

Role of Women in Chipko Movement

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Abstract: *Chipko movement was not only an environmental movement but also a social movement which was aimed at opposing commercial deforestation. Women's participation in the Chipko agitation was a very novel aspect of the movement. In the sixth decade of the last century, India was losing around 1.3 million hectares of forest every year. As a result, in the 1970s, the fight for a safe environment began. Led by Gaura Devi, a large number of tribal women wrapped their arms around the trees and opposed deforestation. The Chipko Movement has attracted world-wide attention. The image of poor, rural women in the hills of northern India standing with their arms around trees to prevent them being cut down is a romantic and compelling one. Although our country is male dominating country where most of the actions are taken by the men, but women has also shown their impact and importance at times. Chipko movement was the one where women showed what they can do when its needed. Chipko movement was launched to protect the trees being cut down. Women claimed that their trees would be preserved even at the cost of their lives. The movement not only inspired numerous people to work on practical programmes of water management, energy conservation, afforestation, and recycling, but also encouraged scholars to start studying issues of environmental degradation and methods of conservation in the Himalayas and throughout India.*

Keywords: Deforestation, Chipko movement, Tribal women, environment etc.

I. INTRODUCTION

Indians have been familiar with the importance of our ecology and environment since ancient times. For ages, they have been worshipping natural resources such as earth, sun, wind, water, trees and plants, rain etc. as gods and goddesses. This shows their faith in the sustainability of the environment. Most of the Indians in general even today consider earth, rivers, herbs and trees as sacred. Our ancestors knew from the beginning that trees were among the most important elements of nature and humans cannot exist without trees and water.

Before the beginning of 19th century, the human population on earth was small and the growth rate of population was also very low. Most of the human population was prone to die before crossing 5 or 6 decades of age. Battles, wars and pandemics were the main reasons behind this. However, the 19th and 20th century brought a number of scientific discoveries that helped humans in living longer lives and get rid of most of the battles and skirmishes that caused huge loss to human lives. Due to these reasons, the human population worldwide began to increase rapidly.

This in turn increased the search of more land for dwelling and establishing villages and cities. Roads and railway tracks were also laid for the movement of rapidly increasing human population. Forest land was the main target of modernization. Humans begin to exploit forests and forest lands for their benefits. In the mid of 20th century, forests worldwide began to shrink faster than ever because of a number of reasons.

Industrialization has caused huge damage to the stability of the environment. Sustainability is very essential to make the world a better place to live. According to Mahatma Gandhi, Earth has everything to meet our needs but not all our greed.

Sustainability means "Taking nothing and causing no harm to the environment". According to Ray Anderson, all business with a no sustainable model is doing a theft because they are stealing the resources of the future generation. The main pillars of sustainability are economic development, social development and environmental protection.

Reason behind Chipko movement

After the India-China war that took place in the year 1962, the state of Uttar Pradesh in India experienced growth in development, especially in the Himalayan regions. A number of roads were built in the interior parts of the Himalayan region for making access to the forest resources available there.

This land was very valuable for the rural villagers because they depended heavily on the forests for food, fuel and other services such as water purification and soil stabilization. Cutting down forests meant lower agricultural yields, erosion, depleted water resources, and increased flooding across the surroundings areas.

Government policies prevented the villagers from making the lands and they were denied access to the forests so that the trees could be cut down for the so called development projects. The villagers opposed the government policy of cutting down trees for making roads and other developmental purposes.

Women were often most affected by deforestation of the Himalayas because they were responsible for cooking and thus cultivating crops from the forest. This became the reason why women first began taking lead in the Chipko movement. However, this was apparently not a feminist movement or even an environmental movement. Villagers affected by the exploitation of the forests had no choice but to protest, their homes and livelihoods were being destroyed and it was the question of their existence.

Resistance in India has been commonly characterized by nonviolent tactics for centuries. The Chipko Movement comes from the word "chipko" meaning to hug or to cling to. During the 1970s, rural villagers led by local women held on to trees as a way to protest tree felling in regions, notably in Uttar Pradesh.

From 1973 to 1979, the mountain regions of then Uttar Pradesh (now Uttarakhand) witnessed several agitations to save forests from the axe. These agitations gained fame as the Chipko movement and eventually forced the government to ban the commercial cutting of trees. But the Chipko movement had already been scripted in 1967. It was Sunderlal Bahuguna who brought recognition for the movement from across the globe with slogans, one of which is- "What do forests bear? Soil, water and pure air".

Hence, the Chipko Movement or the Chipko Andolan, in the 1970s was a nonviolent social and environmental movement championed by rural Indian peasants, particularly women. Its primary objective was to safeguard forests and trees from government-backed logging activities. For the local people, the Chipko conflict represented a fight for survival, driven by the belief that their fundamental rights had been violated by the actions of state institutions.

The movement also highlighted the meticulousness of the locals, the crucial role of women in protecting their homes and families, and the significant support garnered for the anti-alcohol campaign, all of which contributed to the overwhelming backing from women in the movement.

In the year 1970, numerous villages, bridges and roads were washed away due to the devastating floods that were the result of vast deforestation. As various civil engineering projects preceded, incidents of landslides and land subsidence increased rapidly in the area.

Objectives

The main objective of the Chipko Movement was to protect forests from deforestation and promote sustainable forest management practices. The Chipko Movement aimed to bring about a shift in forest management practices, promote environmental consciousness, and empower local communities in the protection and conservation of forests. The key objectives of the movement can be listed as below:

Forest Conservation: The Movement was aimed to prevent the cutting of trees and the destruction of forests, particularly for commercial activities.

Community Participation: The local communities, especially women were involved in the movement in decision-making processes regarding the use and management of forest resources. It emphasized the importance of their traditional knowledge and the need for their consent in forest-related activities.

Nonviolent Resistance: The Movement employed nonviolent methods, such as tree-hugging and sit-ins, to physically prevent loggers from cutting down trees. It aimed to create a peaceful resistance movement that raised awareness about the consequences of deforestation.

Ecological Awareness: The movement aimed to increase awareness about the ecological significance of forests and the adverse impacts of deforestation on the environment, water resources and human lives that were dependent on forests. It sought to educate people about the importance of maintaining a balanced ecosystem.

Socio-Economic Justice: Chipko Movement highlighted the socio-economic injustice faced by the locals dependent on forests for their livelihoods. It called for equitable distribution of forest resources, recognition of the rights of indigenous and marginalized communities, and addressing the economic disparities in resource utilization.

Sustainable Development: The movement advocated for sustainable development practices that harmonize human activities with the preservation of natural resources. It emphasized the need for responsible and balanced use of forest resources to meet present needs without compromising the needs of future generations.

Emerging of the movement

Villagers including women began to organise themselves under several smaller groups. It all began in 1973 taking up local causes and stand up against commercial operations that threatened the livelihoods of the forest dwellers.

The first occasion of conflict occurred when the Forest Department awarded a contract for 300 trees to Simon Company, a sporting goods manufacturer in distant Allahabad, to make tennis racquets.

In March 1973, the lumbermen arrived at Gopeshwar, and after a couple of weeks, they were confronted at village Mandal on 24 April 1973, where about a hundred villagers and DGSS workers were beating drums and shouting slogans, thus forcing the contractors and their lumbermen to retreat.

Participation of Women

The support for the movement came mainly from the womenfolk. Today, beyond the eco-socialism hue, it is considered as an ecofeminism movement. Although many of its leaders were men, women were not only its backbone, but also its mainstay.

The villagers lead by the women formed a vigil group and watched over the trees until December, when they had another successful stand-off when the activists reached the site in time. The lumbermen retreated leaving behind the five ash trees that felled.

A few months later, the final flashpoint began when the government announced an auction scheduled in January 1974, for 2,500 trees near Reni village, overlooking the Alaknanda River. The villagers in the Reni area again decided to protest against the actions of the government by hugging the trees. Over the next few weeks, rallies and meetings continued in the Reni area.

On 25 March 1974, the day the lumbermen were to cut the trees, the men of Reni village and DGSS workers were in Chamoli, diverted by the state government and contractors to a fictional compensation payment site, while back home labourers arrived by the truckload to start logging operations. A local girl rushed to inform Gaura Devi, the head of the village Mahila Mangal Dal, at Reni village. Gaura Devi led 27 of the village women to the site and confronted the loggers. When all talking failed, and the loggers started to shout and abuse the women, threatening them with guns, the women resorted to hugging the trees to stop them from being felled. The women kept an all-night vigil guarding their trees against the cutters until a few of them relented and left the village. The next day, when the men and leaders returned, the news of the movement spread to the Laata and other nearby villages, and more people joined in. Finally the contractors left the area after a four-day stand-off.

Over the next five years, the movement spread to many districts in the region, and within a decade throughout the Uttarakhand Himalayas. Larger issues of ecological and economic exploitation of the region were raised. The villagers demanded that no forest-exploiting contracts should be given to outsiders and local communities should have effective control over natural resources like land, water, and forests. They wanted the government to provide low-cost materials to small industries and ensure development of the region without disturbing the ecological balance. The movement took up economic issues of landless forest workers and asked for guarantees of minimum wage. Globally Chipko demonstrated how environment causes, up until then considered an activity of the rich, were a matter of life and death for the poor, who were all too often the first ones to be devastated by an environmental tragedy. Several scholarly studies were made in the aftermath of the movement. In 1977, in another area, women tied sacred threads, called Rakhi,

around trees destined for felling. According to the Hindu tradition of Raksha Bandhan, the Rakhi signifies a bond between brother and sisters. They declared that the trees would be saved even if it cost them their lives.

Importance of Women's participation in the movement

Women's participation in the Chipko agitation was a very novel aspect of the movement. The forest contractors of the region usually doubled up as suppliers of alcohol to men. Women held sustained agitations against the habit of alcoholism and broadened the agenda of the movement to cover other social issues. The movement achieved a victory when the government issued a ban on felling of trees in the Himalayan regions for fifteen years in 1980 by then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, until the green cover was fully restored.

One of the prominent Chipko leaders, Gandhian Sunderlal Bahuguna, took a 5,000 kilometre trans-Himalaya foot march in 1981-83, to spread the message to farther, greater areas. Gradually, women set up cooperatives to guard local forests, and also organized fodder production at rates conducive to local environment. They also joined in land rotation schemes for fodder collection, helped replant degraded land, and established and ran nurseries stocked with species they selected.

It is apparent that the most important feature of Chipko movement was the mass participation of female villagers. As the backbone of Uttarakhand's Agrarian economy, women were most directly affected by environmental degradation and deforestation, and thus related to the issues most easily. How much this participation impacted or derived from the ideology of Chipko has been fiercely debated in academic circles.

Role of Vandana Shiva in the movement

Vandana Shiva's role in this movement began as a response to the large-scale deforestation that was taking place in the Himalayan region in the 1970s. During this period, the peasant women from the Garhwal Himalaya, having realised that the forests were the real source of springs and streams, fodder and fuel, declared that they would hug the trees, and the loggers would have to kill them before cutting the trees.

In 1973, when Vandana Shiva went to the Himalaya to visit her favourite forests and swim in her favourite stream, the forests were not there and the stream had become a trickle. It was at this moment that she decided to become a volunteer for the Chipko movement. She spent every vacation doing padayatra, documenting the deforestation, the work of the forest activists and spreading the message of Chipko.

Despite this, both female and male activists did play pivotal roles in the movement including Gaura Devi, Sudesha Devi, Bachni Devi, Chandi Prasad Bhatt, Sundarlal Bahuguna, Govind Singh Rawat, Dhoom Singh Negi, Shamsher Singh Bisht and Ghanasyam Raturi, the Chipko poet, whose songs are still popular in the Himalayan region. For their roles in this movement, Chandi Prasad Bhatt was awarded the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 1982, and Sunderlal Bahuguna was awarded the Padma Vibhushan in 2009.

History

In 1731, the king of Jodhpur in Rajasthan asked one of his ministers to arrange wood for constructing a new palace. The minister and workers went to a forest near a village, inhabited by Bishnois, to cut down trees. A Bishnoi woman **Amrita Devi** showed exemplary courage by hugging a tree and daring king's men to cut her first before cutting the tree. The tree mattered much more to her than her own life. Sadly, the king's men did not heed to her pleas, and cut down the tree along with Amrita Devi.

Her three daughters and hundreds of other Bishnois followed her, and thus lost their lives saving trees. The incident inspired the several other rural women, who launched such similar movements in different parts of India during different periods.

Impacts

As the movement continued, protests became more project-oriented and expanded to include the entire ecology of the region, ultimately becoming the "Save Himalaya" movement. Between 1981 and 1983, Sundar Lal Bahuguna marched 5,000 km across the Himalayan region to bring prominence to the movement. A number of movements were focused on

the Tehri dam and other mining operations. This resulted in the closure of at least one limestone quarry. Similarly, a massive reforestation effort led to the planting of more than one million trees in the region.

Though the number of women who participated in the Chipko Movement was limited, its impact has implications for possible changes in gender relationships in the Garhwali society.

II. CONCLUSION

The Chipko Movement was as a powerful and influential environmental movement. Through nonviolent resistance, community participation, and raising awareness about the ecological significance of forests, the movement successfully brought attention to the detrimental effects of deforestation and commercial logging. Led by local villagers, especially women, the movement emphasized the need for sustainable forest management practices and the recognition of community rights.

The Chipko Movement inspired similar grassroots movements and led to policy and legal reforms in India. Its legacy continues to resonate globally, highlighting the importance of community-led environmental activism, conservation efforts, and the pursuit of sustainable development practices. The Chipko Movement remains an enduring symbol of the power of collective action and the ability of local communities to protect and preserve their natural resources for future generations.

The image of poor, rural women in the hills of northern India standing with their arms around trees to prevent them being cut down is a romantic and compelling one. The movement can be considered an important success story in the fight to secure women's rights, in the process of local community development through forestry and in environmental protection. Its biggest triumph is making people aware of their rights to forests, and how grassroots activism can influence policy-making regarding ecology and shared natural resources.

The collective mobilization of women for the cause of preserving forests has brought about a situation of conflict regarding their own status in society. Women have demanded to share in the decision-making process along with men; hence, there has been opposition by men to women's involvement in the Chipko Movement.

Women are, on the one hand, seeking alterations in their position in society and, on the other hand, supporting a social movement that is resisting change. To understand this, it is crucial to ask why women support the movement, what the extent of their awareness is, and how many women in the hill areas are actually participating in the movement.

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