
CHIPKO ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT MEDIA (INDIA)

The Chipko (hugging) environmental conservation movement came to public attention in 1973 when a group of women in Mandal village, located in the mountainous Himalayan State of Uttarkhand, “hugged” trees in order to prevent them from being felled. In the next several years, more than a dozen confrontations between women and lumberjacks occurred in Uttarkhand—all nonviolent and effective, enshrining forever the term *tree hugger* in conservation parlance.

In 1974, an especially notable confrontation occurred in Reni Village in Uttarkhand, where a women’s group, led by Mrs. Gaura Devi, blocked an army of lumberjacks, singing: “This forest is our mother’s home; we will protect it with all our might.” They admonished the lumberjacks:

If the forest is cut, the soil will be washed away.
Landslides and soil erosion will bring floods,
which will destroy our fields and homes, our
water sources will dry up, and all the other ben-
efits we get from the forest will be finished.
(Nagar, 2006, p. 306)

Stories and photographs of women’s bodies in Mandal and Reni villages, interposed between the trees and the gleaming axes of timber cutters, spurred word-of-mouth buzz in neighboring communities and made interesting news copy for local, *national*, and *global media*. The notion of “Cut me down before you cut down a tree,” generated a lot of media coverage, bringing with it a new humanized morality to abstract environmental concerns.

Two local activists—Chandi Prasad Bhatt, a Marxist, and Sundar Lal Bahuguna, a Gandhian—led the Chipko movement, albeit somewhat independently. They both exuded characteristics that fueled the spread of Chipko, bringing it to national and international awareness. Bhatt and Bahuguna were charismatic and credible, and they spoke forcefully in both Hindi and the local Garhwali dialect. Well networked with journalists, they both wielded a prolific pen, writing with ease in both

Hindi and English and thus mobilizing their rural and urban elite constituencies.

In Uttarkhand, the communication media underlying the Chipko movement was remarkably small-scale and low-tech, emphasizing local knowledge, local resources, local leadership, local language, and locally relevant methods of communication. Poets and singers were frontline motivators, writing verse and songs for public performance to inspire grassroots participation. Ghanshyam Sailani emerged as Chipko poet laureate, penning verses such as the following:

*Let us protect and plant the trees
Go awaken the villages
And drive away the axemen.*

When Uttarkhand women heard that the lumberjacks were on their way, they would sing such songs and walk toward the forest. The chorus would get louder and strident when the timbercutters arrived. The women would hold hands and form a circle around the tree, hugging it as a group. The lumberjacks were rendered powerless, even with their axes and saws.

The Chipko movement gathered rapid momentum as it rode the wave of spirituality. *Bhagwad kathas* (large prayer meetings) were routinely organized in forest areas, emphasizing that God resides in every living being, including in trees. To protect the trees was a sacred act, blending environmental science with deeply ingrained spirituality.

Chipko's appeal was uniquely wide-ranging. Thus, the movement was co-opted, shaped, and popularized by groups as diverse as local and global journalists, grassroots activists, environmentalists, Gandhians, spiritual leaders, politicians, social change practitioners, and feminists. The feminist movement popularized Chipko, pointing out that poor rural women walk long distances to collect fuel and fodder and thus are the frontline victims of forest destruction. Gandhians accentuated the Chipko movement through symbolic protests such as prayers, fasting, and *padayatras* (ritual marches). Further, Chipko became synonymous with the growth of ecology-conscious journalism in India and around the world.

The media that the Chipko movement generated went beyond just saving trees but, rather, was imbued with the belief that the forest belonged to

the people, and only they could ensure its wise use. And, as the movement spread, and generated more media, it humanized environmental concerns for local, national, and global audiences.

In India, the headlines generated by Chipko put the notion of saving forests squarely on the political and public agenda of the country. In the early 1980s, India's prime minister, Indira Gandhi, ordered a 15-year ban on cutting trees 1,000 meters above sea level in the Himalayan forests (she believed that Chipko represented India's "moral conscience"). In subsequent time, this decree was extended to the tree-covered forests of India's Western Ghat and the Vidhya mountain ranges.

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See also Community Radio Movement (India); Environmental Movement Media; First Peoples' Media (Canada); Indigenous Media (Australia); Indigenous Media in Latin America; Indigenous Peoples' Media

Further Readings

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