Ecology is Permanent Economy

An Examination of 'Environmentalism of the Poor' and the Chipko Movement

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Right
I will not stop cutting down trees
Though there is life in them
I will not stop plucking out leaves,
Though they will make nature beautiful
I will not stop hacking off branches,
Though they are the arms of a tree
Because-
I need a hut

Cherabandaraju
(translated from Telugu by C.V. Subbarao)

Introduction

The forests of India are a critical resource for the subsistence of rural peoples throughout the country, but especially in hill and mountain areas, both because of their direct provision of food, fuel and fodder and because of their role in stabilizing ecosystems. In the 1970s, an anti-deforestation movement arose is the Uttar Pradesh region of the Himalayas which has become know as the 'Chipko' Movement.

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Translated from Hindi, chipko means "embrace," and many have taken it to mean "tree-hugger." Rooted in this movement was the invigoration of the poorer classes and castes to protect trees and land that they valued for their livelihood. This paper will serve to answer the question: was the Chipko movement based on a desire to save the natural ecology of the Himalayas, as it is hailed to be by many environmentalists, or a desire to maintain the economy that the natural environment created? First, it will place the Chipko movement in the broader context of the global struggle against the capitalist overtaking of forests, which created class tension over the past three centuries. Next, it will examine the Chipko movement itself, giving particular thought to three crucial agitations that occurred during the movement. An examination of women's role in the Chipko movement will be followed by a discussion of the long-term effects of the movement as well as the current state of 'environmentalism of the poor' in India. Finally, it will conclude with a brief case study of ecological refugees, one of the main long-term effects of environmental destruction and deforestation, and the human displacement that results**.** This paper will argue that the reasons behind women's participation in the Chipko movement are more economic than ecological and will, therefore, bring into question the validity of this as the first "tree huggers" movement broader global environmentalism. It seems as though the Chipko Andolan was successful in mobilizing for short-term action, but has failed in addressing long-term issues related to the deforestation of India's natural resources, which many poor people still continue to rely on for their livelihoods.

Since the early seventies a wave of social movements has swept Uttarakhand, the region embracing the 'eight hill district' of the state of Uttar Pradesh.[1] Lying within the Himalayas, this region rises quickly to an average elevation of 7000 feet (2300 meters). The inner hills reach a hundred kilometres to the north, culminating in snowy peaks that are the highest in the world. The hills are criss-crossed by river valleys and ravines. At the bottom of each valley, a river flows along side narrow strips of fertile land. Steeply sloping hills, rising up to 9000 feet (3000 meters), create the backdrop for the river valleys.[2] Prior to the reservation of forests and the subsequent influx of government and commercial control over the forests, hill society could be described as a conglomeration of village communities, with control over the means of production and over the resources needed to sustain itself. In the ecological setting of Uttrakhand, forest management struck at the very root of traditional social and economic organization.[3] As the agriculture of the Indo-Gangetic plain depends heavily on a guaranteed supply of water from the rivers that originate in the Himalaya, the stabilization of

Uttarakhand ecology and society has far wider implications. Himalayan deforestation is by now widely acknowledged as India's gravest environmental problem.[4]

Forests in India, Forests in the World

> The first lesson is that the main source of environmental destruction in the world is the demand for natural resources generated by the consumption of the rich (whether they are rich nations or rich individuals and groups within nations)… The second lesson is that it is the poor who are affected the most by environmental destruction.
>
> *Indian journalist, Anil Agarwal, 1986*

According to Ramachandra Guha , the relationship between colonialism and ecological decline is one neglected by most historians of modern India who have focused more on the social and political consequences of colonial rule.[5] However, in Uttarakhand, by far the most important consequence of colonial rule was the system of commercial forestry it introduced.[6] The slow but steady growth of state forestry in Europe in the 19th century and the enclosure of communal forests by large landowners substituted a restricted, highly controlled and imposed system for one that was based on community interaction, the dispersal of responsibility among community members, and collective agreement.[7] As in Uttarakhand, this transition was neither smooth nor harmonious, with the peasantry protesting bitterly at the deprivation of their traditional rights of access and use.[8] In other parts of Europe as well, the battle for the forest was a central feature of the larger confrontation between an advancing capitalism and the peasant community.[9] As Marx put it, the conversion of land that was normally utilized by the poor to collect wood or harvest food- a 'customary right of the poor'- was transformed into a 'monopoly of the rich'.[10] In India, the reliance of the hill peasants on forest resources was institutionalized through a diversity of social and cultural mechanisms; through religion, folklore and tradition the village communities had drawn a protective ring around the forests.[11] In many parts of India, forests are closely interwoven with material life, and therefore cultural restraints on resource utilization are observed. Thus, in tribal India even today, some have commented that it is striking to see how in many of the myths and legends the deep sense of identity with the forest is emphasized.[12]

Chipko, which lasted from 1973 to 1980, is itself only part of a much longer history of resistance and protest both on a global scale

and also within the Indian context. Guha argues that the Chipko is the last in a long series of peasant movements against commercial forestry which date from the earliest days of state intervention, i.e. the closing decades of the nineteenth century.[13] But it was the Chipko movement which was left to awaken local knowledge of the hill peasantry's[14] latest and most sustained challenge to commercial forestry.[15]

The Chipko Movement

> "The blood of the villages is the cement by which the edifice of the cities is built."
>
> *-Mahatma Gandhi*

India's ecological history has been often turbid, with frequent floods and droughts greatly affecting the lifestyles and livelihoods of hill peasantry. The 1970 flood in the Himalayas marked a turning point in the ecological history of the region. Locals realised that the deforestation that had occurred in the years up to 1970 was the root of the massive flooding, subsequent loss of homes and agricultural land, and displacement of human and bovine life.[16] This realization among the hill peasantry led to the Chipko movement, which aimed to diminish deforestation and the exportation of logs.[17] Over a dozen agitations occurred across the Uttar Pradesh region during the Chipko movement as it spread from community to community.[18] In all of the agitations, classic non-cooperation techniques, called *satyagraha,* were adopted, and there was no question of any violence used ('*himsa ka koi saval nahin tha*').[19] Three of these agitations are particularly notable in relation to the themes of this paper. The first is the agitation at Mandal which is considered to be the birth of the Chipko movement.[20] In early 1973, a forestry company, Symonds Co., was given priority over a community collective organization, the Dashauli Gram Swarajya Sangh (DGSS), to gain access to ash trees in the forest of Mandal. DGSS saw two options present themselves: (i) to lie down in front of the timber trucks; or (ii) to burn resin and timber depots as was done in the Quit India movement.[21] When DGSS members found both methods unsatisfactory, Chadi Prasad Bhatt, a leading local activist, thought of embracing trees. Thus 'Chipko' (to embrace) was borne. The villagers of Mandal resolved to hug the trees even if they risked being split by axes; young men even cemented this oath with signatures of blood.[22] After continued and sustained protest in the form of 'tree-hugging', the labour and agents of Symonds Co. were forced to turn away from Mandal without felling a single tree.

The second agitation of significance occurred in the Pindar valley, near the village of Dungri-Paintoli.[23] Here the men of the village wanted to sell their oak forest to the horticultural department, which intended to establish a potato farm on the land; if the forest, the only good one for miles around, had been cut, the women would have had to walk a great distance every day to collect fuel and fodder. When the women voiced their opposition, it went unheeded. At this juncture, Chipko activists intervened and, helped by the district administration, ensured that the forest area remaining was saved. The significance of the Dungri-Paintoli lies in the open conflict of interest between the men and women of the village. Lured by promises of better communications and other 'modern' facilities, the men hoped to acquire a quick source of income. The women, for their part, "raised some fundamental questions challenging the system. In their opinion, agriculture and animal rearing was entirely dependent upon them, both closely related to the forest, and yet they were not consulted with regard to any [decisions] taken relating to forestry."[24]

The third agitation of significance to this paper occurred at Reni and was the moment in the movement when women came forward to unexpectedly prevent forest felling in the absence of men.[25] The men of Reni and surrounding communities were lured away to Chamoli by the government's offer to grant them overdue compensation for lands appropriated by the Chinese in the 1962 Indo-China War. With the men out of the way, the lumbermen proceeded to the forest. A small girl from the village spotted them and rushed to Gaura Devi, the head of the village Mahila Mandal (Women's Club), who quickly rounded up the women from the village and headed to the forest. Pleading with the labourers not to start felling operations, the women initially met with abuse and threats. When the women refused to budge, the men were eventually forced to retire. This agitation revealed to important aspects of the Chipko movement. First, most of the environmental resource conflicts have pitted rich against poor (i.e. logging companies against hill villagers). In the Chipko Andolan, one party (i.e. loggers) seeks to quicken the pace of resource exploitation to service an expanding commercial-industrial capitalist economy, a process which often involves the partial or total dispossession of those communities who earlier had control over the resource in question, and whose own patterns of utilization were (and are) less destructive to the environment.[26] More often than not, the agents of resource-intensification are given preferential treatment by the state, as in the Reni example where village men were lured away consciously by the government through a promise of compensation in order to make forest

access easier for the logging company. With the injustice so compounded, local communities at the receiving end of this process have no recourse except direct action, resisting both the state and the outside exploiters through a variety of protest techniques, including 'tree hugging'. These struggles might perhaps be seen as the manifestations of a new kind of class struggle.[27] Where traditional class conflicts were fought in the cultivated field or in the factory, these new struggles are waged over gifts of nature such as forests and water, gifts that are coveted by all but increasingly monopolized by a few.

The second aspect of the Chipko movement that is clearly revealed in the Reni agitation is the role that women played within the movement. Despite the important role played by women, it would be simplistic to characterize Chipko as a 'feminist' movement. In several instances, especially the early mobilizations at Mandal, it was men who took the initiative in protecting forests. Many portray the Chipko as the first incidence of female peasantry mobilization in India based on a profound sense of responsibility and connection with the natural environment. However, Indian women's role in the Chipko movement was based greatly on a fear of lost income and instability for their families and communities more than on ecological integrity.

Women's Role in the Chipko Movement

> We have risen, we are awake; No longer will thiefs rule our destiny
> It is our home, our forests; No longer will the others decide for us
>
> Soil ours, water ours, ours are these forests too
> Our forefathers raised these, it is we who must protect these too
>
> Soil has been sold, water sold, our forests too have been sold off
> Hands bare, stomachs empty, we have no shelter to stay
>
> *Dhan Singh Rana "Adivasi", village Lata (Chamoli Garhwal)*

In Uttarakhand, the participation of women in popular movements dates from the anti-alcohol agitations led by Sarvodaya workers in the 1960s.[28] As Ramachandra Guha argues the Chipko movement, the most celebrated 'environmental' movement in the world, is viewed by its participants as being primarily a peasant movement in defence of traditional forest rights, and only secondarily, if at all, an 'environmental' or 'feminist' movement.[29] Some scholars have argued that national and international media assimilated the movement into the modern discourses of feminism, environmentalism, and the revival of Gandhism, while glossing over the local roots of the Chipko, and its roots in the

specific cultural and historical experiences of the Uttarakhand peasantry.[30] The specific historical and cultural experiences of the Uttarakhand peasantry are also essential in discussing the female peasantry's role in the movement.[31] The reasons behind women's participation in the movement are more economic than ecological. Guha and Martinez argue that the female peasantry "were not interested in saving the trees *per se*, but in using their produce for agricultural and household requirements."[32]

Guha argues that, in India, women play an uncommonly important role in hill agriculture.[33] In the difficult terrain of the Himalayas no single economic activity can sustain the household; so, typically, there is a larger plethora of economic pursuits including cultivation, cattle rearing, outside employment, and perhaps some trade. This diverse set of economic activities requires the equal participation of women. Thus,

> The women of the house are also equal partners in the struggle to achieve economic security. Their labour is in no way less valued than that of the male members. They work equally with men in the fields, help them in looking after domestic animals and, of course, take physical care of husband and children. Except ploughing, a wife does virtually everything to help her husband in cultivating, which [else where] are the men's task.[34]

This points clearly to the notion that women play a vital role in cultivation and agriculture in inhospitable or infertile environments such as the Himalayas. It is necessary to point out, as Chandra 1981 does, that apart from their contribution to the tasks of cultivation, women are exclusively responsible for household chores, the rearing of children, and the collection of fuel, fodder and water. Undoubtedly, the hill women have traditionally borne an extraordinarily high share of family labour- and their participation in the Chipko movement may be read as an outcome of the increasing difficulty with which these tasks have been accomplished in the deteriorating environment.[35] Interestingly, Chandi Prasad Bhatt, a strong leader in the Chipko movement and the thinker behind 'tree-hugging', has stated that women are capable of playing a more dynamic role in the movement than the men who, in the face of growing commercialization and an expanding capitalist economy, are gradually losing sight of the long-term interests of the village economy.[36]

In essence, conservation is at best an underlying element in the action of the women. What they were articulating more strongly was

their 'right to use'. The issue therefore may be characterized as a competition regarding the rights of use; in this case the competition was between the state approved contractors and the community. It is not as if the women were fighting so that the trees remained untouched. In fact it is they themselves who had a need for these trees, as a source of firewood for their hearths and for the leaves as fodder. Their basis for fighting was economic. Their desire to provide economic security to their families and communities led them to the Chipko Andolan. Guha and Martinez argue that the "Chipko movement was the forerunner of and in some cases the direct inspiration for a series of popular movements in defence of community rights to natural resources."[37]

The Road Ahead: the long-term effects and future challenges of 'environmentalism of the poor'

Forming the link between forests and humans, Chipko has contributed to a heightened awareness in ecological consciousness, or 'cognisance of the environment' as Sakar and Dasgupta refer to it.[38] Chipko aimed at halting the growing separation of humans from nature, a separation with potentially damaging consequences. People became more aware of their ecological surroundings through the movement and today are aware of issues such as the importance of forest cover in regulating soil and water regimes.[39] The Chipko movement has served to create a community solidarity surrounding ecological consciousness and integrity. While the last Chipko agitation in Uttarakhand occurred in 1980, the movement's activists have continued to propagate its message throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s. Foot marches and environmental camps were organized at regular intervals and members of the movement made a significant attempt to contribute to the environmental debate in India and abroad.[40]

In 1981, the government agreed to allow a fifteen–year moratorium on commercial felling in the Uttarakhand Himalayas.[41] Chipko was able to bring commercial forestry to a standstill, but only for a determined amount of time. The current pulls towards economic liberalization and globalization have created a shift in the forest policy of the Indian government. India's government has moved towards an open liberalized economic model which prizes forest export.[42] It is also important to emphasize that state forestry is by no means the only threat to the ecological and social stability of the hills as the past three decades have witnessed a rapid expansion of the number of large-scale dams, increased mining operations, and a spread of alcoholism. Movements against all these issues have been organized and lead by the Chipko movement as it continued to mobilize the Himalayan peasantry.[43]

Although the Chipko movement had obvious success and continued to be active through the 1980s and 1990s, it seems as though it has failed in addressing long-term issues related to the deforestation of India's natural resources. The Chipko movement has attracted wide attention, as has the chain of events which has come in its wake such as the eroding basis of subsistence agriculture and large-scale outward migration from Uttarakhand.[44] Since the end of the Chipko movement, subsistence agriculture has progressively met with the pressures of large-scale, monocrop agriculture. One of the major negative outcomes of environmental degradation is the large-scale outward migration of human life that it causes. In order to escape deforestation and the scarcity of natural resources due to over consumption, people flee to the cities in search of better access to food, water, and employment to maintain a basic livelihood. Guha and Martinez define these displaced persons as ecological refugees.[45]

Ecological Refugees

Ecological refugees are "peasants-turned-slum dwellers who eke out a living in the cities on the leavings of omnivore prosperity."[46]
These hill peasants have flocked to the cities, to which the state has channelled resources, from all over the country. But ecological refugees do not and can not become partners in sharing the generosity of natural resources. As Eduardo Galeano has written of their counterparts in Latin America, the ecological refugees of Indian cities "sell newspapers they cannot read, sew clothes they cannot wear, polish cars they will never own and construct buildings where they will never live."[47] But these displaced persons feel that they are still better off in city slums than they are in their home villages, with marginal access to potable water and opportunities to gain income. The city itself has a maximum population which it can sustain, and with increasing numbers of 'ecological refugees' flocking to the cities in search of economically productive activities that simply do not exist, the city is reaching its natural limits.[48]

The Indian state is losing its ability to deal with the demands of the ecological 'omviores' (the rich city-dwellers) as well as the demands of 'ecological refugees'. So it is asking for resources from abroad- but the global omnivores- the World Bank, IMF and multinational corporations- would not make such resources available for nothing. The Indian government, in its movement towards economic liberalization and globalization, has conceded to these demands, exposing India's high-cost, low-quality economy to traumatic competition from

abroad. Ecosystem people and ecological refugees are protesting, and these protests are becoming more apparent. To the liberal economist's clamour for *efficiency*, these protests have counter posed the equally compelling slogans of *ecology* and *equity*. And so starts a new movement, born of a reaction to ecological destruction and a desire for economic security. While ecological refugees continue to flock to city slums and protest against their lot in life, some scholars are looking towards new development in "environmental peacemaking" to start a healing process between the elite, government, hill peasantry and the environment.[49]

Conclusion

> 'knowledge of the people, by the people, for the people'
>
> – *Gadgil and Guha*[50]

Locating Chipko culturally and historically provides an overdue corrective to the popular notion of Chipko, which is that of an idealistic reunion of humans, especially women, with nature.[51] The role of female hill peasantry in the movement was one based on economics rather than a romantic connection to nature, as many elites and environmentalists, both within India and abroad, make it out to be. The women were not averse to cutting down trees; they were just concerned about who was able to use those trees, which they need to provide warmth, food, and fodder to their families. Their desire to participate emerged from a sense of economic insecurity through the threat that logging companies posed within the ever-expanding global capitalist economy. The Chipko Andolan provided hill peasants with an increased ecological understanding rooted in a deeper connection with the environment and with their communities. However, the movement has not been able to overpower the might of an increasingly liberalized economy based on the export of primary resources. In the face of globalization, the Chipko movement has collapsed. However, according to Sawhney, there is a new face of environmental management in India emerging, rooted in a more significant input from public and community actions.[52] There is hope that government policy will again, as it did in 1981 when it placed a fifteen–year moratorium on commercial felling in the Uttarakhand Himalaya, embrace 'knowledge of the people, by the people, for the people'. This is one more battle in the ongoing struggle between 'the people' and the capitalist economy.

Notes

[1] These eight districts are Pauri, Chamoli, Tehri, Uttarkashi, and Dehardun (which collectively constitute 'Garhwal'); and Almora, Pithoragarh and Nainital (which constitute 'Kumaun'). Ramachandra Guha, *The Unquiet Woods* (New Dehli: Oxford University Press, 1989) 9-10.

[2] Guha, 9-10. Guha (1989) argues, and I agree, that when undertaking a study of an issue related to ecology, one must have a general understanding of the ecology of the region in question. Therefore, a greater description of Himalayan ecology can be found in Guha (1989), pages 180 to 190 and Madhav Gadgil & Ramachandra Guha *Ecology and Equity.* (New Dehli: Penguin Books India, 1995) 16-33.

[3] Guha, 185. For further discussion on the traditional uses and folklore of forests in India, refer to Amitbha Sarkar & Samira Dasgupta, *Ethno-Ecology of Indian Tribes* (New Dehli: Rawat Publications, 2000) 111-139.

[4] Guha, xi.

[5] Guha, xiii.

[6] See Richard Grove's *Green Imperialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) for a broader discussion of the effect of British rule on the ecology and economy of India. Also refer to Gadgil and Guha's *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India* (New Dehli: Oxford University Press, 1992) for a detailed discussion of forest management practices under British control and the effect those practices had on post-Independence government policies.

[7] See chapter 4 and 5 of Guha's *The Unquiet Woods* for further discussion on European forest administration and its affect on India's forest administration and management policies and practices.

[8] Guha, 187

[9] Charles Tilly, *The Contentious French* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Publishing, 1986) 214.

[10] Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, *Collected Works, volume 1* (Moscow, 1975), 235.

[11] See Guha (1989), pg. 28-34, for further details on the cultural ecology of the Himalayas.

[12] Michael Dove, *Forest Discourses in South and Southeast Asia: A Comparison with Global Discourses*, (London: Duke University Press, 2003), 103-104.

[13] Guha, xi. See Guha (1989), chapter 4 and 8 for more information on other rebellions such as the Dhandak at Rawain (1930) and the Kisan Andolan (1944-48).

[14] Guha refers to the people mobilized in the Chipko movement as the 'hill peasantry'. I find this to be an accurate descriptive term to use for the mobilized masses, and therefore have taken to using this term in this paper as well.

[15] Guha, 151.

[16] Guha, 156.

[17] Ramachandra Guha, & Joan Martinez-Alier, "The Environmentalism of the Poor" in *Varieties of Environmentalists*, (London: Earthscan, 1997), 3.

[18] See Guha (1989), pages 157-172, for a detailed discussion of the various agitations that occurred during the Chipko Andolan.

[19] Guha, 166.

[20] Guha, 156-157.

[21] The 'Quit India Movement' occurred in 1942 and was an important event of the Indian freedom struggle based in anti-British sentiment that had reached a boiling point. It was embodied in struggles with police, rioting in the streets and peasant rebellion. See Krishnan Bhaskaran *Quit India movement: a people's revolt in Maharashtra* (Himalaya Publishing House, 1999) for further discussion.

[22] Guha, 157.

[23] Guha, 164.

[24] Chandi Prasad Bhatt and S.S. Kunwar, "Hill Women and Their Involvement in Forestry" in SS Kunwar, Dasholi Gram, Swarajya Mandal (eds.) *Hugging the Himalayas: The Chipko Experience* (Gopeshwar, 1982) 84

[25] Guha, 158.

[26] Guha and Martinez, 5.

[27] Guha and Martinez, 5.

[28] Guha, 175.

[29] Guha, xxi. The issue of caste played an important role in the Chipko movement. However, space in this paper did not permit for a discussion of the topic. For further discussion on the role of caste in the Chipko movement see Guha (1989) pages 11 to 14 and Gadgil and Guha (1992), pages 91 to 109.

[30] Guha, xii.

[31] The poor of India, and largely the female poor, reacted to deforestation in the Uttar Pradesh region of the Himalayas through a practice of non-violence called satyagraha, where they interposed their bodies between the trees and the contractor's axes, thus becoming what environmentalists have termed 'tree huggers'.

[32] Guha and Martinez, 5.

[33] Guha, 21-22.

[34] Ramesh Chandra. "Sex Role Arrangements to Achieve Economic Security in Northwest Himalayas", in *Asian Highland Societies in Anthropological Perspective*. C. von Furer Haimendorf ed. (New Delhi: Sterling Press, 1981). 209

[35] Guha, 175.

[36] Guha, 175.

[37] Guha and Martinez, 5.

[38] Amitabha Sakar and Samira Dasgupta, *Ethno-Ecology of Indian Tribes* (New Dehli: Rawat Publications, 2000) 135-136.

[39] Guha, 168.

[40] Guha, 178.

[41] Guha, 178.

[42] According to the US Library of Congress, India's primary sector, including agriculture, forestry, fishing, mining, and quarrying, accounted for 32.8 percent of GDP in 1991 (http://countrystudies.us/india/93.htm, 2005).

[43] Guha, 179.

[44] Guha, xi. This large scale migration has accumulated into the present phenomenon that Guha and Martinez (1997) term ecological refugees. They will be discussed in detail in the next section of this paper, but further information on ecological refugees can be found in Gadgil and Guha (1995).

[45] Guha and Martinez, 12.

[46] Guha and Martinez, 12.

[47] Gadgil and Guha, *Ecology and Equity,* 32.

[48] Gadgil and Guha, *Ecology and Equity,* 33.

[49] Ashok Swain, *Environmental Cooperation in South Asia* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2002) 61-85.

[50] Gadgil and Guha (1995) discuss this idea of 'knowledge of the people' in great detail. Further discussion can be found on pages 133 through 147.

[51] Guha, 173.

[52] Aparna Sawhney (2004) argues that the Indian economy is becoming increasingly reliant on information technology (IT) for its development, rather than traditional industrial sources (133-134). This IT-based development, which is rooted in the service sector, is viewed as being "cleaner" than the "dirty" industrial growth of most developing economies even though the IT sector has its own environmental downfalls.