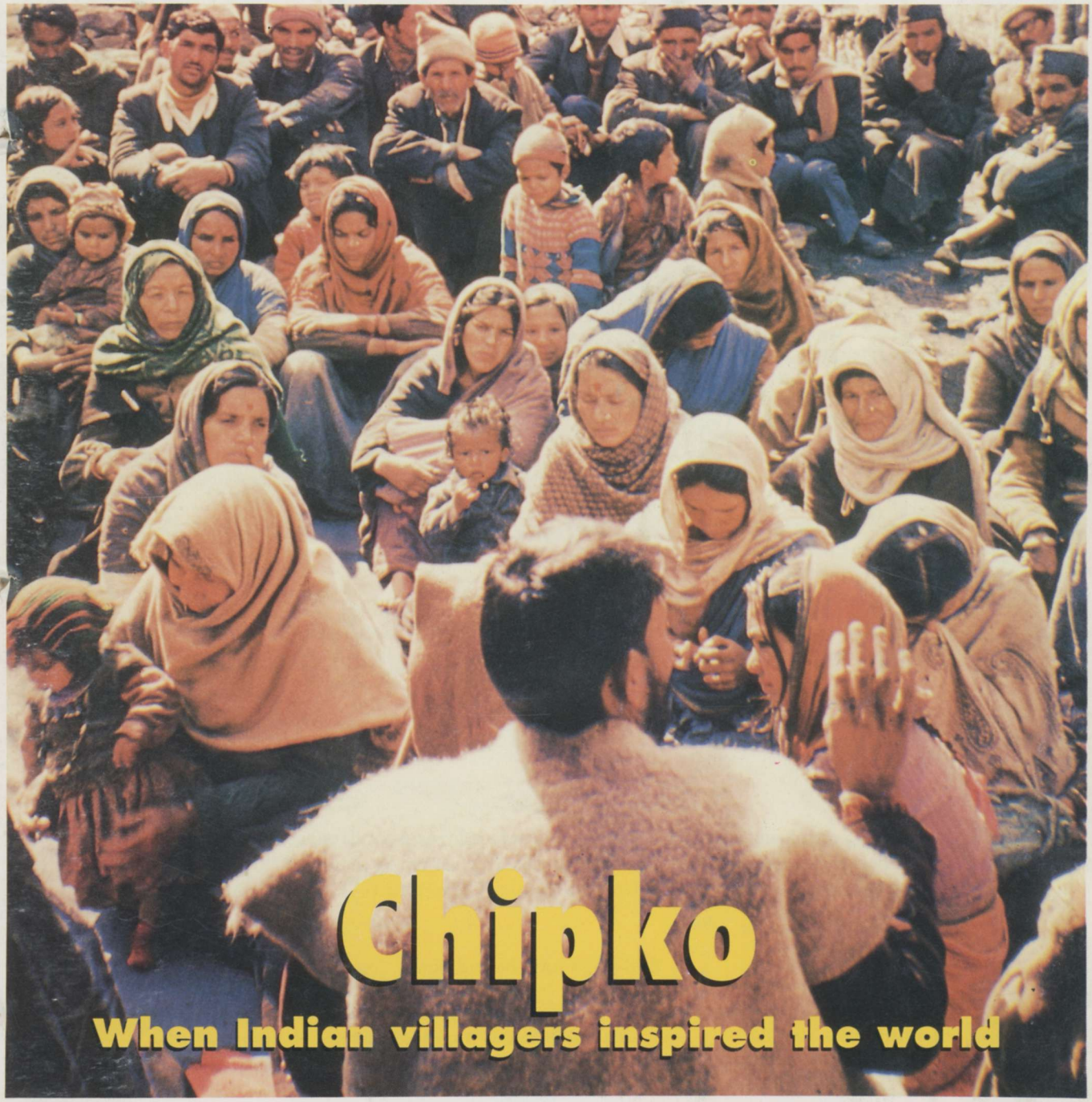
SCIENCE AND ENVIRONMENT FORTNIGHTLY

Down To Earth

APRIL 30, 1993



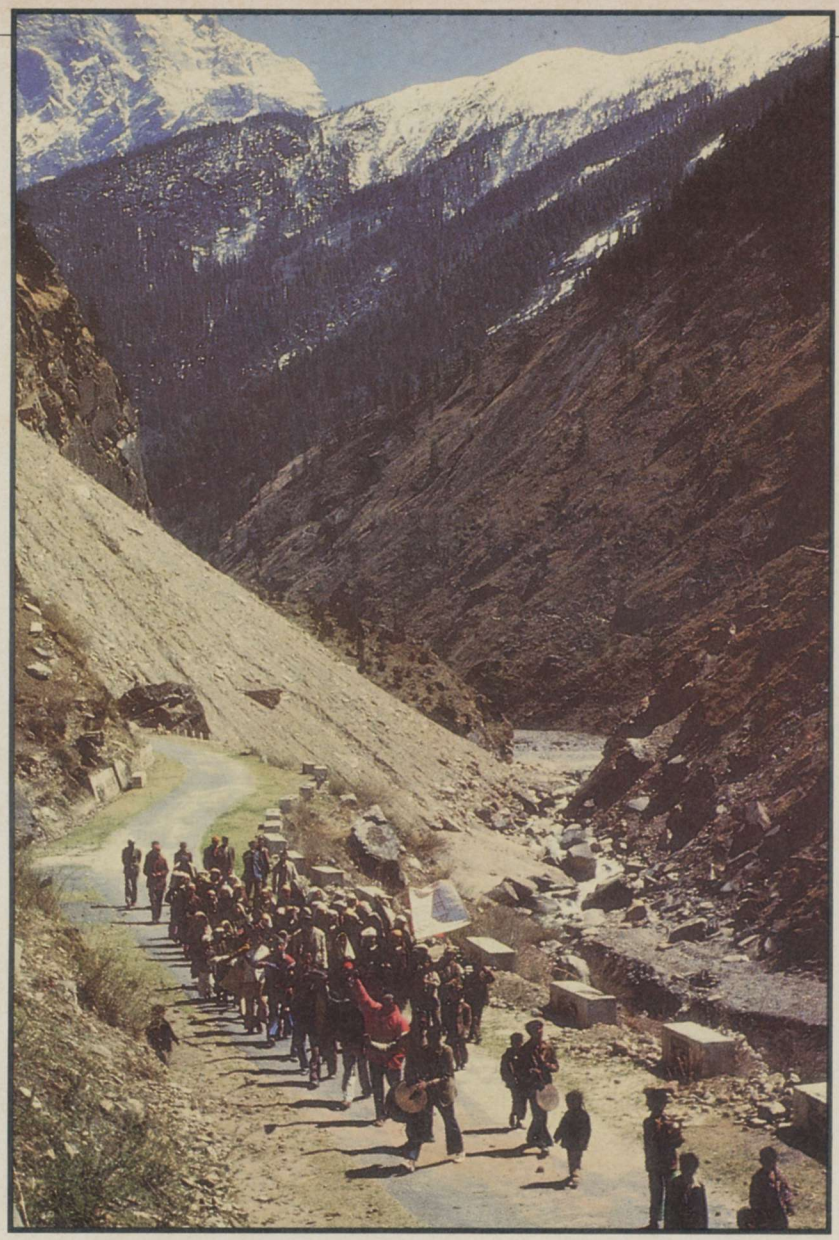
Chipko

When Indian villagers inspired the world

India says no to World Bank on Narmada

USA may relax its position on global warming

Wood industry covets forest plantations



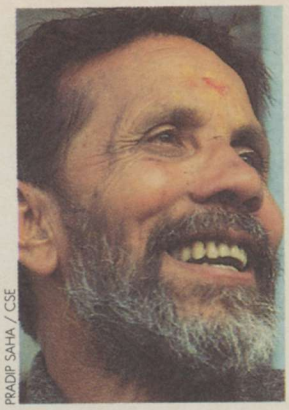
Chipko

AN UNFINISHED MISSION

In 20 years, Chipko has acquired many facets — a conservation endeavour by the poor, a struggle for local control of natural resources and an effort by women to protect their environment. Chipko influenced the world, but have its local objectives been met? **Amit Mitra** toured the districts of Garhwal and Kumaon and met the people behind Chipko and those whose lives it has touched. He traces the origins and the spread of Chipko and assesses its contributions, its discord and its standing today. In the *Crosscurrents* section on page 45, five Chipko observers, some of whom have been linked with the movement, present their views and on page 50, a Chipko heroine, Gayatri Devi recounts the hard days.

"NO WOMAN ever had to hug a tree to protect it," says Chandi Prasad Bhatt, the founder of Chipko. "It was not necessary to do so, for the mere threat was enough." The concept of hugging a tree to defend it was so powerful, it brought in a new consciousness to the country and put environment at its centre.

Chipko — "to hug" in Hindi — today evokes romantic images of poor, village women in the hills of northern India determinedly hugging trees to prevent them from being cut down by the very axes of forest contractors that were also a threat to their lives. But Chipko's multi-faceted identity has given it a different meaning to different people. For some, it is an extraordinary conservation movement of the poor; for others, it is a local people's movement to regain control of their natural resources, snatched away first by a colonial power and then by the free government of India, and, finally, it is a movement of women trying to save their environment with a message to loggers: "Our lives before our trees" In fact, as a women's movement, it inspired ecofeminism in India and, to some extent, throughout the world.



PRADIP SAHA / CSE

The founder: Chandi Prasad Bhatt.

The volume of literature Chipko generated is enormous, but, today, 20 years after its birth, questions remain: What has been its impact locally, nationally and internationally? Did it achieve its objectives or were its gains only intellectual, with few benefits for the villagers?

The struggle

Chipko's first battle took place in early 1973 in Chamoli district, when the villagers of Mandal, led by Bhatt and the Dasholi Gram Swarajya Mandal (DGSM), prevented the Allahabad-based sports goods company, Symonds, from felling 14 ash trees. This act took place on April 24 and, in December, the villagers again stopped Symonds agents from felling in the Phata-Rampur forests, about 60 km from Gopeshwar.

In 1974, the forest department marked trees for felling in the Peng Murenda forest, near Reni village in Joshimath block, which had been badly affected by the massive Alaknanda flood of 1970. More than 680 ha were auctioned for Rs 4.7 lakh to Jagmohan Bhalla, a contractor from Rishikesh. But the women of Reni drove out the contractor's labourers on March 26, 1974 (See box). This was a turning point for Chipko, as it marked the first time the initiative was taken by women, especially when their menfolk were not around. The Reni incident also prompted the state government to set up a nine-member committee, chaired by Delhi botanist Virendra Kumar and whose members included government officials; the local MLA, Govind Singh Negi of the Communist Party of India (CPI); Bhatt, and Govind Singh Rawat, the block *pramukh* of Joshimath. The committee's report, submitted after two years, led to a 10-year ban on commercial forestry in Reni and in nearly 1,200 sq km of the upper catchment of the Alaknanda. The ban was extended for 10 years in 1985.

Another response to Chipko was the formation of a Van Nigam, a state-owned forest corporation, in 1975 to take over all forms of forest exploitation from private contractors. "It was generally believed," says Surendra Bhatt, a veteran Sarvodaya worker of Uttarkashi, "the government would not be as ruthless and corrupt as private contractors in exploiting forest resources." But this belief was unjustified for many agitations were targeted in time against Van Nigam.

The protests spread

Meanwhile, other protests were staged in the Uttarakhand region. In 1974, a struggle was launched on July 25 — and reached its peak in October — by villagers from the Vyali forest area near Uttarkashi, seeking to halt tree-felling. In Kumaon, Chipko made its debut at the Nainadevi fair in Nainital in 1974, and activists proceeded to block forest auctions at several places, including Nainital, Ramnagar and Kotdwar. The movement in Kumaon gathered momentum following major landslides at Tawaghat in 1977 and student activists successfully blocked the auction at Shailley Hall in Nainital on October 6, 1977 On November 28, another protest by students was forcibly dispersed by the police and many of the activists were arrested. The Nainital Club was set ablaze and this led the police to open fire. Says poet Girish Tiwari "Girda", whose folk songs inspired Chipko rallies, "In 1942, during the Independence movement, the British fired two rounds in Nainital. Since then, there had never been any firing in Nainital."

The heady days: Chandi Prasad Bhatt addressing villagers at Reni.

YOGESHVAR KUMAR

PRADIP SAHA / CSE

Women storing fodder: Chipko fostered the realisation that people are an integral part of the environment.

In Tehri Garhwal, meanwhile, Chipko activists led by Sunderlal Bahuguna began organising villagers in May 1977 to oppose tree-felling in the Henwal valley. They resorted to direct action in December 1977 to protect the Advani and Salet forests and in March the following year, 23 volunteers, including women, were arrested for opposing a forest auction at Narendranagar. "The struggle in Henwal," recalls Pratap Shikhar, "marked the transformation of Chipko from an economic struggle to a fight for conservation." The agitation to save the Badyargarh forests gained momentum after the jailing of Bahuguna, who began a hunger strike on January 9, 1979.

Chipko resumed activities in Chamoli during 1977-78, with the women from Pulna stopping the felling of forests in Bhyunder valley. Similar protests were staged in Doongri-Paintoli in 1980, and in Bacher, as late as 1984-85. "But by then, the Chipko protests were breathing their last," says Sudarshan Kathait of Gopeshwar, who was actively involved in the Chanchridhar struggle (See box). "After early gains, Bhatt began to spend more time on plantation work, eco-development camps and organising women into Mahila Mangal Dals (MMDs). Bahuguna did not believe at that time in plantations, though he is currently involved in promoting afforestation."

After Bahuguna met British forester Richard St. Barbe

Landmarks on the Chipko trail

1973

- Chipko is born when villagers of Mandal, near Gopeshwar, led by Chandi Prasad Bhatt and the Dasholi Gram Swarajya Mandal, stop contractors of an Allahabad-based sports goods company, Symonds, from felling 14 ash trees on April 24.
- In December, villagers again stop Symonds agents at the Phata-Rampur forests, about 60 km from Gopeshwar.

1974

- Women of Reni, led by Gaura Devi, prevent agents of a Rishikesh contractor, Jagmohan Bhalla, from entering the Peng Murenda forest on March 26.
- On May 25, student leaders Shamser Singh Bist, Shekhar Pathak, Kumar Prasun and Pratap Shikhar lead a youth group on a 44-day march from Askot near the Indo-Nepalese border to Arakot in Himachal Pradesh, to draw attention to the pitiable conditions of forest labourers, to the need to protect trees from exploitation by outsiders and to set up industries locally.
- Villagers around the Vyali forest near Uttarkashi, led by Communist Party of India leader Kamlaram Nautiyal, who heads the Uttarkashi municipality now, stop trees from being felled between July and October.

1974

- Chipko is introduced in the Kumaon region with forest auctions being opposed by the Parvatiya Van Bachao Sangharsh Samity, a youth organisation. The arrest of 18 youths, including Bist and socialist leader Bipin Tripathi, at a Nainital protest provokes demonstrations throughout Kumaon.

1977

- Landslides in Tawaghat near the Indo-Nepalese border kill 45 persons and 75 cattle. Protests against auctions are intensified by activists of the newly formed Uttarakhand Sangharsh Vahini, with which Bhatt is associated.
- The first forest auction at Shailley Hall in Nainital on October 6 is postponed.
- A second attempt to hold the auction on November 28 sparks a demonstration and several arrests are made. Miscreants set Nainital Club ablaze and police firing injures 25 persons, including children.
- Chipko activists organise villagers in Tehri Garhwal to protest felling in Henwal valley and the Advani and Salet forests in December Dhoom Singh Negi, a student leader of Jajal, symbolically hugs five trees in Salet, but each time he is pushed away by the contractor's men.

Chipko calls: Beating drums summoned people to a meeting.

From *van bachao* to *ped kato*: Bipin Tripathi.

Vyali *gherao*: CPI members oppose tree-auction in 1974.

Shailley Hall: Forest auctions were held there in the 1970s.

Kalavati Devi: Opposing the Van Nigam in Bacher in the mid-1980s.

1977-78

- Women of Pulna village in Bhyunder valley block tree-felling.
- A 40-day struggle led by Bipin Tripathi begins on January 21 in the Chanchridhar forest near Dwarahat, an area exploited since the 1950s by the Saharanpur-based Star Paper Mill.
- Volunteers are arrested on March 23 for opposing a forest auction at Narendranagar in Tehri Garhwal.
- Protests are staged against felling in the Badyargarh forests in Tehri on December 25.

1979

- Sunderlal Bahuguna begins a hunger strike on January 9 to protest proposed felling in Badyargarh.
- Contractors withdraw from Badyargarh and Bahuguna is released from jail on January 31.

1980

- Women from Doongri-Paintoli prevent the state horticulture department from felling an oak forest so as to start a farm.

1981

- In April, Bahuguna begins another fast, demanding a complete ban on green felling above 1,000 m in the Himalaya. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi sets up an expert committee and its report leads to a 15-year moratorium on commercial felling in the Uttarakhand Himalaya.

1984-85

- Women from Bacher, near Gopeshwar, wanting to prevent soil erosion and protect their sources of firewood, stop the Van Nigam (forest corporation) from felling dead trees in neighbouring forests.

YOGESHWAR KUMAR

Forest devastation in Bhyunder spurred the rising tide of protest in 1977.

Baker in 1977, he became an ardent conservationist and in April 1981, he went on an indefinite fast in support of his demand for a total ban on felling in the Himalaya above 1,000 m. Indira Gandhi, who was prime minister then, set up an eight-member expert committee to look into the matter. Although the committee exonerated the forest department and its sustained yield forestry policy, the government instituted a 15-year moratorium on commercial felling in the Uttarakhand Himalaya.

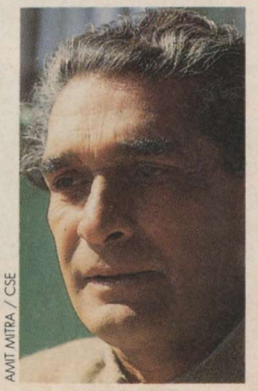
Long before the moratorium, however, it had become clear that Chipko had significantly slowed the march of commercial forestry: The output of major forest produce from the eight hill districts declined from more than 62,000 cubic metres in 1971 to 40,000 cum in 1981.

A history of protests

According to social historian Ramachandra Guha, author of *The Unquiet Woods*, Chipko is the latest in a long series of peasant protests going back to the turn of the century, against commercial forestry in the Uttar Pradesh Himalaya. In 1916, British officials were nonplussed at the "deliberate and organised incendiarism" by the people of Kumaon to the opening up of forests to commercial exploitation, but that also deprived the people of their traditional rights. The 1916 agitation, which began as a general strike against *utar* (forced labour) and then became a systematic campaign in which *chir* (pine) forests were burnt down all over Kumaon, especially in Almora, led to the formation in 1921 of the Kumaon forest grievances committee.

In Garhwal, a protest that is still remembered is the one the local people refer to as the infamous Tilari *kand* (incident). On May 30, 1930, a massive satyagraha was held at Tilari against the forestry policies of Tehri Garhwal state, which were similar to those introduced by the British in the rest of Uttarakhand. The maharaja of Tehri was in Europe and his prime minister, Chakradhar Juyal, crushed the Tilari protest in a replay of the Jallianwala Bagh incident. Soldiers shot down unarmed people, including children, and many drowned in the Yamuna while trying to flee.

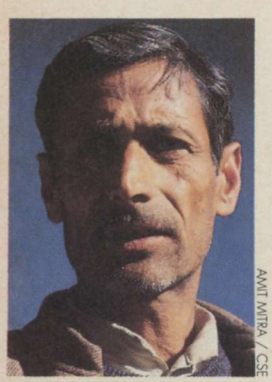
Girish Tiwari: Singing to inspire people.



AMIT MITRA / CSE

Protests over forest policies deemed inimical to local needs continued after Independence. The 1962 Indo-Chinese war opened up border areas to development. An extensive network of roads ran deep into the hills, literally opening the way for a wave of forest officials and contractors. Most of the labourers were recruited from outside the region and their work triggered landslides, soil erosion and irreversible damage to watersheds. The local villagers got nothing except damage to their environment.

The DGSM was formed in 1964 in Gopeshwar by Bhatt. With the blessing of the Sarvodaya movement, it worked to promote Vinobha Bhave's concepts of *gramdan* and of a non-violent, self-reliant, village society based on rural industries. DGSM became involved in anti-liquor campaigns, in the construction of roads, including one running through Gopeshwar, and in setting up a resin factory and a saw mill there. However, DGSM's attempts at cottage industry-scale development ended disastrously in the face of competition from established firms and the forest department's preference to supply forest raw material to outside industrialists than to local, cottage industries.



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J P Nautiyal: Barred from felling trees.

The Sarvodaya campaign against alcohol provided a platform for women, but increasingly it was the conflict between local and outside contractors over forest exploitation that became the rallying point for popular protest during the 1960s. At a memorial meeting in Tilari in 1968, the people in Garhwal renewed their resolve to fight for forest rights. The Alaknanda floods of 1970 gave further impetus to the protests against outside contractors, which peaked in 1972 with demonstrations in Purola on December 11, in Uttarkashi on December 12 and in Gopeshwar on December 15.

These demonstrations failed to move the government and local activists began to look for new ways to protest. In its first phase, Chipko sought to force the government to end its preference for big, outside forest contractors and instead award contracts in small lots to local labour cooperatives. It wanted an end to the export of raw material from the region and to start local forest-based industries. Chipko aimed at ushering in forest management policies that would meet the needs of the local villagers.

CPI election pamphlets distributed in the region in 1962 and 1967 made the same demands. "Chipko was not a conservation movement, as it is presently projected," says P C Tiwari, an Almora lawyer and a former Chipko activist. "Bahuguna, too, favoured granting the local people the right to fell trees for commercial exploitation. On April 4, 1977, he performed a ceremony to worship the axe, the major instrument of survival of the forest labourer. He was not a conservationist then."

Kathait agrees, saying, "Chipko was primarily an economic struggle. Environment and ecology were attributed to it later and Bahuguna started projecting it as a conservation campaign. The local people wanted their economic survival first." It's a matter of regret, adds Kathait, that Bhatt is now toeing the Bahuguna line.

PRADIP SAHA / CSE

Continuing commercial logging at Tapoban in Chamoli district makes the message of Chipko as relevant and pressing today as it was two decades ago.

YOGESHWAR KUMAR

A procession of Bhotia women in 1977: The movement ushered in the age of eco-feminism.

C P BHATT

Panel meets: Under popular pressure, the state appointed a committee in 1974 to look into the problem of deforestation.

ANIL AGARWAL / CSE

A women's rally in Chamoli: Chipko drove home the fact that an environmental movement cannot succeed without the cooperation of the women.

An illustration of local economic compulsions is the Mandal incident, which H K Singh of Gopeshwar College says had its roots in 1969. "The files of late Subedar Bachan Singh Bist of Mandal, the Symonds contractor between 1969 and 1972, show that he did not get the contract because he demanded exorbitant wages for labourers," Singh explains. "He then organised a meeting in Mandal on March 18, 1973, where leaders like Alam Singh Bist, the *pradhan* of Khalla village, and Bachan Lal, the secretary of the Shoshit Dal (Depressed Classes' Association), threatened to hug trees if Symonds brought in outside labour Bhatt was away then from Gopeshwar and the Mandal meeting was a local affair, without any mass participation."

As it turned out, on April 24, DGSM workers and students and villagers from Gopesh-war held a rally to prevent Jagadish Prasad Nautiyal, a Symonds sub-contractor, from entering the forest. Bhatt, too, opposed the felling of trees by outside contractors because it was DGSM's aim to establish cottage-scale industries through local labour cooperatives.

Chipko dismissed the notion that it is the poor who wantonly destroy their environment and do not want to protect it.

Says Nautiyal, now *gram pradhan* of Banglo-ki-Kandi village near Mussoorie, "I was a sub-contractor of Symonds. Earlier, I had worked as a labourer. In 1973, I got the contract for felling trees in Pangarbasa forest near Mandal village. That was the first time I got a contract and, as it turned out, the last. Bhatt said he would not allow the felling and the villagers threatened to hug the trees.

"I got scared and did not go to the forest. Instead, I met district forest officer Narinder Singh Negi, who asked me to wait till he could pacify the DGSM workers. After three months, I was permitted to fell trees in Phata in the Kedarnath division. But the DGSM got there, too. I lost Rs 32,000 in payments to 17 labourers. The DGSM didn't *chipko* any tree, but it put up posters against me all over Gopeshwar even though I had not engaged any Nepalese labourers. The workers were from my village."

Meanwhile, during October-December 1973, Bahuguna undertook a *padyatra* between Gopeshwar and Ukhimath to publicise the need to save trees and to expound the philosophy of non-violent direct action. Symonds agents also staged *padyatras*, going from village to village and explaining they had already paid for the trees. The agents also spread a rumour that a movie was being screened in nearby Rampur and when the villagers guarding the forest left their post, they quickly felled five ash trees. But the villagers returned the next morning, disappointed because there was no movie, and were able to drive off the contractors, who had to leave the trees behind. More demonstrations followed until December 31, when the Symonds permit expired. But Nautiyal says he had to leave earlier because "my dwindling resources ensured that I quit the whole business in three months."

The impact

The transformation of Chipko from a struggle to control local resource use to a national movement was influenced heavily by a growing global environmental concern. Chipko began independently of global environmen-

tal consciousness, but in interacting with the rest of the world, it assumed a deep conservationist bearing. In the process, its utilitarian and developmental stance was steadily eroded.

Reacting to Chipko in 1980, Indira Gandhi told *Nature* magazine in an interview, "Well, frankly, I don't know all the aims of the movement. But if it is that trees should not be cut, I'm all for it." When informed that Chipko was concerned also about poverty in the region, she replied, "Naturally, anybody who lives in a backward country has to be concerned with that, too." But clarifying that trees are important in themselves, she added, "The cutting of trees has immediately brought havoc because it has increased our drought, it has increased our floods and it has made vast areas much more difficult to live in." Like Indira Gandhi, different people read in Chipko what interested and suited them.

Undoubtedly in its growth, Chipko contributed immensely to national and international ecological movements. But as Bhatt puts it, "Chipko was like the discovery of the elephant by blind persons. One person felt the trunk, another the legs and each thought each had felt the real thing."

Irrespective of Chipko's grassroots achievements, it accomplished a great deal at the national and international levels. Says Shekhar Pathak, a Chipko activist now teaching history at Kumaon University in Nainital, "A distinction is necessary between what happened locally and the national and international movement that grew out of it. Chipko put forests on the political agenda in the country The Forest Conservation Act of 1980 and the very creation of the environment ministry are due to the consciousness

Gaura Devi: The martyr of Chipko.

The tragedy of Reni

How misfortune befell a woman, once hailed as a conqueror, and a village that tried to protect its forests.

WHEN GAURA Devi of Reni village died on July 4, 1991, she must have been disillusioned. Two decades earlier, she inspired a group of women to chase away employees of a forest contractor — and this act of courage and spontaneous defiance was hailed by the media as the start of Chipko. Today, the villagers of Reni are disenchanted as they have no access to the forest they had once saved.

A Reni woman recalled how Communist Party of India activist Govind Singh Rawat, who was *pramukh* (chief) of Joshimath block in which Reni lies, was attempting to organise the villagers against the contractors when Gaura Devi, then a 50-year-old widow, led a group of women and set fire to a hut in which the contractor's labourers were staying and threw stones at them forcing them to flee. The villagers may have been provoked in part by the labourers being outsiders and not Tolcha Bhotias like them. The villagers who had thrived on Indo-Tibetan trade were in dire straits as the border was closed in 1962.

Another elderly Reni woman, who like the others wanted anonymity, explained: "On March 26, 1974, our men were at Chamoli collecting compensation for the land we lost in Malari after the (Indo-Tibetan) border was sealed. Rawat had warned us and we took turns keeping a constant watch on the labourers."

There are conflicting reports of what actually happened that day. One woman recalled, "Gaura Devi was with us when we decided to chase the labourers away." And, Gaura Devi's son, Chander Singh, adds, "The labourers were cooking when the women descended on them. Their axes and utensils were snatched and they were chased away with a shower of stones. The women also demolished a stone slab that bridged a small stream." Another woman said they had tied up a forest guard found consorting with the labourers.

The incident triggered a month of rallies and demonstrations. Then, in 1986, Gaura Devi and representatives of 30 village women's groups received the Priyadarshini Vrikshamitra award in the Capital from Rajiv Gandhi, who was prime minister then.

Gaura Devi's fortunes began to decline about then. A rumour spread that she received 12.5 kg of gold but kept it for herself instead of sharing it with others who took part in the March 26 struggle. This led to virtual ostracism of Gaura Devi's family and she could not even get medical treatment in her old age.

Another tragedy is now unfolding in Reni, which still lacks a school, plantations or a development project. The felling of the forest that touched off the environment wave is continuing and this year, Dayal Singh, a Reni resident, was awarded a contract to cut 84 dry and dead trees.

"Our wood continues to go outside and we can do nothing," one of the village women complained. "They say it's dry wood, but we know what's going on. We could have used the dry wood ourselves." Asked why Chipko cannot be revived, she replied, "What did we get out of the first one? Now they have made this area the Nanda Devi biosphere reserve and I can't even pick herbs to treat a stomachache."

created by Chipko."

And Nirmal Kumar Joshi, director of the Forest Training Institute at Haldwani, adds, "Chipko created a new wave of understanding among foresters. We realised that our plans to exploit forests were not at all scientific, as it was claimed. We realised that nurseries and plantations were more important than cutting down green trees."

International ecologists saw Chipko as a cultural response of the people's love for their environment. Chipko was popularised by the feminist movement, who pointed out that village women have to walk long distances to collect fuel and fodder and they become the first victims of forest destruction. Eco-feminists argue that women are therefore closer to nature and more ecologically conscious.

But Chipko's biggest contribution probably was the pro-poor environmentalism that it brought in its wake. Says Mahendra Singh Kunwar, who was a student during Chipko's heyday, "It dismissed the notion that the poor destroy their environment and do not want to protect it. The Chipko message captured the imagination of activists across the world. Until Chipko, people refused to believe the poor could live in harmony with their environment.

Chipko was primarily an economic struggle. Environment and ecology were attributed to it later.

"Chipko had a very humane appeal: Cut me down before you cut down the tree. The tree is far more important than my life, it is the basis of my survival."

Several environmental activists discerned in Chipko a powerful assertion by people of their rights over their environment. This concept, in fact, set a major trend in environmentalism, and one Chipko observer has written, "Local control over the habitat — in this case the forests — might have been illegal in terms of contemporary laws, but it was not immoral."

This was the true social justification of the protests, which defined a new morality in environmental concern. "This gave rise to the notion of the need to empower local communities to manage their resources," says Shamser Singh Bist, an ardent Chipko activist when he was a student in the 1970s. He is now associated with Uttarakhand Kranti Dal, a local political party.

Unfortunately, people's control over local resources has been the least of the state's concerns, even though, under pressure from the growing, international, environment lobby and the "summits" in Stockholm and Rio, it has adopted a series of conservationist policies. However, most of them still deny people the rights to manage their environment for their own use and so the villagers who participated in Chipko have suffered as a result.

Diverging concerns

Academics like Guha have traced three main Chipko streams: one led by Bahuguna, which blames materialism

AMIT MITRA / CSE

AMIT MITRA / CSE

Leading from the front: Chooma Devi (top) and Bachni Devi.

Not a preserve of women

Though women were the primary participants in Chipko, men and children were also involved in the movement at various levels.

WOMEN were involved in popular agitations in Uttarakhand long before Chipko, but it is Chipko that produced courageous women who even dared to take on the state.

In the Vyali forest agitation in Uttarkashi in 1974, women acted as messengers and lookouts because the men were under police surveillance. Some, like Chooma Devi of Kishanpur village, led processions, a red flag in hand. She is in her 80s now and almost senile, but the mention of a procession is enough to set her muttering, "Get me my red flag. Why are you sitting and watching? We have to march against the pigs of the Van Nigam."

Then there is Bachni Devi of Advani village, whose contractor husband, Bakhtawat Singh, wanted to cut down trees in the nearby forests. She rebelled and joined Chipko in December 1977 Today, Bachni Devi mourns her dead husband and says, "He was a good man. So what if he made a mistake? I convinced him and, in any case, he did not throw me out of the house for joining Chipko."

In Doongri-Paintoli, Gayatri Devi led a group of women and prevented an oak forest from being cleared in 1980 for a horticulture farm. And, when some men in Bacher village agreed to allow the forest department to cut down dead trees, the Mahila Mangal Dal she organised blocked department labourers, contending, "We need the trees for fuel. The trees are ours." (See page 50)

These examples have often been cited as proof that Chipko was exclusively a women's movement. Though this is not to decry the role of women, this argument is not true. Some protests, such as those in Mandal and Phata, started as all-male initiatives. In all the struggles, right from Reni to Badyargarh, men, women and children were all involved at various levels.

ANIL AGARWAL / CSE

The lesson of Chipko: The local community has a right to manage its forests.

Another movement, another purpose

The Parvatiya Van Bachao Andolan aims at protecting Kumaon forests from all tree-fellers — not just those from outside.

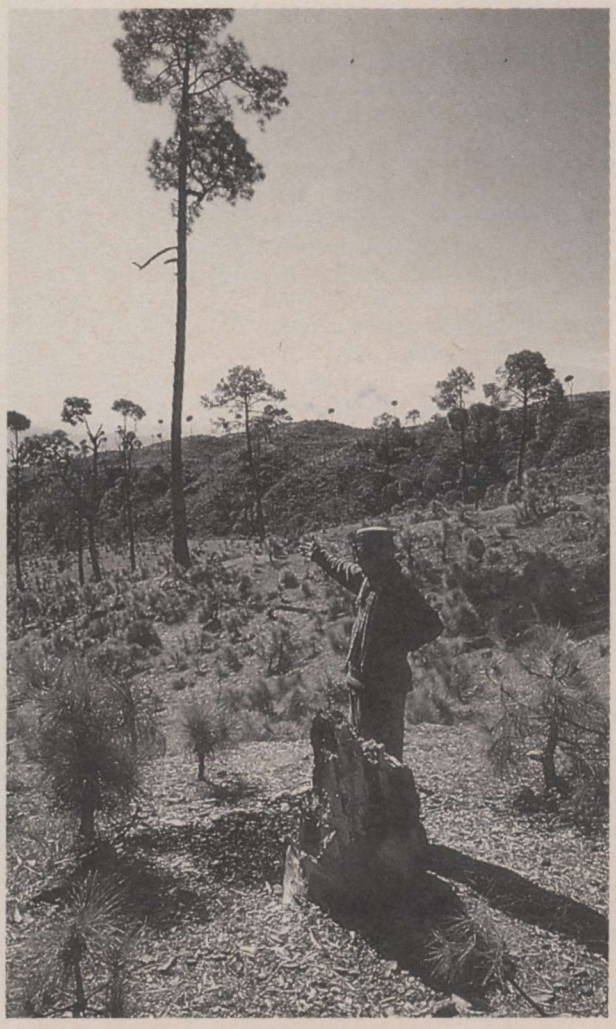
IN JANUARY 1978, about 300 villagers from Almora district got together under the aegis of the Parvatiya Van Bachao Andolan and camped for 39 days in the Chanchridhar forests near Dwarahat. Bipin Tripathi, the block *pramukh* (chief) of Dwarahat, explained why: "We did not want Kashmiri Lal, the contractor of Saharanpur's Star Paper Mill, to fell the trees."

From the 1950s, Star had devastated many forests in the region and this had prompted many campaigns in the local press, including *Dronanchal Prahari*, a Hindi weekly, which Tripathi edited from 1971 to 1975. He was jailed during the Emergency and the paper shut down. Star had also complained to the Press Council about Tripathi's columns against the mill.

"We decided to save Chanchridhar," Tripathi recalled, "because it was the watershed of several streams supplying water to about 18 villages. However, our movement was not Chipko and I will not say we were non-violent in the true sense of the term."

According to Tripathi, Chipko's fight in Garhwal was against outside contractors. In Kumaon, he explained, "We opposed all contractors and any felling of trees. In 1974, I had suggested many times to Sunderlal Bahuguna, Chandi Prasad Bhatt and the forest department that plantation of broad-leaved trees, watershed development and setting up agro-based industries would generate employment. But at that time these proposals were not in vogue."

The Chanchridhar protest was a people's movement and Trilok Singh Rautela of Bijepur village proudly displays a saw he snatched from one of the contractor's men. "They ran away in fright," he recalled. "We never had to cling to a tree."



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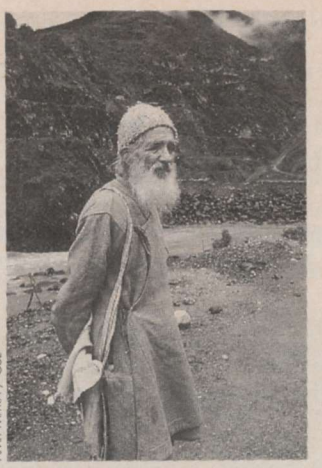
A scarred landscape: Trees felled by contractors of the Star Paper Mill, Saharanpur, in the 1970s.

for ecological degradation and wants strict conservation; another led by Bhatt, which works at environmental regeneration with people at the centre, and, the third named Uttarakhand Sangharsh Vahini (USV), which seeks to move Chipko away from being publicly identified with Bahuguna and Bhatt, though the latter founded it. USV insists the human-nature relationship must be viewed in the context of relationships between humans and so social and economic redistribution are more important than ecological harmony. USV does not associate itself with state-sponsored development programmes and has on occasion engaged in sharp confrontations with the administration in Kumaon.



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The crusader: Sunderlal Bahuguna.

Several USV activists formed the Uttarakhand Kranti Dal, which is leading a movement for the region to be given statehood. Dal activists felled thousands of trees throughout Garhwal and Kumaon during their 1988-89 *ped kato andolan* (fell trees movement), which was launched to counter delays in environmental clearance for road and water pipeline projects. Explains Bipin Tripathi, who led the 1978 struggle to save the Chanchridhar forest from being felled by a paper mill, "We cut trees in 111 places, where the government was using the Forest Conservation Act to hold up development projects. After all, we had to consider whether the trees are for the people or if it's the other way around. Nearly 4,500 development schemes in the hills are held up due to environmental reasons. The hill people want trees, but they want development, too."

It is indeed an irony that the very region that gave Chipko to India and the world now has activists promoting the *ped kato andolan*. This came about because the state used the environmental concern that was first enunciated in the country by Chipko to centralise forest management, instead of decentralising.

Now the complaint throughout Uttarakhand, from Almora to Uttarkashi, is: "We got nothing from Chipko. Even our *haq-haqooqs* (traditional rights and customs) to forest produce, have been taken away from us." Gayatri Devi, the heroine of the Doongri-Paintoli struggle, says, "Earlier, we could fight the contractors, but now the *sarkar* and the Van Nigam are the biggest contractors. How can we fight them?"

Even in Reni, a woman who wished to remain anonymous, complained, "They have put this entire area under the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve. I can't even pick herbs to treat a stomach ache. Chipko *karke hum latak gaye, bas ab aur kuchh nahin karna* (We got into enough trouble with Chipko. Now we don't even want to attempt anything else)." The woman said she had come to hate the word *paryavaran* (environment).

Analysing these complaints, Bist says, "The internationalisation of Chipko wrought havoc on the local people in many ways. While green felling has been stopped to a large extent, the people watch helplessly as the Van Nigam continues to be the biggest exploiter. The roads, electric lines, bridges and water pipelines that we need are all held up.

"Chipko was essentially an economic campaign, a

Logging in the Reni forest: Once private contractors felled the trees; now, it's the government.

PRADIP SAHA / CSE

fight for local livelihood and when this was not achieved, the people became disillusioned. Now, even their traditional rights have been taken away and the forest guard is supreme."

This is conceded by N K Joshi, a forester, who says, "The Forest Conservation Act has not given the people much. It has not stopped development but it has certainly delayed it, as permission to build roads and lay down pipelines has to be obtained now from the Centre. This can take months and no villager wants to wait that long."

Both Bhatt and Bahuguna maintain the villagers' traditional rights have not been taken away. They maintain that the media myth that they were, is fostered by vested business and political interests to break the movement. Bhatt concedes development has been affected in the region, but he blames this on "short-sighted government policies" and not on Chipko. On the other hand, Bahuguna contends, "Development is the major cause of ecological destruction. The needs of modern civilisation will have to be curtailed to preserve the environment."

Is Chipko moribund now? Bahuguna says no and describes his agitation against the Tehri dam as a continuation of Chipko. Bhatt, too, calls his campaign against the extension of the Vishnuprayag hydroelectric project to the Bhyunder valley and his encouragement of the afforestation work undertaken by MMDs as Chipko-related.

Bhatt explains he has moved on to what he calls *rachnatmak* (constructive) activities, primarily involving women in tree-planting. The trees they plant, he adds, generally have a higher survival rate than those planted by the forest department.

DGSM holds a number of three-day environment camps annually and they attract a few hundred people each. In 1986, MMDs of 30 villages where the DGSM worked got the Priyadarshini Vrikshamitra Award of the then National Wastelands Development Board.

Bhatt receives some government support for his afforestation work, exposing him to criticism that he has "governmentalised" Chipko. But, then, Bahuguna's critics say he has "internationalised" Chipko by putting it at the service of the world conservation community, from which he derives considerable respect.

But the Himalayan villagers, who joined Chipko to further their struggle for basic subsistence rights that had been denied to them by state institutions, are dissatisfied with what they got. Their major complaint is against the eulogising of Chipko to the extent that their other social movements, such as against alcoholism and untouchability, were overlooked. Alcohol continues to be the bane of Uttarakhand and the plight of Harijans there is still unhappy.

Media role

The media may have played a key role in building up Chipko, but today it is subjected to widespread criticism in Uttarakhand. Says Bist, "Looking back, a major reason for the failure of Chipko was the role the media played. They made it an international movement, but how many newspapers bothered to send reporters to villages in the interior Uttarakhand? They reported on hearsay because they never talked to us."

Pratap Shikhar of Jajal, a Chipko activist during the 1970s, was even more forthright in his criticism of the media. "The media reports sparked a wave of bitterness between Bhatt and Bahuguna, creating an unbridgeable rift between them, to the utter damnation of the movement," he says.

The many national and international awards received by Chipko leaders alienated them further from the people. Both Bahuguna and Bhatt were awarded the Padma Shri, Bhatt received the Magsaysay Award and Bahuguna accepted the Right Livelihood Award given to Chipko.

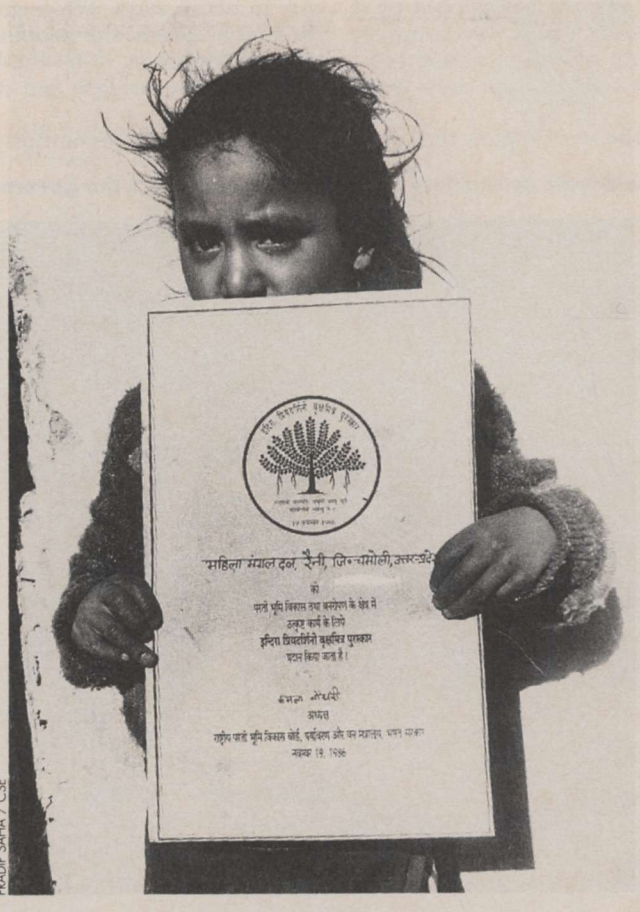
Pathak analyses the movement further: "The major failing of Chipko was its refusal to recognise its political dimensions. Political organising — both at local and national level — and electoral politics are necessary for a movement of this kind. But when politicisation was attempted, especially by the youth who came into the movement, the Sarvodaya workers dissociated themselves from it."

Bist confirms the youth did try to politicise Chipko, "but we were highly confused at that time. We looked to Bhatt and Bahuguna for leadership."

Nor did political parties learn from Chipko. The national CPI leadership didn't show any interest in the mass movement even though local CPI cadres were involved in it. "The final act of betrayal," says Bist, "came when a potentially radical political movement for self-determination and self-management of our resources turned into a purely conservationist one."

What this means is that a movement that could have given the world its most powerful green party with village self-governance at its heart, fell apart. It inspired a generation of young Indians to consider environment a critical concern, but many of the young of Uttarakhand who came to join it in the 1970s feel empty today. ■

Just so much paper: Gaura Devi's granddaughter holds up the Vrikshamitra award given to her grandmother



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