

# The *Chipko* Environmental Conservation Movement in India

by

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*"Nature has enough for everybody's need but not for everybody's greed"*  
Mahatma Gandhi



Women performing *Chipko*

The *Chipko* (literally "hugging" in Hindi) environmental conservation movement in India came to public attention in April 1973 when a group of women in Mandal village, located in the mountainous Himalayan region of Uttarkhand, "hugged" trees in order to prevent them from being felled (Routledge, 1993). In the next several years, more than a dozen confrontations between women and lumberjacks occurred in Uttarkhand -- all non-violent and effective, enshrining forever the term "tree hugger" in conservation parlance (Shepherd, 1982).

In 1974, an especially notable confrontation occurred in Reni Village of Uttarkhand, where a women's group led by Mrs. Gaura Devi, blocked an army of lumberjacks, singing: "This forest is our mother's home; we will protect it with all our might". They admonished the lumberjacks: "If the forest is cut, the soil will be washed away. Landslides and soil erosion will bring floods, which will destroy our fields and homes, our water sources will dry up, and all the other benefits we get from the forest will be finished" (Bhatt, 1992).

Stories and photographs of women's bodies in Mandal and Reni villages, interposed between the trees and the gleaming axes of timber cutters, spurred word-of-mouth buzz in neighboring communities, and made interesting news copy for local, national, and global media. The notion of "Cut me down before you cut down a tree," generated a lot of media coverage, bringing with it a new humanized morality to abstract environmental concerns (Guha, 1989).



Two local activists -- Chandi Prasad Bhatt, a Marxist, and Sundar Lal Bahuguna, a Gandhian, led the *Chipko* movement, albeit somewhat independently (Shah, 2008). They both exuded characteristics that fuelled the spread of Chipko bringing it to the national (and international) consciousness. Bhatt and Bahuguna were both charismatic, credible, and spoke forcefully in both Hindi and the local Garhwali dialect. Well networked with journalists, they both wielded a prolific pen, writing with ease in both Hindi and English and thus mobilizing their rural and urban elite constituencies (Shah, 2008).

In the Uttarkhand region, the communication media underlying the Chipko movement was remarkably small-scale and low-tech (Shah, 2008), emphasizing local knowledge, local resources, local leadership, local language, and locally relevant methods of communication (Shah, 2008). Poets and singers were frontline motivators, writing verse and songs for public performance to inspire grassroots participation. Ghanshyam Sailani emerged as the poet laureate of Chipko, penning such verses as:

“Let us protect and plant the trees  
Go awaken the villages  
And drive away the axemen.”

When women of Uttarkhand heard that the lumberjacks were on their way, they would sing such songs and walk toward the forest. The chorus would get louder and strident when the timber-cutters arrived. The women would hold hands and form a circle around the tree, hugging it as a group. What could the lumberjacks do? They were rendered powerless even with their axes and saws.

The Chipko movement gathered rapid momentum as it rode the wave of spirituality. *Bhagwad kathas* (large prayer meetings) were routinely organized in forest areas of Uttarkhand, emphasizing that God resides in every living being, including in trees. To protect the trees was a sacred act, blending environmental science with deeply-ingrained spirituality.

Chipko's appeal was uniquely wide-ranging. Thus the movement was co-opted, shaped, and popularized by groups as diverse as local and global journalists, grassroots activists, environmentalists, Gandhians, spiritual leaders, politicians, social change practitioners, and feminists. The feminist movement popularized Chipko, pointing out that poor rural women walk long distances to collect fuel and fodder, and thus are the frontline victims of forest destruction (Shah, 2008). The Gandhians accentuated the Chipko movement through symbolic protests such as prayers, fasting, and *padayatras* (ritual marches) (Shah, 2008). Further, Chipko is synonymous with the growth of ecology-conscious journalism in India and around the world.

The media that the Chipko movement generated went beyond the notion of just saving trees but, rather, was imbued with the belief that the forest belonged to the people, and only they could ensure its wise use (Guha, 1989). And, as the movement spread, and generated more media, it humanized environmental concerns for local, national, and global audiences.

In India, the media generated by Chipko put the notion of saving forests squarely on the political and public agenda of the country. In the early-1980s, India's Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, ordered a 15-year ban on cutting trees 1,000 meters above sea level in the Himalayan forests (She believed that Chipko represented India's "moral conscience"). In subsequent time, this decree was extended to the tree-covered forests of India's Western Ghat and the Vidhya mountain ranges.

And to think that it all began spontaneously by the simple act of hugging a tree!

### Key References

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