Reinvestigating the Chipko movement of 1973

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ABSTRACT

As it is well acknowledged that the Chipko movement of 1973 laid out the foundation of modern environmentalism in India. It was a struggle for local control of natural resources and an effort by women to protect their environment. The issue was not just the cutting of trees but the bigger problem of the depletion of natural resources. People’s participation is what made it the most popular of all. But what is necessary after 40 years is a rethinking over this issue, a new probe into what happened during that time, what let to such a mass movement, what were the immediate responses and how it impacted Indian environmentalism in the long run, were the initiatives taken enough, or the authorities underestimated the masses, was the leadership apt and efficient, did they succeed in performing their duties in securing the people their rights over land. If we are still talking about it, the movement must have a bigger relevance in today’s world, and we can learn a point or two from the people of those times. The study also tries to find what kind of disorientations were there in the movement that ultimately led to the unmet objectives. To go through that scenario once again, various newspaper cuttings, interview clippings and articles of that time have been used. When the study mentions the relevance of Chipko movement in present times, instantly it comes to mind, that still the tribal and peasant communities continue to be pushed off their lands through destructive and carelessly conceived projects. A new Chipko movement is waiting to be born. Industrialization and afforestation will never go together. No doubt, cutting of trees is unavoidable while making advancement in industrializing the economy, but how best the same is compensated through afforestation is significant. What we need is sustainable development along with non-perfunctory policies.

Keywords: Environmental movements, Chipko movement, Garhwal Himalayas, environmentalism, eco-feminism.

1. Introduction

If we look at the top 10 most powerful environmental movements in India, it seems that Chipko movement stands to be on number one position, it can also be said to be the starting point of the environmental movements in the country. As according to Ramchandra Guha, “On the 27th of March 1973…. a group of peasants in a remote Himalayan village stopped a group of loggers from felling a patch of trees. Thus was born the Chipko movement, and through it the modern Indian environmental movement itself.” Chipko movement basically was:
1. Started in the Garhwal Himalayas, led by Chandni Prasad Bhatt and Sunderlal Bahuguna.
2. A struggle for local control of natural resources and an effort by women to protect their environment.
3. The issue was not just the cutting of trees but the bigger problem of the depletion of natural resources.

4. “And they did it simply. By hugging trees when the woodmen came to axe them,” *India Today* in January 1990.

5. According to Guha, (2013), In the West, the environmental movement had arisen chiefly out of a desire to protect endangered animal species and natural habitats. In India, however, it arose out of the imperative of human survival. This was an environmentalism of the poor, which married the concern of social justice on the one hand with sustainability on the other. It argued that present patterns of resource use disadvantaged local communities and devastated the natural environment.

6. In 1987 the Chipko Movement was awarded the Right Livelihood Award

1.1 Objectives

The study tries to achieve following objectives-

1. To find out what were the earlier events leading to the Chipko movement and what gave it so much popularity.

2. To find out what were the instant reactions and responses of media, government officials etc.

3. To find out how the Chipko movement has impacted environmentalism, governance in India.

4. To find out what is the relevance of the Chipko movement in today’s world.

5. To find out what were the disorientations that it suffered that led to the unmet objectives.

1.2 Methodology & Data sources

The study interprets the newspaper headlines, cuttings, research articles, interview clippings of people associated with the movement with a purpose of reinvestigating into the movement.

2. Review of literature

Ramchandra Guha(2013) in his article in The Hindu, has expressed concern over the deteriorating environment and ecosystem. One thing significant is the chronology he cited here to indicate the changes in the policy of the ruling class after independence and its impact on our vulnerable environment.

Vandana Shiva and J. Bandyopadhyay (1986), in their paper, trace the development of the philosophy and the non-violent resistance activities from the beginnings of Chipko in the early 1970s in Garhwal to its present role throughout most of India. According to the authors, it is unique in that it is based not on the politics of the distribution of wealth but on that of sustainable ecological stability, and it is dominated by women. The authors also believe that today the Chipko search for a strategy for human survival from ecological disaster has worldwide significance.

Sya Kedzior, (2006) in his thesis, while using Chipko as a case-study, demonstrates how a geographical approach to political ecology avoids some of the essentialization by encouraging a holistic analysis of environmental movements that is characterized by a “bottom-up” analysis, grounded at the local level, which also considers the wider context of the movement’s growth by synthesizing socio-political and ecological analyses. Also explored are
questions on the importance of gender-informed approaches to the study of environmental activism and participation in environmental movements in India.

3. Earlier events leading to the Chipko movement

According to social historian Ramachandra Guha, author of The Unquiet Woods, Chipko is the latest in a long series of peasant protests going back to the turn of the century against commercial forestry in the Uttar Pradesh Himalaya. In 1916, British officials were not pleased at the "deliberate and organized incendiaries" by the people of Kumaon to the opening up of forests to commercial exploitation, but that also deprived the people of their traditional rights. The 1916 agitation, which began as a general strike against forced labor and then became a systematic campaign in which chir (pine) forests were burnt down all over Kumaon, especially in Almora, led to the formation in 1921 of the Kumaon forest grievances committee.

In Garhwal, a protest that is still remembered is the one the local people refer to as the infamous Tilari kand (incident). On May 30, 1930, a massive Satyagraha was held at Tilari against the forestry policies of Tehri Garhwal state, which were similar to those introduced by the British in the rest of Uttarakhand. The maharaja of Tehri was in Europe and his prime minister, Chakradhar Juyal, crushed the Tilari protest in a replay of the Jallianwala Bagh incident. Soldiers shot down unarmed people, including children, and many drowned in the Yamuna while trying to flee.

Protests over forest policies deemed inimical to local needs continued after Independence. The 1962 Indo-Chinese war opened up border areas to development. An extensive network of roads ran deep into the hills, literally opening the way for a wave of forest officials and contractors. Most of the laborers were recruited from outside the region and their work triggered landslides, soil erosion and irreversible damage to watersheds. The local villagers got nothing except damage to their environment.

The DGSM was formed in 1964 in Gopeshwar by Bhatt. With the blessing of the Sarvodaya movement, it worked to promote Vinobha Bhave's concepts of gramdan and of a non-violent, self-reliant, village society based on rural industries. DGSM became involved in anti-liquor campaigns, in the construction of roads, including one running through Gopeshwar, and in setting up a resin factory and a saw mill there. However, DGSM's attempts at cottage industry-scale development ended disastrously in the face of competition from established firms and the forest department's preference to supply forest raw material to outside industrialists than to local, cottage industries.

The Sarvodaya campaign against alcohol provided a platform for women, but increasingly it was the conflict between local and outside contractors over forest exploitation that became the rallying point for popular protest during the 1960s. At a memorial meeting at Tilari in 1968, the people in Garhwal renewed their resolve to fight for forest rights. The Alaknanda floods of 1970 gave further impetus to the protests against outside contractors, which peaked in 1972 with demonstrations in Purola on December 11, in Uttarkashi on December 12 and in Gopeshwar on December 15.

These demonstrations failed to move the state and local activists began to look for new ways to protest. In its first phase, Chipko sought to force the government to end its preference for big, outside forest contractors and instead award contracts in small lots to local labor

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cooperatives. It wanted an end to the export of raw material from the region and start local forest-based industries. Chipko aimed at ushering in forest management policies that would meet the needs of the local villagers.

Chipko was primarily an economic struggle. Environment and ecology were attributed to it later and Bahuguna started projecting it as a conservation campaign. The local people wanted their economic survival first.

An illustration of local economic compulsions is the Mandal incident, which H K Singh of Gopeshwar College says had its roots in 1969. "The files of late Subedar Bachan Singh Bist of Mandal, the Symonds' contractor between 1969 and 1972, show that he did not get the contract because he demanded exorbitant wages for laborers," Singh explains. "He then organized a meeting in Mandal on March 18, 1973, where leaders like Alam Singh Bist, the pradhan of Khalla village, and Bachan Lal, the secretary of the Shoshit Dal (Depressed Classes' Association), threatened to hug trees if Symonds brought in outside labor. Bhatt was away then from Gopeshwar and the Mandal meeting was a local affair, without any mass participation."

As it turned out, on April 24, DGSM workers and students and villagers from Gopeshwar held a rally to prevent Jagadish Prasad Nautiyal, a Symonds' sub-contractor, from entering the forest. Bhatt, too, opposed the felling of trees by outside contractors because it was DGSM's aim to establish cottage-scale industries through local labor cooperatives.

The tree cutting agents also spread a rumor that a movie was being screened in nearby Rampur and when the villagers guarding the forest left their post, they quickly felled five ash trees. But the villagers returned the next morning, disappointed because there was no movie, and were able to drive off the contractors, who had to leave the trees behind. More demonstrations followed.

3.1 What gave rise to the Chipko Movement?

According to Guha, (2013), Chipko movement was representative of a wide spectrum of natural resource conflicts in the 1970s and 1980s—conflicts over forests, fish, and pasture; conflicts about the siting of large dams; conflicts about the social and environmental impacts of unregulated mining.

The Deprivation: The pressures of urban and industrial development had deprived local communities of access to the resources necessary to their own livelihood. Peasants saw their forests being diverted by the state for commercial exploitation; pastoralists saw their grazing grounds taken over by factories and engineering colleges; artisanal fisher folk saw themselves being squeezed out by large trawlers.

Forest Management: According to Vandana Shiva and J. Bandyopadhyay (1986), mainly the conflicts over forest resources were behind the ignition. The conflicts and tension from which the famous Chipko Movement has emerged can be traced historically to the drastic changes in forest management and utilization introduced into India during the colonial period.

3.2 Instant reactions to the movement

The news of the movement soon reached the state capital, where then state Chief Minister, Hemwati Nandan Bahuguna, set up a committee to look into the matter, which eventually
ruled in favour of the villagers. This became a turning point in the history of eco-development struggles in the region and around the world. Reacting to Chipko in 1980, Indira Gandhi told Nature magazine in an interview, "Well, frankly, I don't know all the aims of the movement. But if it is that trees should not be cut, I'm all for it." When informed that Chipko was concerned also about poverty in the region, she replied, "Naturally, anybody who lives in a backward country has to be concerned with that, too." But clarifying that trees are important in themselves, she added, "The cutting of trees has immediately brought havoc because it has increased our drought, it has increased our floods and it has made vast areas much more difficult to live in."

But in transforming itself, Chipko contributed immensely to national and international ecological movements. As Bhatt puts it, "Chipko was like the discovery of the elephant by blind persons. One person felt the trunk; another the legs and each thought each felt the real thing." International ecologists saw Chipko as a cultural response of the people's love for their environment. Chipko was popularized by the feminist movement, who pointed out that village women have to walk long distances to collect fuel and fodder and they become the first victims of forest destruction. Eco-feminists argued that women are therefore closer to nature and more ecologically conscious.

Several environmental activists discerned in Chipko a powerful assertion of people's rights over their environment. This concept, in fact, set a major trend in environmentalism, and one Chipko observer has written, "Local control over the habitat -- in this case the forests -- might have been illegal in terms of contemporary laws, but it was not immoral."

3.3 The impact of Chipko movement

Chipko movement has emerged as a model for the resolution of conflicts over natural resources. Environmental consciousness: "No woman ever had to hug a tree to protect it," says Chandni Prasad Bhatt, the founder of Chipko. "It was not necessary to do so, for the mere threat was enough." The concept of hugging a tree to defend it was so powerful, it brought in a new consciousness to the country that put environment at its centre.

Inspired eco-feminism in India. Chipko -- "to hug" in Hindi -- today evokes romantic images of poor, village women in the hills of northern India determinedly hugging trees to prevent them from being cut down by the very axes of forest contractors that also threatened their lives. But Chipko's multi-faceted identity has resulted in it meaning different things to different people. For some, it is an extraordinary conservation movement of the poor; for others, it is a local people's movement to regain control of their natural resources, snatched away first by a colonial power and then by the free government of India, and, finally, it is a movement of women trying to save their environment with a message to loggers: "Our bodies before our trees". In fact, as a women's movement, it inspired eco-feminism in India and, to some extent, throughout the world.

Formation of Van Nigam: formation of a Van Nigam, a state-owned forest corporation, in 1975 to take over all forms of forest exploitation from private contractors. "It was generally believed," says Surendra Bhatt, a veteran Sarvodaya worker of Uttarkashi, "the government would not be as ruthless and corrupt as private contractors in exploiting forest resources." But this belief was unjustified for many agitations were targeted in time against Van Nigam.
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Other Protests followed: Their actions inspired hundreds of such actions at the grassroots level throughout the region. By the 1980s the movement had spread throughout India and led to the formulation of people-sensitive forest policies, which put a stop to the open felling of trees in regions as far reaching as Vindhyas and the Western Ghats.

Other protests were staged in the Uttarakhand region. In 1974, a struggle was launched on July 25 -- and reached its peak in October -- by villagers from the Vyali forest area near Uttarkashi, seeking to halt tree-felling. In Kumaon, Chipko made its debut at the Nainadevi fair in Nainital in 1974, and then proceeded to block forest auctions at several places, including Nainital, Rammagar and Kotdwar. The movement in Kumaon gathered momentum following major landslides at Tawaghat in 1977 and student activists successfully blocked the auction at Shailley Hall in Nainital on October 6, 1977. On November 28, protest students were forcibly dispersed by the police and many of the activists were arrested. The Nainital Club was set ablaze and this led the police to open fire. In Tehri Garhwal, meanwhile, Chipko activists led by Sunderlal Bahuguna began organizing villagers from May 1977 to oppose tree-felling in the Henwal valley. They resorted to direct action in December 1977 to protect the Advani and Salet forests and in March the following year, 23 volunteers, including women, were arrested for opposing a forest auction at Narendranagar. "The struggle in Henwal, marked the transformation of Chipko from an economic struggle to a fight for conservation."

Chipko resumed activities in Chamoli during 1977-78, with the women from Pulna stopping the felling of forests in Bhyunder valley. Similar protests were staged in Doongri-Paintoli in 1980, and in Bacher, as late as 1984-85. "But by then, the Chipko protests were breathing their last," says Sudarshan Kathait of Gopeshwar, who was actively involved in the Chanchridhar struggle."After early gains, Bhatt began to spend more time on plantation work, eco-development camps and organizing women into Mahila Mangal Dals (MMDs)."

But according to Bahuguna, his agitation against the Tehri dam as a continuation of Chipko. Bhatt, too, calls his campaign against the extension of the Vishnuprayag hydroelectric project to the Bhyunder valley and his encouragement of the afforestation work undertaken by MMDs as Chipko-related.

The movement slowed the march of commercial forestry: The output of major forest produce from the eight hill districts declined from more than 62,000 cubic meters in 1971 to 40,000 cum in 1981. Forest Conservation Act: Chipko put forests on the political agenda in the country. The Forest Conservation Act of 1980 and the very creation of the environment ministry are due to the consciousness created by Chipko."

New wave of understanding: Nirmal Kumar Joshi, director of the Forest Training Institute at Haldwani, adds, "Chipko created a new wave of understanding among foresters. We realized that our plans to exploit forests were not at all scientific, as it was claimed. We realized that nurseries and plantations were more important than cutting down green trees."

Pro-poor environmentalism: Chipko's biggest contribution probably was the pro-poor environmentalism that it brought in its wake. Says Mahendra Singh Kunwar, who was a student during Chipko's heyday, "It dismissed the notion that the poor destroy their environment and do not want to protect it. The Chipko message captured the imagination of activists across the world. Until Chipko, people refused to believe the poor could live in harmony with their environment.
"Chipko had a very humane appeal: Cut me down before you cut down the tree. The tree is far more important than my life, it is the basis of my survival."

People's control over local resources: Unfortunately, people's control over local resources has been the least of the state's concerns, even though, under pressure from the growing, international, environment lobby and the "summits" in Stockholm and Rio, it has adopted a series of conservationist policies. However, most of them still deny people the rights to manage their environment for their own use and so the villagers who participated in Chipko have suffered as a result.

Increased Awareness: Through these varied efforts, the environmentalism of the poor began to enter school and college pedagogy. Textbooks now mentioned the Chipko and Narmada movements. University departments ran courses on environmental sociology and environmental history. Specialist journals devoted to these subjects were now printed and read. Elements of an environmental consciousness had, finally, begun to permeate the middle class.

3.4 Relevance of Chipko movement in present times

Although Chipko was first practiced in the Garhwal Himalaya, it spread to most of the country, especially the hilly regions.

Gandhian strategy: The Chipko movement revived the Indian tradition of resolving conflicts through non-violent non-cooperation, in the present time, Chipko went ahead and revived it through its activities of non-cooperation Satyagraha, and keeping it non-violent resistance against the violent opposition.

In the present time, people have resisted the forest encroachment in various parts of India mainly through the Gandhian non-cooperation method of protest, now-known as "Forest Satyagraha".

Political as well as an ecological movement: Although it had its roots in a movement based on the politics of the distribution of the benefits of resources, it soon became an ecological movement rooted in the politics of the distribution of ecological costs.

Today the Chipko search for a strategy for human survival from ecological disaster has worldwide significance.

The involvement of Women: The females of the region were made to understand that it is in their best interest and is imperative that they protest against these people at any cost, coz their families' future depends on it.

Although the visible leaders of the movement are men, the strength of the movement lies in the support from women.

4. Unmet objectives and disorientation in the movement

Divergent views: According to Guha, there are three main Chipko streams:

1. Led by Bahuguna: blames materialism for ecological degradation and wants strict conservation;
2. Led by Bhatt: which works at environmental regeneration with people at the centre;
3. Uttarakhand Sangharsh Vahini (USV): seeks to move Chipko away from being publicly identified with Bahuguna and Bhatt. USV insists the human-nature relationship must be viewed in the context of relationships between humans and so social and economic redistribution are more important than ecological
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harmony. USV does not associate itself with state-sponsored development programs and has on occasion engaged in sharp confrontations with the administration in Kumaon.

Fell trees movement: Several USV activists formed the Uttarakhand Kranti Dal, which is leading a movement for the region to be given statehood. Dal activists felled thousands of trees throughout Garhwal and Kumaon during their 1988-89 Ped Kato Andolan (fell trees movement), which was launched to counter delays in environmental clearance for road and water pipeline projects.

Bipin Tripathi, who led the 1978 struggle to save the Chanchridhar forest from being felled by a paper mill, "We cut trees in 111 places, where the government was using the Forest Conservation Act to hold up development projects. After all, we had to consider whether the trees are for the people or if it's the other way around. Nearly 4,500 development schemes in the hills are held up due to environmental reasons. The hill people want trees, but they want development, too."

No Results: Now the complaint throughout Uttarakhand, from Almora to Uttarkashi, is: "We got nothing from Chipko. Even our hak-hakooks (traditional rights and customs) to forest produce, have been taken away from us." Gayatri Devi, the heroine of the Doongri-Paintoli struggle, says, "Earlier, we could fight the contractors, but now the sarkar and the Van Nigam are the biggest contractors. How can we fight them?"

Even in Reni, a woman complained, "They have put this entire area under the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve. I can't even pick herbs to treat a stomach ache. Chipko karke hum latak gaye, bus ab aur kuch nahin karna (We got into enough trouble with Chipko. Now we don't even want to attempt anything else)."

"The Forest Conservation Act has not given the people much. It has not stopped development but it has certainly delayed it, as permission to build roads and lay down pipelines has to be obtained now from the Centre. This can take months and no villager wants that long."

Both Bhatt and Bahuguna maintain the villagers' traditional rights have not been taken away. They maintain that the media myth that it was, is fostered by vested business and political interests to break the movement. Bhatt concedes development has been affected in the region, but he blames this on "short-sighted government policies" and not on Chipko. On the other hand, Bahuguna contends, "Development is the major cause of ecological destruction. The needs of modern civilization will have to be curtailed to preserve the environment."

Media Role: Various activists have criticized the role played by the media. According to Bist, "Looking back, a major reason for the failure of Chipko was the role the media played. They made it an international movement, but how many newspapers bothered to send reporters to villages in the interior Uttarakhand? They reported on hearsay because they never talked to us."

Pratap Shikhar of Jajal, a Chipko activist during the 1970s, was even more forthright in his criticism of the media. "The media reports sparked a wave of bitterness between Bhatt and Bahuguna, creating an unbridgeable rift between them, to the utter damnation of the movement," he says.
Away from people: The many national and international awards received by Chipko leaders alienated them further from the people. Both Bahuguna and Bhatt were awarded the Padma Shri, Bhatt received the Magsaysay Award and Bahuguna accepted the Right Livelihood Award given to Chipko. It is said that they lost the appeal and the effective leadership after some time.

5. Conclusion

As according to Guha, India, today is an environmental basket-case; marked by polluted skies, dead rivers, falling water-tables, ever-increasing amounts of untreated wastes, disappearing forests. Meanwhile, tribal and peasant communities continue to be pushed off their lands through destructive and carelessly conceived projects. A new Chipko movement is waiting to be born.

Industrialization and afforestation will never go together. Nodoubt, cutting of trees is unavoidable while making advancement in industrializing the economy but how best the same is compensated through afforestation is significant. What we need is sustainable development along with non-perfunctory policies.

6. References


