

# Protecting The Sources Of Community life

## Women's Non-Violent Power In The Chipko Movement



*The history we read tells us very little of what women were doing during the evolution of "mankind." We hear of an occasional Nur Jehan or Lakshmbai but what of the millions of ordinary women—how did they live, work and struggle ? Women have always participated in social and political movements but their role has been relegated at best to the footnotes of history. This study of the Chipko movement, written by a movement activist, points out the links between women's burden as food providers and gatherers, and their militancy in defending natural resources from violent devastation. The word Chipko originates from a particular form of non-violent action developed by hill women in the 19th century forerunner of today's movement. Women would embrace (chipko) the trees to prevent their being felled, and some women were killed while thus protecting with their own bodies the sources of community life.*

A CURSORY glance at any newspaper will show that most of the space is occupied by urban affairs and problems, by the doings of those in power who are busy making plans and policies. Though there is much fancy talk of rural uplift and rural welfare, none of these plans solve the problems of the poor and neglected millions in India's villages.

Who are these poor and neglected people ? All the toiling people are neglected, but the most neglected, the most silent, are women. Women are not allowed to participate in public and

political life. The most important institution in the village is the *gram panchayat*. Hardly ever does one come across a woman member of a *panchayat*. The question of a woman *sarpanch* does not, of course, arise. So the specific problems of this half of society are never reflected in the plans drawn up by *panchayats* and higher bodies such as Area Development Committees or District Boards.

The two powerful movements — Anti-drunkenness and Chipko, which swept Uttarkhand during the last decade, activated women and gave collective expression to their aspirations. On November 20, 1971, more than 10,000 women of India's most poverty-stricken district, Tehri Garhwal, (annual per capita income Rs 129), staged a massive demonstration against drunkenness. 56 women were arrested and jailed for picketing outside a liquor shop. The agitation continued until drunkenness was well under control in the area.

### **We Will Continue Our Struggle**

It is common experience that mere declaration of prohibition by the government does not eliminate drunkenness. Those who have administrative, social and economic power in villages, openly carry on illicit brewing and sale of liquor. Women are continuing their battle. In many hill villages, women organized in *mahila mandals* keep an eye on drunkards and their dens. When the *mahila mandal* in Pundasa village of Tehri Garhwal came to know of such a den in their village, they surrounded the house of the liquor distiller, caught hold of him and tied him to the buffalo pole. They then walked ten miles to Tehri township to call the police. When the case came up, six women twice travelled a distance of 80 kms to Narendranagar to give evidence in court. They did not hesitate to leave behind their few-days-old infants to undertake this journey. This is just one of many such instances.



In Menagi Village, last April, Vaishakhi Devi, a member of the *mahila mandal*, came to know that a number of men were sitting together in a house and drinking. She immediately took a lantern and set out to stop them. The drunkards grabbed the lantern, threw it at Vaishakhi Devi and, as her clothes caught fire, pushed her into a wheatfield. Vaishakhi Devi was badly burnt from her chest to her knees. After about two weeks, I visited this heroic woman in Mussoorie Community Hospital. I told her how more than 500 women had travelled long distances on foot to protest against the atrocity inflicted on her. These women had declared: "We are not daunted by this fire. We will continue our struggle against drunkenness." When she heard this, Vaishakhi Devi, though she was suffering great agony, wept for joy that her work was going on.

### **The Jungle Is Our Parental Home**

During the National Movement, women, under Gandhi's leadership, had been active in the picketing of liquor shops. But the women's Chipko movement against tree-felling is a phenomenon of the last seven years. It is being nationally and internationally discussed as a people's ecological movement for the protection of the natural environment. In April 1974, the



**Vaishakhi Devi after she was attacked**

women threw out the men sent by the government contractors to fell the trees. The women said: "This forest is our home, we will not let it be cut down." Women in many areas have forced woodcutters in the guise of forest research scientists, to leave the place. Armed police were sent from Tehri Garhwal, on February 1, 1978, the Revenue and Civil Police from Malgadhi on February 1, 1979, and from Lasi on November 1, 1979, to help the forest officers. The police, with all their repressive and terrorizing methods, were forced to retreat before the non-violent strength of the women.

The slogan of the Chipko women is: "Soil, water and vegetation are the gifts of the forest; Soil, water and vegetation are the basis of life." This fundamental tenet of ecology has not come to them from scientific research but has sprung from their daily experience and struggle to survive. These women know that the commercialization of the forest management means the erosion

of the soil which is the base of their existence and the drying up of water sources.

Last year, during the Chipko week (May 30-June 5), Kali Devi and Vimla Bahuguna of Sildara village and Sudeshi Devi of Rampura, told us how the erosion of natural resources adds to the heavy burden of the hill women. The government agriculture and village development secretary who is also a well known agricultural scientist, Dr M.S. Swaminathan, was present at these meetings. Kali Devi is 70 years old. When she married and came to Sildara, the forest here was a mixed one. Grass for fodder was available on the outskirts of the village. The buffaloes yielded plenty of milk and there was no lack of fuel. Now, young wives roam all day long but are not able to gather fodder enough even for one buffalo. This situation has arisen because of the commercial *chir* forests. These forests are thinned, so bushes are not able to grow under the trees. Earlier, when trees were felled, the stumps were used by the villagers. But after the introduction of felling machines and motorable roads, the forest department and the contractors do not leave a splinter of wood in the forest.

Young daughters-in-law look to their parental homes for some sympathy. Normally, mothers send sweetmeats with their daughters when they return to their in-laws' homes, but nowadays, women prefer to bring back a log of wood. At least, that will solve their problems for a few days !

### **Women Pay With Their Lives**

Vimla Bahuguna said : "Mothers-in-law remember the forest as full of greenery. So they scold the daughters-in-law: 'Have you been sleeping all day? Why have you gathered so little grass ?' Due to erosion of fertile soil from the fields, men migrate to Bombay and Delhi in search of work. Unable to cope with their painful existence, young women often commit suicide by jumping into the river. Since the last three years, I have been hearing of cases of two or three young women, and in one year even of seven women, who tied themselves together with saris or ropes and committed suicide by jumping into a river. Last July, three women of Bheluntha village drowned themselves in the Jalkur, a tributary of the Bhagirathi. Enquiries revealed that during the previous year, four women of the same village had committed suicide in groups of two. All these women were between 18 and 22 years of age. There was a shortage of water, fodder and fuel in this village.

When women go to the forest, they leave the children alone at home. Sometimes, children are tied to a post or a grinding stone: Often children get strangled by the rope that ties them or fall into the *chulha* and burn to death. It is very common for children to fall from rooftops and get injured. Many people in the hill areas have scars of such childhood accidents on their bodies. Girls are never sent to school. At the age of three or four they have to begin taking care of young children, at six or seven they help with the domestic animals, at 10 or 12 they help with housework, and at 14 they are sent off to the in-laws' house.

On the night of May 31, 1979, Bhadi Devi of Sabli village, who

belongs to the Chipko Padyatra team, told me about the ill effects of the devastation of forests : “When we were young, we used to go to the forest early in the morning, without eating anything. There we would eat plenty of berries and wild fruits. We used to drink the cold, sweet liquid of the Banj roots (which is now sold as mineral water at Rs 10 a bottle in Delhi five star hotels). In a short while we would gather all the fodder and firewood we needed, rest under the shade of some huge tree and then go home. Now, with the going of the trees, everything else has gone too.”

### **Blind Planning**

On June 2, 1979, women came on foot from 30 kilometre distant villages like Bharpur, Patudi, Bhengi. Their slogan was: “Planning without fodder, fuel and water is one-eyed planning.” This cry reverberating in front of the magistrate’s court in Tehri was a challenge to the games played by politicians, administrators, and planners in the name of “development schemes.”

During the last 33 years of independence, crores of rupees have been spent in the hill areas for so-called development. Most of this money has been spent on the construction of motorable roads which have only resulted in the erosion of soil, thus destroying the area’s flourishing dairy industry, and its youthful labour power. These motorable roads have also facilitated the mindless exploitation of natural resources—forests, minerals and water. The beauty of the mountains is fast vanishing. Beauty has become ugliness, blooming faces have withered. In spite of all this, the men of these areas continue to demand more motorable roads. It is the women who have to gather fodder, fuel and water. They have to walk miles every day in search of these, so their demand is that the availability of resources be recognised as minimum necessities for survival, and made available to them.

One sister from Bharpur village had this to say about the 33 years of “development” schemes which have brought dairy-processed milk, cooking gas and tap water to the hill areas, for the use of politicians, administrators and planners: “The water corporation in our village spent 4 lakhs on a potable drinking water scheme but when it was completed, the taps were fitted only in the houses of rich cement contractors. Water never reached the village at all. So we have to fetch water from Jalankur river which is two miles away. We have to literally hoard water and use it so sparingly that we are not able to give our children as much water as you give your children milk.” In Pipli village, we met a 10-year-old girl fetching a pitcher of water from a distance of two kilometres.

In January 1980, when such an uproar was being created about the Lok Sobha elections, the women of Khurat village declared their intention to sabotage the pumping scheme of Chamba area which had been built six years before and had cut off the water supply to their village. They had to fetch water from a distance of one and a half kilometres. They formed a Water and Forest Protection Committee and warned the authorities that unless drinking water was immediately provided to their village, they would stop the flow of water from the pumping set, on January 26, the Republic Day of this “great democracy.” They had carefully planned their action and prepared themselves for possible arrest. However, on the evening of January 25, the Lucknow administrators sent a messenger to announce that work on a drinking water scheme would soon begin. January 26 was a day of victory for the women.

I am waiting for the day when the non-violent movement of the hill women will help turn upside down the centres of power in this country.