsistence economy is organized in this area. It is also related to the way men perceive the Chipko Movement as a "back-to-nature" strategy and to their preference for a traditional type of economic development that takes place around them.

However, whether the Chipko workers realized it or not - or intended it or not - the women who participated in the Chipko meetings, processions and other programmes have become aware of their potentialities and are now demanding a share in the decision-making process at the community level.

FORESTERS ARE LISTENING TO HER Chipko has depended upon women and girls

The social setting

The Garhwal division of Uttar Pradesh (one of India's northern states) comprises the four districts of Uttarkashi, Chamoli, Tehri and Pauri and covers a total area of 27 002 km², with a population of more than 70 0000 persons, less than 1 percent of the total population of the state. Uttarkashi and Chamoli, both border districts having the Indo-Tibetan boundary to the north, are the least-populated districts of the state.

The Indian Social Institute of New Delhi financed a two-month study visit to the Chamoli district by a group including the author in September-October 1982. Chamoli was selected as our unit of investigation because the Chipko Movement, initiated by a group of Sarvodaya workers (followers of Mahatma Gandhi's disciple Vinoba Bhave), originated here. The total area of the Chamoli district is 9 125 km². Ninety-six percent of the district population lives in villages. There are 1649 villages in all, and of these 1488 are inhabited. Of the total population, 58 percent are gainfully employed. Sixty percent of the total female population of the district are "working" while only 55 percent of the men in the district work. Further, 97 percent of working women are engaged in cultivation, as compared with only 72 percent of the men.

Not only do females in the Chamoli district outnumber males by four percentage points, but the single-member female households outnumber single-member male households. The majority in these single-member households belong to the 50-plus age group. Male migration from the hill areas to find work in the armed services and other jobs in the plains is fairly common, with women left to look after land, livestock and families.

Subsistence. A visit to the area makes one realize that topographic and climatic conditions require special adaptation by people who have to work extra hard to survive. During the 1982 field trip, seven villages were visited and open-ended interviews held with rural women and men. Unlike that of the villages in the Indo-Gangetic plains, the rural population of this area depends on land as well as forest for its subsistence and other survival requirements. Such dependence makes the character of social life in this region significantly different from that of the rural population in the plains. Nearly every family in the village owns land, usually less than half a hectare. Annual crops grown here are wheat, paddy, pulses and oil seeds. Farming is mainly dependent on monsoon rains rather than irrigation channels.

In general, subsistence farming by an average family of five members is possible for three to six months per year. For the rest of the year, villagers have to look for other sources of subsistence. The nearest source is the forest around them. Thus, settled agriculture is coupled with the foraging of minor forest produce. The villagers also use wood from the forest for various purposes, such as agricultural tools, dwellings, cooking fuel and fodder for grazing cattle. The use of forest products is expected to increase.

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They asked the women to confine themselves to their fields and homes and simultaneously issued a written warning to Bhatt that if he tried to agitate or organize the village women, he would be killed.

People generally had free access to the forest until 1821, when there began a process of gradual control over the forest area by the Government. Among some nomadic tribal groups, control over territories holding strategic food resources was specified in terms of customary laws, but government policy specified their dissociation "from the management and exploitation of the forest wealth" (Joshi, 1981).

In terms of day-to-day life, the basis for sex-role differentiation and the types of relationship between the sexes are linked with the pattern of cultivation and exploitation of forest wealth. Women's position in the society is governed by the norms of a patriarchal system of social organization. Typically, men must prepare the land for cultivation because there are taboos associated with women operating the plough. Thus, women are never themselves able to initiate the process of cultivating; they must depend on men. Men also own the land, as property among the Hindus of Garhwal is transmitted patrilineally. The labour required to raise crops is, however, almost entirely supplied by women. Women do the planting, weeding and harvesting. There are no "prestige crops", raised exclusively by either sex. Most staple crops are raised by women, provided that men prepare the land by ploughing it for two days in each cropping season.

Government programmes. In almost all the villages, we were told that the various development plans and tribal welfare schemes introduced by the Government have failed to make an impact either on the low standard of living in general or on the worsening conditions of women's household drudgery in particular. On the other hand, there are very visible signs of government-initiated development programmes such as those for road construction and the increased number of educational, medical and housing facilities.

In Chamoli district alone, there are 66 government intermediate colleges and three postgraduate colleges. The district registered an increase of 52 percent in literacy in the decade between 1961 and 1971. Although education has begun to have an impact in this region, one old woman in Dewara Kharora village requested me to stop its spread. Because of it, she said, all the educated boys of the village want to leave, leaving women to cope with the

harsh life in the hills.

Conversations with local teachers and students gave the impression that development in the forms of roads, schools, hospitals, hotels, shops, cinemas, radio and libraries had ensured increased participation on the part of the Garhwal region in the mainstream of national development. One old man stated in a calm voice: "Whether we like it or not, the government is opening up this area. For sure, the government is only working in its own selfish interests, and it has no aim of benefiting the people. All the same, it is up to us to benefit from the new developments, and if we want to take advantage of the new schemes we must prepare our selves to come forward and push the outsiders out."

Origins of the Chipko Movement

The Chipko is one of many "people's" ecological movements that have sprung into being over the past 10 to 20 years. These movements are fundamentally different from ecological movements in the industrialized world. There, industrial pollution and even "development" are seen as threats, but threats primarily to present lifestyles. In the Chipko Movement, however, the basic concern is the very survival of the people in the hill areas. Rather than using the media to try to influence government policies, the people here have had to resort to a popular struggle.

The DGSM. Although the Chipko Movement was officially begun on 24 April 1973 by some Sarvodaya workers (all male) at Mandal, Chamoli district, the organizers had already been active in the field of social reconstruction for the previous 13 years.

One of the movement's leaders, C.P. Bhatt, and his co-workers, who belong to Chamoli district and who had worked for increased employment for local people, believe in the ideology of non-violence as propagated by Mahatma Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave. In 1960, they founded a workers' cooperative which organized unskilled and semi-skilled construction workers. For some time, they worked successfully in this field. One of their schemes, begun in 1964, aimed at creating more employment through the exploitation of the forests. The group established the Dasholi Gram Swarajya Mandal (DGSM) workers' cooperative and entered the market by buying forest rights through auctions to supply its small workshop making farm tools for local use. After initial success, however, the group was out-manuevered by other, richer contractors.

One Chipko leader said that, at present, 90 percent of the women are with him while 90 percent of the men oppose him.

In the meantime, the DGSM thought of starting a new enterprise - the collection of roots and herbs from the forest. In this activity, the cooperative gave employment to about 1000 persons between 1969 and 1972. In 1971 it opened up a small processing plant in Gopeshwar, which manufactured turpentine and resin from pine sap. Again the DGSM had difficulties, this time because the Forest Department 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 months in 1971-72, the plant had to be closed down for lack of raw material. The plant therefore worked for a total of only four months. The Sarvodaya workers thus faced difficulties with government policies in each of their enterprises.

Demonstrations. On 22 October 1971, villagers from nearby areas demonstrated in Gopeshwar against government forest policy. Meanwhile, the Forest Department, which had earlier refused the DGSM's annual request for 10 ash trees for its farm-tools workshop, allotted 300 ash trees to the Simon Company, a sporting-goods manufacturer from the plains, thus putting tennis rackets before the plough. In March 1973, the agents of the Simon Company arrived in Gopeshwar to supervise the cutting of the trees. There also arrived the

Chipko Movement.

On 27 March 1973 at a meeting in Gopeshwar, local people decided not to allow a single tree to be felled by the Simon Company. A month later, DGSM workers and villagers from nearby areas marched out of Gopeshwar to Mandal, beating the drum and singing traditional songs. It was a rally of about 100 persons. The Simon Company agents and their men retreated from Mandal without felling a single tree. This event had an impact on the Forest Department, which now offered to let the DGSM have one ash tree if it allowed the Simon Company its full quota. The DGSM refused and the Forest Department increased its offer to two, then three, five and ten trees - the DGSM's original request. Finally, the Forest Department had to cancel the Simon Company's permit and the trees were assigned to the DGSM instead.

The Forest Department also ended the ban on pine sap supplies, but at the same time it allotted the Simon Company a new set of ash trees in the Phata forest in another part of the district. On 20 June 1973, a local leader joined hands with the Savodaya workers and organized a Chipko demonstration in Phata, 80 km away from Gopeshwar. Villagers of Phata and Tarsali kept a vigil on their trees until December, thus starting the long story of the Chipko Movement.

Monsoon erosion. Thus far the movement had confined itself to the problems of unemployment among the local people. Earlier, the Sarvodaya workers had organized them in several enterprises. Among these activities was a 1970 relief operation, started when monsoon rains flooded the Alaknanda river and swept away hundreds of homes. During the operation, the workers realized that the chief cause of the flood was soil erosion from the clear-cutting of mountain slopes by the lumber companies. Despite the Forest Department's policy of planting cleared slopes, the base slopes remained bare. Overgrazing and gathering by villagers also caused the barring of many slopes. Another cause of landslides, the DGSM workers pointed out, was road-building.

In 1973, monsoon rains again brought a spate of floods in the area. By this time, the DGSM had fairly well spelt out its interconnected goals of raising local people's consciousness about the Government's forest policy, about their rights to use the local forest and about their responsibility to preserve the environment through a programme of afforestation. During the 1973 flood-relief operations, the DGSM workers observed the sad plight of the women who had lost their houses, farm and cattle in floods. The series of recurring landslides that followed (1977, 1978, 1979) caused severe damage to life and property, making villagers almost paupers. Working in areas affected by floods and landslides, C.P. Bhatt and his companions heard long stories of suffering by women. This experience gave them both an insight into women's problems and an unprecedented direct contact with them.

The two branches of Chipko

As the years have gone by, the Chipko Movement itself has acquired two distinct streams of thought, personified by its two leaders, C.P. Bhatt from Gopeshwar, who pioneered the movement, and Sundarlal Bahuguna from Silyara in the Tehri region. The operational style of these leaders is totally different. While Bhatt is a grass-roots worker and believes mainly in organizing the people, Bahuguna a journalist, is a publicist *par excellence*. Though Bahuguna has also organized some protest activities in his region - for instance, Chipko activists in Henwal Ghati once went to the forest to bandage wounded trees with mud and sacking to protest against the indiscriminate tapping of pine trees - his main focus has been on spreading the message of Chipko far and wide. In 1981, Bahuguna started on a foot march from Kashmir to Kohima to campaign against deforestation.

Bhatt, on the other hand, has dug deep roots in the Chamoli region. He is, as a result, far less well known than Bahuguna. Bhatt has realized that it the local village communities have the

right to control their surrounding resources, they must also undertake to conserve and develop those resources. So he has organized the country's largest voluntary afforestation programme through eco-development camps. These camps bring together local villagers, students and social workers who have planted over a million trees. The survival rate of these Chipko plantations has been an astonishing 85 to 90 percent in most cases. Bahuguna, however, tends to dismiss this activity as irrelevant at this stage of the movement, concentrating all his writing and speaking power against the forest departments.

The two leaders differ not just in their operational styles but also in their philosophy with respect to the use of forests. Bahuguna is fiercely ecological in approach. The re-greening of forests is the top priority - a matter of national defence - for him. For instance, he argues that the main objective of forest management in Himachal Pradesh should be soil and water conservation: forests, he says, do not produce timber, resin and foreign exchange but soil, water and pure air. The self-sufficiency of the hill people in food, clothing and shelter is important to Bahuguna but secondary to the major ecological objectives.

For Bhatt, however, the search for a new eco-development process for the region and the involvement of the local people are primary issues. "Saving the trees is only the first step in the Chipko Movement," says Bhatt. "Saving ourselves is the real goal. Our future is tied up with them."

Bhatt, therefore, wants forest resources to be used in a manner that is both environmentally and developmentally sound - in other words, while the environment is preserved, the benefits of the controlled exploitation accrue to the local people, a process in which decentralized economic growth and ecological conservation go hand in hand.

Notwithstanding the divergent opinions of these leaders, the real strength of the movement is the women of the region. Except for a few "organized" events, the Chipko Movement essentially consists of a string of spontaneous confrontations in which none of the so-called leaders is present.

The Chipko Movement is thus very much a feminist movement. It not only has brought forth in a dramatic manner a greatly increased understanding of the divergent interests of local communities and state bureaucracies in the management of local resources; it is now finding that the interests of men and women within the same community can differ greatly. As long as the leadership of the Chipko Movement remains sensitive to this learning process, it is bound to grow in strength. The latest demand to emerge from the women of Chamoli is that it is they who should be elected to the Forest Panchayats and not their men.

From *1982 citizens' report on the state of India's environment*.

[INDIAN VILLAGE WOMEN AT WORK is there time left for politics?](#)

Confrontation. When the Forest Department announced an auction of almost 2500 trees in the Reni forest overlooking the Alaknanda river, which had flooded in 1970, Bhatt reminded the villagers of the earlier flood and warned of more landslides and more floods if the remaining forests were cut down. He suggested that they hug the trees as a tactic to save them.

Who listened to him? As subsequent events showed, it was women rather than men who got his message. One woman, Gaura Devi, organized the women of her village, Lata, and faced down the workmen of the company that had won the auction for felling the trees. It was a situation that almost forced women to take action - which they did with firmness and unyielding courage. Gaura Devi later described the encounter in graphic detail, commenting on the rude behaviour of some of the men and on how she pushed herself forward in front of the gun of one of these labourers. She challenged the man to shoot her instead of cutting down the trees, comparing the forest with her mother's home (*maika*). Eventually, she and her

companions forced the men to retreat.

Following this demonstration of strength by women, the Uttar Pradesh Government decided to set up a committee of experts to investigate the situation, and the lumber company withdrew its men from Reni to wait for the committee's decision. The committee, after two years, reported that the Reni forest was an ecologically sensitive area and that no trees should be cut in this region. The Government placed a 10-year ban on all tree-felling in an area of over 1 150 km². This event blazed a trail: at Gopeshwar in June 1975, at Bhyndar valley ("valley of flowers") in January 1978, at Parsari (Joshimath) in August 1979, and at Dongri Paintoli in February 1980, women took the lead in Chipko demonstrations and saved forests from felling. After the Reni success, Bhatt and his workers began to address themselves to women and found them very sensitive and responsive to ecological problems. Women who were never before seen in any of the village meetings were asked to attend. They welcomed this opportunity and turned out in great numbers.

Implications for society

Political involvement. The events at Dongri Paintoli village, according to Bhatt, indicated a new development in the movement. During a meeting between the members (all male) of the village council and the officials of the Horticulture Department, it was decided that the oak forest near the village would be given to the Horticulture Department for felling. The department, in turn, would provide the villagers with a cement road, a secondary school, a new hospital and electricity for their village. Some DGSM workers, together with Bhatt, tried to explain the implications of development and the importance of conservation. However, the village men, especially the members of the village council, did not agree. They maintained that a school, a hospital, a road and electricity were far more important for the village than a few hundred trees.

Yet the efforts of Bhatt and others did not go to waste on the local women, who decided to hold a Chipko demonstration if anyone tried to fell the trees. They even asked Bhatt and his men to help them. On hearing about this, the members and president of the village council became infuriated at the "outrageous" behaviour of their women. They asked the women to confine themselves to their fields and homes and simultaneously issued a written warning to Bhatt that if he tried to agitate or organize the village women, he would be killed upon arrival at the village.

All this did not deter the women of Dongri Paintoli, and on 9 February 1980 they did not even wait for Bhatt to arrive but turned out in large numbers, held a Chipko demonstration and prevented any tree-felling. Nine days later, the Government ordered the forest-felling in that area stopped, and within a month a ban on any further cutting was effected. Subsequently, women leaders in the village were defamed and asked not to attend further meetings. The women in Reni took action only because there were no men in the village around to do so. Their "action" was to ask the tree fellers to wait until their men returned so that some discussion could take place between the two sides (of men) as equals. Women took charge of the scene only in the absence of men, but once they did take charge, they succeeded.

In Dongri Paintoli, by contrast, rather than merely taking a decision in the absence of men, the women stood up against decisions made by their own men. Although they faced opposition from men, they held to their conviction. This certainly marked a major step forward in terms of women's role in the Chipko Movement.

In Gopeshwar, women have now formed a cooperative of their own, the Mahila Mandal, to ensure protection of the forest around the town. Its work is carried out regularly by watchwomen, who receive regular wages. Under their supervision, the extraction of forest produce for daily necessities is accomplished in a regulated manner, so as not to harm the

trees. Women or men violating these rules are fined, and these fines are deposited in a common fund. Those who do not obey the rules face the punishment of having their tools confiscated. In addition, more and more of the DGSM educational camps are now attended by women, who come despite their busy routines. They take part in discussions and become articulate in expressing their views through this mode of informal education. Their programme, of course, is only in its initial stages. In most villages, women were found to be too busy in their day-to-day tasks to have time for the Chipko meetings and camps.

It can only be said that the cases of Reni and Dongri Paintoli and the organization of women into the Mahila Mandal at Gopeshwar are indicative of the latent potentialities in the organization and mobilization of resources by women whose consciousness has been raised. A situational analysis of the crisis periods shows how village women work in handling their problems: when new ideas and methods of handling problems are introduced by leaders, they are quick to act.

Disagreement on development. The situational conflicts in Chamoli district arose because of the different meanings attached to the word "development" by different groups of people. Men, who sit on village councils and other village bodies and head their families, view the government officials with a great deal of respect and fear. They dare not oppose them. Women, on the other hand, who have never had any contact with government officials or other outsiders, have no model of interaction to follow with them. The Chamoli women understood only that the felling of trees is harmful to their well-being, and they simply acted according to that belief. On the basis of their past interaction with government officials, men are convinced of the great powers of the Government. They consider it wrong to oppose its policies.

We have a situation where female energy - at least up until now - is concentrated in the subsistence, reproductive and nurturing spheres and male energy is concentrated in public power and authority. Now, with more paid jobs available to men in construction and other labouring sectors, they are not so dependent upon women for their subsistence needs. These changes are causing a reformulation of traditional relationships between the sexes in these villages.

Women's participation in the Chipko Movement, however limited in numbers or in its impact on the general way of life, has implications for possible changes in gender relationships in the Garhwali society. One Chipko village leader summarized the present situation of the movement by saying that, at present, 90 percent of women and 10 percent of men are with him while 90 percent of men and 10 percent of women oppose him. He considers that only through non-violent methods will the movement win over the other men.

What we read about women's participation in the movement and what its leaders talk about are simplified and idealized images of reality. This idealization has, in turn, led to an unrealistic belief that the participation of women in the development process can be achieved by a mere ideological commitment and a few organizational devices. The account given here demonstrates that the release of spontaneity and creativity on the part of rural women in Garhwal is chiefly a byproduct of actions initiated at the grass-roots level by the Sarvodaya workers to increase people's awareness about the environment. At present, these workers and their leaders face the problem of handling an unforeseen release of womanpower in this area.

Ecological balance is an important aspect of new approaches to development, and women's concern with local ecological problems is vital. In a majority of existing programmes for women's development, the top-down approach is used. Decision-making, evaluation and control rest at the top with planners and policy makers, while participants lack the scope to develop their own skills or to have any political say in deciding their own affairs. If we aspire to change in the social and political situation of women, we have to look at alternative

approaches to replace the traditional power structure; hence the need to study women's participation in social movements.

Even the supporters of the Chipko Movement and its leaders are not free from traditional constraints. In home and family situations, egalitarianism is almost absent and there are invariably tensions and inequalities which have implications for the stratification system of the society as a whole. The relevant questions are:

- Is it possible that only a few instances of the successful exercise of power by women can lead to further demands for sharing power in both public and private?
- Are women able to face opposition from men, and for how long?
- Does coercion by men alienate women from their families, or does there come about another pattern of relationship between the sexes?

These questions cannot be answered right now. As the Chipko Movement is still in its infancy, we have to observe further developments and observe what happens to the role of women within it.

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