

Chipko movement: Of floated myths and flouted realities

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On 26 March 1999, a quarter of a century will be over since a group of women in the Reni forests of Garhwal Himalaya succeeded in chasing away timber felling contractors. In course of time this event became a milestone in the evolution of the world famous Chipko movement. An impressive and useful bibliography on the literature around the movement has also developed since then. A number of activists with remarkable philosophical richness and social commitment have devoted their lives to this movement, which is one of the most written about, in the world today.

In spite of the volumes of literature, or probably because of it, there appear some serious gaps in the public impressions and actual realities of the movement. Myths have often flouted realities; individuals with no links with the movements have often been projected by the media as its leader. Thus, some widely accepted yet mistaken concepts have got currency. There is a need to re-establish the realities about the movement and to honour the selfless hard work of the numerous less-known and unknown Chipko activists.

As a student of environmental activism, over the past 20 years, the present author and his associates have traveled extensively through mountain villages in large parts of Garhwal and Kumaon Himalaya, where the Chipko movement emerged. This article is written as a tribute to the numerous and largely unknown activists of the movement on the occasion of the completion of 25 years since the successful forest protection action in Reni under the leadership of Gaura Devi, the head of the local village women's organisation. It is also aimed at a wider examination of the reliability of the media created 'messages' and dispelling some of the myths about the movement that have floated around for quite sometime.

In addressing this, the following questions are taken for examination:

1. Is Chipko a movement rooted in economic conflicts over mountain forests or guided by ideas of deep ecology?

2. Is Chipko a social movement based on gender collaboration or a 'feminist movement' based on gender conflicts?

3. Has anyone in the Chipko movement actually hugged trees at the risk of her/his life and not for waiting photographers?

These points will be taken up below for some elaboration.

1. Is Chipko a movement rooted in economic conflicts over mountain forests or guided by ideas of deep ecology?

Documented evidences from the movement sources do not indicate any influences of the brand of thinking known as 'deep ecology'. Dependable historical account of this widely written about movement is, surprisingly, scanty. Among the early writers on the history of the movement, Bandyopadhyay (1992) as well as Guha (1989) have not indicated any link with 'deep ecology'. On 24 June 1973, the first successful resistance to forest felling at the Mandal forests was based on economics and aimed at obtaining higher allotment of trees for felling to the Dasholi Gram Swarajya Sangh (DGSS), a local Gandhian organisation. On 26 March 1974, the more vociferous yet non-violent resistance at the Reni forests was triggered off by the news of auction of some local forests for felling to a sports-goods company from the plains. The contract system for forest felling allowed rich contractors from the plains make large profits from fellings in the mountain forests. The basic theme of the movement as opposition to this practice is precisely expressed in the following lines from a famous poem by Raturi, the folk-poet of the movement:

Embrace the trees in the forests
And save them from being felled!
Save the treasure of our mountains
From being looted away from us!!

The movement got its initial start in the conflicts over mountain forests between the economic interests of the mountain communities and the economies of the plains. However, this fundamental basis of the movement got substantially reduced with the contract system of felling being stopped and the establishment of the public sector Forest Development Corporation. The fellings were then onwards undertaken with the help of local village cooperatives.

Reference in the literature is frequently made of an environmental branch of the movement, which called for a total ban on commercial fellings in the whole Garhwal and Kumaon Himalaya. This part of the movement is reported to have originated in the Tehri-Garhwal region, particularly the Henwal valley region, and is identified with the slogan:

What do the forests bear? Soil, water and pure air!!

The slogan is an excellent and simple summarisation of the ecological importance of the mountain forests, especially in the Himalayan context. Many academic analysts, including the present author, had unhesitatingly accepted the slogan, when first informed about it. However, with the passage of time, several questions on the representative character and origin of this slogan have emerged. Notwithstanding the significant role played by the women of Henwal valley region in the protection of mountain forests, many women in the Garhwal and Kumaon region do not find the slogan as very realistic. Can the women in the mountain villages who spend several hours each day in the forests struggling to collect daily fuelwood and green fodder, ever forget to include fuelwood and green fodder in the list of important forest products, they ask. The convoluted argument that firewood and green fodder can grow only when there is soil, water and pure air, and hence they are secondary, appears too distant, theoretical and urban in the face of the hard struggle for survival in the rural mountain villages.

Naturally, the slogan has impressed urban environmentalists the world over but, for the women in the mountain villages who struggle to keep the cooking fire running and the domestic cattle well-fed at home, the slogan is an abstract one, at best a reflection of half-truth of their lives. This point indicates why the ecological message of the Chipko movement has impressed environmentalists in the urban areas and the countries of the North, much more than those in the mountainous hinterlands in the South. However, there is also a positive side to it. Much of the success of the movement in getting tacit political support lies in this capacity of the leadership of the movement to mobilise the vocal and urban environmentalists. Thus, in line with the distinction made by Guha (1989), the Chipko Movement has the private face of a quintessential peasant movement and a public face of one of the most celebrated environmental movements of the world. In answering the main question raised above, Chipko has its roots in the hard economic struggle for survival, while its face has been tactically decorated by some 'deep ecological' terms.

2. Is Chipko a social movement based on gender collaboration or a feminist movement based on gender conflicts?

In the early literature on Chipko no serious questions were raised about the movement being based on gender conflict. There was no lack of recognition of the fact the issue of forests in the Garhwal and Kumaon Himalaya touches the women much more intensely, than the men. The presence of large number of women in the forest action at Reni, and the largescale participation of the village women have led to some analysts claiming Chipko to be a 'women's movement'. Guha (1989) has answered these questions in a substantive manner showing the location of Chipko in the tradition of social movements of the

region. However, inspite of that, Shiva (1992), identified Chipko as 'a women's movement', though no activist woman from the movement has made any such claim. The acutely subjective nature of such claims and the confusions they generate can be explained by a closer look at the way the incidence of the protest led by Gaura Devi in 1974 is seen from the ecofeminist viewpoint. As Guha (1989) describes,

Reni's importance in the saga of Chipko andolan (movement) is twofold. It was the first occasion on which women participated in any major way, this participation, moreover, coming in the absence of their own menfolk and DGSS activists.

Guha has elaborated on how the officials made a clever move to get the menfolk and the DGSS activists away from the villages around Reni forests, so that felling could be undertaken without resistance. The forest officials were concerned about the resistance to forest felling by both men and women. As Gaura Devi, the woman leader of the forest action at Reni explained (Guha 1989):

It was not a question of planned organisation of the women for the movement, rather it happened spontaneously. Our men were out of the village so we had to come forward and protect the trees.

The above statement clearly establishes the nature of the movement as a joint struggle based on gender collaboration. Thus, while the men in the concerned villages were diverted by a clever official move, the women took up the mantle of resistance. Interestingly, Shiva's (1992) description of the same incidence, from an ecofeminist viewpoint merely says:

A group of village women led by one Gaura Devi hugged trees, challenging the brute power of hired sawyers, about to cut down the trees for a sportsgoods company. The above statement suffers from reductionist drawbacks and distortion of facts. Due to the reductionist view, Shiva is unable to see the Reni action in a holistic perspective. Thus, the link between the steps taken by Gaura Devi and the contrived absence of the men in the village has been missed in her analysis. Referring to the contrived absence of the menfolk of the village, Guha (1989) describes the same incidence in the following words:

Gaura Devi quickly mobilised the other housewives and went to the forest. Pleading with the labourers not to start the felling operations, the women initially met with abuse and threats. When the women refused to budge, the men were eventually forced to retire....As such, even at the level of participation Chipko can hardly be said to constitute a women's movement.

Gaura Devi herself did not mention any incidence of having led the women to embrace trees, as has been projected by Shiva (1992). This is historically

incorrect. In the ecofeminist literature on Chipko, the women of Garhwal and Kumaon have often been described as opponents of change and mere carriers of tradition. Similarly, the menfolk are described as rapacious agents of economic development and change. Realistic, holistic and painstaking research results by scholars in the same region have, fortunately, provided a different picture (see for example Mehta 1996). More recently, such myths have been more effectively exploded by the leading roles played by the women of Garhwal and Kumaon in the popular movement demanding a new and development oriented state in this mountain region.

Notwithstanding sensationalist writings, the women activists of the Chipko movement have considered that the movement has strengthened itself from gender collaboration against the inappropriate management practices for the mountain forests. Women have played significant roles in the movement, just as their male counterparts. There is no reason for seeing the Chipko movement as based on gender conflicts.

3. Has anyone in the Chipko movement actually embraced trees at the risk of her/his life and not for waiting photographers?

A common impression exists all over the world, except in the villages of Garhwal and Kumaon, that large number of people, especially women, have been embracing trees to prevent their felling. While the media has played an important role in spreading the positive message of the movement, some journalists have failed miserably to maintain minimum professional standards and have created serious confusions at the international level on the above question. Examples of such unprofessional reporting are given below:

In a magazine Sanctuary, Shiva (1992) declared that 'one Gaura Devi' led a group of village women to hug trees. A number of researchers had discussed the Reni action with Gaura Devi. However, there is no documented support to the claim of Shiva. She was neither present at the spot in Reni, nor she refers to any discussion with Gaura Devi. There has been a media created confusion on the issue of who embraced the trees in Chipko Movement. This has also disturbed the activists of the movement. The spreading of misinformation is taken to comical heights by a Malaysian journalist Fong (1996) who, in an article in The Star wrote that :

Her (Vandana Shiva's) name is synonymous with the Chipko Movement (Chipko means embrace) in India, an active anti-logging movement in the 70s and early 80s. To stem environmental destruction, Vandana (Shiva) led thousands of women to embrace (literally) the trees in the Himalayan mountains in their bid to stop logging activities.

In the characteristic style of sensationalist journalism, Fong (1996) does not provide any date, place, forest area, or villages associated with the incidence

he reports. Nor he mentions one name out of the thousands of women that Shiva, reportedly, had led somewhere in the Himalayan mountains. The activists of the Chipko movement were, on one hand, amused at the totally comical nature of Fong's claim. On the other hand, in a letter of protest to the editor of The Star, they wrote (Jardhari et al. 1996):

The interview is based on false claims of Vandana Shiva and has angered many.....The real activists are so simple that they do not know why Vandana Shiva is reportedly publishing wrong claims about Chipko in the foreign press. We should all stand up against this new green exploitation of the people's simplicity and courage by clever, greedy and selfish persons like Vandana Shiva.

Contrary to all the unfounded greenish journalistic attempts in the international media, to garner the glory of the Chipko Movement, there has so far been only one reported clear instance of actual use of the method of embracing trees, and that too by a male activist. In the year 1977, Dhoom Singh Negi, a courageous and less known Gandhian activist from the village Pipleth, successfully prevented felling by embracing trees in the Salet forest area in the Garhwal Himalaya, as has been reported by Shiva and Bandyopadhyay (1986). In all other instances of Chipko movement, resistance was expressed in other non-violent forms. In most cases, the presence of a large number of angry villagers was enough to discourage the contractors from trying to fell trees.

All photographs of 'Chipko Actions' represent enactments. When the only reported incidence of embracing trees to protect them from felling occurred in Salet forests in the Garhwal Himalaya, and human life was at risk, there was no photographer around in the remote mountain forests.

This text is now brought to an end with a tribute to Dhoom Singh Negi, the little known man of strong commitments who embraced trees against falling axes in the Salet forests. Many courageous activists, men and women of determination, have brought 'Chipko' from the stage of a possible instrument of struggle to the stage of a trend setting achievement. Individuals like Dhoom Singh Negi are busy working in their small and remote Himalayan villages for the cause of sustainable human development. On the occasion of the completion of a quarter century since the mountain women's action at Reni forests in 1974, this article is a tribute to all of them.

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