

The Chipko Movement and the Bhotiya Community



Some of the remaining living Chipko warriors, 2003

The Bhotiya woman enjoys far more equal status to the men than in any other part of Garhwal. This is evident in the participation of Bhotiya women in collective issues, both in action as well as in decision-making. Perhaps this is the result of the historical experience of the Bhotiya women in managing their households during the long absence of the men. The spontaneous action by Gaura Devi and her colleagues is one such story in the recent memory of the Bhotiya society. In fact, women are the most vocal contingent of the Bhotiya community in the recent phase of the struggle. Their concerns mostly focused around access to NTFPs from the core zone.

During the 1970s when the Forest Department supplied timber at subsidised rates to industry, a movement to save the forests started in the Garhwal (Guha 1989). The movement, called Chipko, was the collective response of the Garhwal mountain communities against the violation of their customary rights over natural resources by large-scale commercial interests. Resistance against commercial felling was organised under the leadership of Govind Singh Rawat, who at that time was the pramukh of the Joshimath Block. In the Niti Valley, issues of equity were raised with an emphasis on technological skills development for efficient resource use. Gadgil and Guha (1995) consider this a Marxist trend in the Chipko movement. Although,



The Lata congregation at the Reni bridge, during the anniversary celebration of the Chipko movement.

the movement successfully stalled the large-scale felling of trees, it failed to consolidate and spread this Marxist line of thought. Chipko provided a new lease on life to the Gandhian movement, but it gradually degenerated into camps and personality cults. In the history of the Chipko movement, the Bhotiya community is best remembered for the courage of Gaura Devi and her associates who took spontaneous action and

refused to allow the labour force of forest contractors to enter the forests.

A somewhat utopian version of the Chipko movement was presented to the world. Both scholars and the local community have criticised this mystification of the movement. Bandyopadhyay (1999) emphasised the need to re-establish the realities of the movement and honour the selfless work of numerous lesser-known activists. The villagers of Lata are now calling for redefining Chipko from the community's perspective. In a certain sense, the movement also rebounded on its promulgators. The state became convinced that preservation and conservation were important, but the same people who successfully prevented tree felling for commercial purposes now found their own usage rights rescinded.