

Chipko – A Movement of Ecofeminists

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1975 was a historic year. The World Conference on Women held in Mexico City caught special attention from participants around the world because of a woman environmentalist.¹ It was Vandana Shiva speaking before the gathering about the struggle of rural women during the "Chipko Movement."

Chipko, in the local language, means "to hug".² But what exactly did these women hug?

The timber merchants came to the Terai region of the Indian state of Uttarakhand. They came with a hidden purpose of massive ecological destruction. In 1974, a 50-year-old illiterate woman named Gaura Devi predicted deforestation and loss of topsoil as the outcomes of the logging activity. Along with her, 27 other women from the village of Reni in Chamoli District rushed out of their homes to hug the trees to protect them from being felled.³

To the wood loggers, Gaura Devi said, "This forest is our mother's abode. We obtain vegetables and medicinal plants from it. Do not clear the lavish forests".⁴ The love that these women showed for the forests highlights the bond between women and nature (ecofeminism). Injuries to nature are a direct harm to womanhood.

A Chipko woman by the name of Chamundeyi from Nahi Kala said, "The forests are used by us for growing jora, jhangora, chillies, and mandua. It is food for our families and us".⁵ Further a unified singing entered the ears of the hills: "Offer me an oak tree, and I will offer you pots of milk and grain baskets".⁵ The feminine principle is related to food production. It is founded on the idea of a close connection between trees, agriculture, and animals. Women have been said to play a key role in maintaining this link.



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A hidden story lies behind the origin of the popular Chipko Movement. In 1730, members of the Bishnoi community from the Khejarli village in Rajasthan, under the leadership of Amrita Devi, blocked the path of the king's men. The King of Jodhpur had sent his men to cut the Khejri trees (*Prosopis cineraria*) for lime burning during palace construction. The brave ecofeminist and 363 villagers died in the conflict to save the trees. On hearing of the loss of lives, the king felt sorry for his actions and withdrew his plan to chop down more trees in the near future.⁶

The Chipko Movement saw a revival of women's power and their concern for the Himalayan ecology. It is important that we know their lesser-known names. Bachni Devi, Gaura Devi, Mira Behn, Bimala Behn, Hima Devi, Sarala Behn, Suraksha Devi, Viruksha Devi, Sudesha Devi, Gunga Devi, Itwari Devi, and Chamun Devi—these were the real change makers who conserved the organic food system by protecting the water, soil, trees, cattle and genetic diversity.⁵

The movement was based on the Gandhian philosophy of non-violence. It not only included voices that spoke against environmental harm but also those that stood up against power, caste and gender disparity. In 1987, the Chipko Movement was awarded the Right Livelihood Award, or the alternative Nobel Prize.¹

Sunderlal Bahuguna, a prominent male activist during the Chipko movement, said, "Men are the messengers, women are the actual leaders".⁷

At the beginning of the 1980s, the prime minister of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, issued a 15-year ban on the cutting of trees located at 1,000 m above sea level in the Himalayan forests.⁸ Thus, the Chipko Movement emerged as a source of moral and ecological conscience among the locals as well as the rest of the world.

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