

The Chipko movement

In the 1970s, an organized resistance to the destruction of forests spread throughout India and came to be known as the Chipko movement. The name of the movement comes from the word 'embrace', as the villagers hugged the trees, and prevented the contractors' from felling them.

Not many people know that over the last few centuries many communities in India have helped save nature. One such is the Bishnoi community of Rajasthan. The original 'Chipko movement' was started around 260 years back in the early part of the 18th century in Rajasthan by this community. A large group of them from 84 villages led by a lady called Amrita Devi laid down their lives in an effort to protect the trees from being felled on the orders of the *Maharaja* (King) of Jodhpur. After this incident, the *maharaja* gave a strong royal decree preventing the cutting of trees in all Bishnoi villages.

In the 20th century, it began in the hills where the forests are the main source of livelihood, since agricultural activities cannot be carried out easily. The Chipko movement of 1973 was one of the most famous among these. The first Chipko action took place spontaneously in April 1973 in the village of Mandal in the upper Alakananda valley and over the next five years spread to many districts of the Himalayas in Uttar Pradesh. It was sparked off by the government's decision to allot a plot of forest area in the Alaknanda valley to a sports goods company. This angered the villagers because their similar demand to use wood for making agricultural tools had been earlier denied. With encouragement from a local NGO (non-governmental organization), DGSS (Dasoli Gram Swarajya Sangh), the women of the area, under the leadership of an activist, Chandi Prasad Bhatt, went into the forest and formed a circle around the trees preventing the men from cutting them down.

The success achieved by this protest led to similar protests in other parts of the country. From their origins as a spontaneous protest against logging abuses in Uttar Pradesh in the Himalayas, supporters of the Chipko movement, mainly village women, have successfully banned the felling of trees in a number of regions and influenced natural resource policy in India. Dhoom Singh Negi, Bachni Devi and many other village women, were the first to save trees by hugging them. They coined the slogan: 'What do the forests bear? Soil, water and pure air'. The success of the Chipko movement in the hills saved thousands of trees from being felled.

Some other persons have also been involved in this movement and have given it proper direction. Mr Sunderlal Bahuguna, a Gandhian activist and philosopher, whose appeal to Mrs Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, resulted in the green-felling ban. Mr Bahuguna coined the Chipko slogan: 'ecology is permanent economy'. Mr Chandi Prasad Bhatt, is another leader of the Chipko movement. He encouraged the development of local industries based on the conservation and sustainable use of forest wealth for local benefit. Mr Ghanasyam Raturi, the Chipko poet, whose songs echo throughout the Himalayas of Uttar Pradesh, wrote a poem describing the method of embracing the trees to save them from felling:

***' Embrace the trees and
Save them from being felled;
The property of our hills,
Save them from being looted.'***

The Chipko protests in Uttar Pradesh achieved a major victory in 1980 with a 15-year ban on green felling in the Himalayan forests of that state by the order of Mrs Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India. Since then, the movement has spread to many states in the country. In addition to the 15-year ban in Uttar Pradesh, the movement has stopped felling in the Western Ghats and the Vindhyas and has generated pressure for a natural resource policy that is more sensitive to people's needs and ecological requirements.

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India's Call to Save Their Forests

In India there is an ancient legend about a girl, Amrita Devi, who died trying to protect the trees that surrounded her village. The story recounts a time when the local Maharajah's tree cutters arrived to cut the villager's trees for wood for his new fortress. Amrita, with others, jumped in front of the trees and hugged them. In some versions of the tale their dramatic efforts prevented the forest's destruction; in others Amrita dies in her valiant attempt.

It is this tale that inspired the actions of a group of mostly rural women who in the 1970s launched similar spectacular protest movements in India. For rural women, saving the environment is crucial to their economic survival. As primary food, fuel, and water gatherers, women have strong interests in reversing deforestation, desertification, and water pollution. The women who eke out a living in the Himalayan foothills, using its forests as sources of food, fuel, and forage for their animals, face a particularly severe challenge. The Himalayas, a young range subject to erosion, need forests on this steep slopes to allow the absorption of water and prevent flooding. Disintegration of Himalayan forests started over a century ago. In the 1960s, India's push for national economic development cleared even more trees to export the wood to earn foreign exchange. The hill soil washed away, causing landslides, floods and silting in the rivers below the hills. Crops and houses too were destroyed, and women had to trudge further and further for their fuel, fodder and water. All in all, it was the women who were the main victims of India's deforestation policies.

Against these harmful deforestation policies a movement called Chipko was born. "Chipko" in Hindi means to cling, reflecting the protesters main technique of throwing their arms around the tree trunks designated to be cut, and refusing to move. Women's participation in the movement can be traced to a remote hill town where a contractor in 1973 had been given the right by the state to fell 3000 of trees for a sporting goods store. The area already was dangerously denuded. When the woodcutters were scheduled to appear, the men were enticed away from the village leaving the women at home busy with household chores. As soon as the woodcutters appeared, the alarm was sounded and the village's female leader, a widow in her 50s, collected twenty-seven women and rushed into the forest. The women pleaded with the woodcutter calling the forest their "maternal home," and explaining the consequences of felling the trees. The woodcutters, shouting and abusing the women, threatened them with guns. The women in turn threatened to hug the earmarked trees and die with them And it worked! The unnerved laborers left, the contractor backed off. In 1974, women in a nearby area used the same tree hugging technique in order to protest the clearing of their forest lands. And in 1977, in another area, women tied a sacred threads around trees fated for death.....a symbolic gesture in Hindu custom confirming the bond of brother-sister relationships. They declared that their trees would be saved even if it cost them their lives.



Women in the Chipko Movement in India discussing deforestation

In the 1980s the ideas of the Chipko movement spread, often by women talking about them at water places, on village paths, and in markets. Women decided they were not powerless; there were actions they could take and a movement which would support them. Songs and slogans were created.

In one the contractor says:

“You foolish village women, do you know what these forest bear?
Resin, timber, and therefore foreign exchange!”

The women answer:

“Yes, we know. What do the forests bear?
Soil, water, and pure air,
Soil, water, and pure air.”

As an organized effort, the Chipko movement has had some success. Sometimes it won moratoriums through government bans or court battles; sometimes it managed to replant trees in areas close to village homes. In 1987 Chipko was chosen for a “Right to Livelihood Award,” known as the “alternate Nobel” prize honor. The honor was rightly deserved for this small movement dominated by women which had become a national call to save forests.