THE POWER THAT NOURISHES:

The Chipko Movement in India

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June 2013 was a record setting flood season in Uttarakhand villages located in northern India. It is popular with local citizens and tourists alike because of the many Hindu and Sikh temples in the area. Early monsoon rains created flash floods that reached over 300 times higher than the normal flood benchmarks for monsoon season. Unfortunately, the town of Kendarnath was completely obliterated by the floods; Indian government officials said the area will be closed for at least a year. Environmentalists speculated the largest reason for the widespread destruction was directly related to the 70 plus hydroelectric projects created in the area’s watersheds.1

Although the hydroelectric projects were new, historically, Uttarakhand was all too familiar with flooding and environmental conflicts between a variety of interest groups and individuals. For example, in April 1973 a forest-dwelling community in the Garhwal region of Uttarakhand protested the felling of trees in the Mandal forest by a sporting goods company. The citizens succeeded in their purpose by hugging or clinging to the trees; in Hindi, chipko means to cling. The actions of these early tree huggers became known as the Chipko movement. The Chipko movement started as a community, ecological agitation based on traditional Indian beliefs about forest conservation; nevertheless it culminated into a seminal moment that awakened society to the power and potential of female activism in India.

Although the Chipko movement took place in the 1970s, its roots germinated during the British colonial era. Before colonization, forests were managed in tradition ways by the inhabitants. Forests were considered a vital resource; therefore, they were managed by strict “social mechanisms for controlling their exploitation to ensure sustained productivity.”2 This type of traditional husbandry also included the “deliberate selection of appropriate tree species.”3
Large tracks of natural forests, village forests, and wood lots were developed and maintained in this long-established fashion until 1864 when the British Empire leased this Himalayan region. The lease between the British and the Kingdom of Tehri-Garhwal followed on the heels of a lease garnered by Mr. Wilson, a British man who clear-cut and completely destroyed valuable Deodar and Chir forests for fourteen years at the nominal annual rental amount of 400 rupees. That is the contemporary equivalent of $6.50 in US currency. Motivated by the profitable success of Mr. Wilson’s timber business, the “British rulers of the northwestern provinces took a lease for 20 years and engaged Wilson to exploit the forest for them.” The large-scale clearing that occurred during the Empire’s lease provided for “non-local commercial needs, such as shipbuilding for the British Royal Navy” and railroad ties “for the expanding railway network in India.” Those commercial demands created an extraordinary, destructive force.

After Independence in 1947, the Indian government also failed to preserve and protect the fragile biodiversity that existed in this region of the Himalayas. For example, during the 1962 war with China, India fought the adversary on two different battle fronts: the Eastern and the Western. The Eastern front occurred on the Sino-Indian border north of Bangladesh and east of Bhutan; whereas the Western front played out on the Sino-Indian border east of Kashmir. Although no fighting transpired in the Garhwal region, trees were cleared and roads were hastily created throughout the area in order to access the Western front. These poorly crafted and quickly built roads were deemed partially responsible for the frequent landslides in the area.

The deforestation and denuding of the forests, along with the government’s apparent lack of interest in conservation, greatly concerned the people in Uttarakhand. Case in point,
bureaucrats restricted the traditional access and rights to the land which greatly compromised the subsistence and grazing lifestyles of the Himalayan inhabitants. Government officials refused forest access to local people who wished to gather vegetation to feed their families and livestock, as well as harvest ten ash trees to create bows for oxen to use when plowing; yet, administrators freely auctioned off trees to lumber companies and industries based in the Gangetic plains. Furthermore, when the State Forest Department allotted the cutting of 300 ash trees to the Simon Company for the building of tennis rackets, the residents decided it was time to act.12

What began as citizen resistance to commodification of the forest, turned into a statement about livelihood preservation. To illustrate, men from the town council (panchayat) were concerned about the employment opportunities for the village inhabitants. A new organization, Dasholi Gram Swarajya Mandal (DGSM), Dasholi Society for Village Self-Rule, was created by Chandi Prasad Bhatt. Its sole purpose aimed to develop small industries using the forest as a resource to facilitate increased employment. As an example, the first project consisted of the creation of a small workshop that manufactured farm tools for local use. They also “tried buying and marketing herbs,” participating in the purchase of forest lots at government auction, as well as setting up a “processing plant to make resin and turpentine from pine sap.”13 However, they were always out maneuvered by larger, better funded corporations.

Nevertheless, when the flooding of the Alaknanda river occurred in 1970, the government hired the DGSM to help rescue stranded people. During the process, DGSM workers talked with other inhabitants about the possible causes of the flood; additionally, they made their own observations and concluded that the “chief cause was the clear-cutting of mountain slopes by the lumber companies. Clear-felled mountain slopes meant that the soil on the slopes was washed away by the rains or fell in landslides.”14
The villagers rallied around Bhatt and the DGSM when the contractors returned to harvest trees in the spring of 1973. Numbered around 100 agitators, they gathered on April 24; they sang songs, and beat their drums in opposition to the ax-men. When the lumbermen continued with their intentions, the protestors hugged the “earmarked trees to foil the contractors.” According to the explanation of one participant, their predetermined actions mirrored the actions of a protective mother saving her child from a potential tiger attack by “hugging the child to her breast, to take upon herself the wrath of the tiger.” The cutters retreated; the participants on both sides braced themselves for the next encounter. That seminal moment would take place the next year.

Additionally, during the flood recovery of 1973 Bhatt and the DGSM workers came in direct contact with women who had lost most of their material possessions, homes, cattle, and became practically paupers. This contact created an opportunity for Bhatt and his associates to get insight into the women’s plight as well as to educate them about afforestation programs. The women across the region connected with Bhatt’s message because their livelihoods depended upon a thriving forest.

The customary livelihoods of the hill people divided along gender lines. Specifically, the patriarchal societal norms dictated that men owned the land, prepared it for cultivation “because there are taboos associated with women operating the plow,” participated in the socio-religious and political activities of the community, and migrated outside the area, as necessary, to seek employment. On the other hand, women planted, weeded, and harvested the crops; raised the children; tended to household duties such as cooking, collection of firewood, water, and other forest edibles. Women also took care of the animals and gathered fodder for them from the forest. In spite of these responsibilities, women conventionally determined distribution of all
food. Therefore, because of the connection between women’s required duties and the forest, women were especially sensitive to its decline. Their participation in the non-violent Chipko resistance represented their vital need to sustain their very existence.

The non-violent act of hugging the trees linked inextricably to Gandhi’s ideology of satyagraha. He created the word using two Sanskrit words: satya meaning truth and agraha meaning insistence. He described satyagraha as:

Satyagraha is literally holding on to Truth and it means, therefore, Truth-force. Truth is soul or spirit. It is, therefore, known as soul-force. Satyagraha differs from Passive Resistance as the North Pole from the South. The latter has been conceived as a weapon of the weak and does not exclude the use of physical force or violence for the purpose of gaining one’s end, whereas the former has been conceived as a weapon of the strongest and excludes the use of violence in any shape or form.

Gandhi believed his self-created resistance theory to be more powerful than violence. According to Gandhi, non-violent confrontation appealed to the heart and conscience of the opponent; non-violent activism invited the enemy to cease the undesired behavior. Gandhi’s triumphant implementation of satyagraha lead to the withdraw of the British Empire from India; its inspirational use also influenced modern heroes like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, and the Chipko women.

Historically, forest satyagrahas spread widely throughout India during 1930-31; at that time, villagers also protested the commodification of their ancestral wooded areas. One of their remonstration tactics consisted of the ceremonial removal of “forest products from the reserved forests to assert their right to satisfy their basic needs.” Although eventually successful in reestablishing some of their traditional access to woodlands, forest satyagrahas did not eliminate the destruction of the ecology or its impending threat to “forest-dwelling communities.” As a
response to the intensifying predicament in the 1970s, the Chipko movement immersed with women at its forefront who used non-violent Gandhian resistance as their weapon of choice.\textsuperscript{24}

Women’s participation in the agitation proved pivotal to the overall achievement of the movement’s goals. For example, in 1974 contractors were allotted a contract to cut down almost 2,500 trees near the town of Reni. The female residents had not been formally included in the resistance meetings; however, they felt the woodcutters’ actions directly affected them. Therefore, the women acted independently from the village patriarchal leadership when they confronted the loggers one day.\textsuperscript{25} It happened when a woman grazing her cows first noticed the lumbermen headed for the forest; she managed to gather other women who surrounded the woodcutters. The women told the men: “This forest is our mother. When there is a crisis of food, we come here to collect grass and dry fruits to feed our children. We dig out herbs and collect mushrooms from this forest. You cannot touch these trees.”\textsuperscript{26} The women and children of the village hugged the trees; one middle-aged widow in particular, Gaura Devi, told the men they would have to shoot her first and then they could touch the trees.\textsuperscript{27} The men wisely retreated. This powerful display by women caused the state of Uttar Pradesh to investigate; ultimately a committee of experts appointed by the government decided “the Reni forest was a sensitive area and no trees should be cut in this region.” A ten-year ban on clear-cutting in this area shortly followed.\textsuperscript{28}

The behavior of these women countered the idea that women were inactive regarding social protest. The women involved in these spontaneous tree-hugging demonstrations advocated for their livelihoods and by so doing, moved to leadership positions. As a representation of the achievement at Reni, Bhatt and the other DGSM participants deferred to the sensitivities and sensibilities of the women.\textsuperscript{29} Bhatt confessed that the women’s activism “came
as an eye-opener to him and it was only after this that he realized how much more important ecology was to women in Garhwal than it was to men.”

Those lower-caste women never received training, political or otherwise, to respond that way.

The women took action as a matter of continued existence. In order to accomplish the daily drudgery of their duties, those women were forced to arise before dawn and walk several miles to collect water, fuel, and fodder; the annihilation of the forest added to their burden because it required them to travel further to fulfill their needs provided by the forest. Subsequently, their daily routines often demanded fourteen hour days just to survive. The respect for the bravery of these mountain women garnered them an invitation to village meetings to participate in decision making. Irony lies in the fact that women had heretofore never been allowed to attend those gatherings. Of course, they attended in large numbers.

In conclusion, the Himalayan women who embraced trees stimulated Indians to the renewed idea that females with the duty to nourish also possessed the power to advance change. Their brand of organic social movement inspired a generation to take to the streets to agitate for societal transformations. A significant factor in the formation of the Chipko movement originated during colonial times, which transformed the established forestry practices of the Himalayan population; western commercialization practices resulted in the deterioration of the forest. Even though the original intent of the Chipko organizers endeavored to generate ecological change, more than anything else it created a platform for women’s concerns. Likewise, a distinctive quality used by the Chipko participants consisted of their utilization of non-violent resistance that reflected Gandhian philosophy. Women’s willingness to hug the trees and courageously confront their adversaries proved key to the accomplishment of protecting their livelihoods. The Chipko women truly showed they innately held the power to nourish; they
nurtured their families, they promoted forest conservation, and through example they encouraged and inspired future women’s social movements.
Notes


3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., 136.

6. Ibid.


9. Ibid., 134.


12. Ibid.


14. Ibid.

15. Ibid., 13.

16. Ibid., 12.


18. Ibid.


23. Ibid., 136.

24. Ibid.


28. Ibid.


31. Ibid., 183.


