

# Protecting the Sources of Community Life

## Slandered By The Community In Return



*In our sixth issue this column carried an account of the Chipko movement, written by a male activist-leader Sunderlal Bahuguna. While this account presented a very positive picture of women's heroism in struggle, it did not describe in detail how men reacted to the women's actions. Here, a woman who belongs to the Garhwal region, writes how women activists are being hounded and attacked for their participation in the movement. We feel this gives a very important insight into the dynamics of women's participation in mass movements – the Chipko movement has received international acclaim but what price are the women involved being made to pay? Has not this been women's experience in many movements which they have participated in but not controlled? As soon as women assume leadership roles, they are opposed and attacked by their own community and from within the movement itself.*

THE world Chipko originates from a particular form of non-violent action developed by hill women in the 19<sup>th</sup> 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. The modern movement is a phenomenon of the last seven years. In April 1974, women threw out the men sent by the government contractors to fell trees. Even the police were often forced to retreat before the women's non violent strength.

Since women are the gatherers of fuel, fodder and water, it is they who feel the first impact of soil erosion. Mindless destruction of the forests has badly upset the hill people's economy. Men often migrate to the plains – women are left to cope with an ever more impoverished existence and to provide for the old and the children. Many women have been driven to suicide because of the increasing pressures on them. Therefore it is women who have seen through the government "planning" on which crores of rupees have been spent during the last 33 years. Women have repeatedly challenged administrators and politicians with their slogan: "Planning without fodder, fuel and water is one-eyed planning."

In the course of this movement, Garhwal women successfully undertook leadership roles and questioned the right of the men to decide the fate of the forests or to enter into contracts without consulting the women, who would be the worst affected. Their struggle against drunkenness also brought them into direct confrontation with the men. One of the women, Vaishakhi Devi, was severely burnt by drunkards. Yet the women did not give up until liquor distilleries were destroyed.

On June 22, 1980, when I asked Gaura Devi, the famous leader of the movement, about her experience, I was shocked to hear instead a story of continuous harassment. "At times we feel like leaving the village", she said, "But where to go?" The village is divided into two camps. Gaura Devi is in the minority camp and is not even invited to the social and cultural functions of the other camp. Besides, her family is being sued in court by the other camp.

The harassment by the village men folk began the day when Gaura Devi led 27 village women to prevent the contractor's employees and forest department personnel, about 60 men in all, from going to the Reni forest to fell 2,415 trees. While the women were blocking the narrow passage leading to the forest, the men used all sorts of threats and later, on the pretext of being drunk, even tried to misbehave with the women. But the women refused to budge and bravely resisted all misbehaviour. Finally, one of the men spat at Gaura Devi's face. The women remained cool but firm. However, when the men returned, instead of being elated at Gaura Devi's success, they got frightened at the prospect of being arrested and put behind bars. To save their skin, they made their wives put all the blame on Gaura Devi.

Gaura Devi stood by her action. First the contractor tried to bribe her into letting his men enter the forest. When she refused this offer, the forest department personnel threatened to call the police and arrest her. The contractor, in league with some villagers, composed folk songs describing the arrest of Gaura Devi and her torture in jail. They used to sing these songs all night long and dance together. Since Gaura Devi is not educated, she was not sure what the repercussions of her action could be. Naturally,

she and her son began to get unnerved. One day her son started crying. She herself used to show all boldness in front of the men but actually the tension was so great that she lost her appetite and sleep. She had never met Chand Prasad Bhatt who had spread the message of Chipko in the village. Her son had attended Bhatt's meeting and told her about it. She was not sure whether he would support her and was afraid that if she let it be known that Bhatt had told her son of the need to protect the forest, Bhatt too might be arrested. So she took all the blame on herself.

Three days later, Bhatt came to the village, complimented Gaura Devi on her action and assured her that he would take full responsibility and would face all the consequences. After this the tide turned in her favour. For a month, people from different villages came to express solidarity with her and to protest against the tree-felling. The government appointed a committee to look into the matter, and accepted its recommendations.

However, the widespread publicity and success increased the harassment of Gaura Devi by the village men. In 1974 Gaura Devi was about 51 years old. She had been widowed at the age of 22. Hers was one of the poorest families in the village and after the death of her husband, she had to rely on the help of the village men to get her field ploughed (because women are not supposed to use the plough though they do all the other much heavier work). The influential villagers who had rented their houses to the contractor and his men, or who had gained employment from the tree-felling operations, first got annoyed with her and decided to help the authorities in punishing her. But once the greatness of her deeds began to be publicly acknowledge by the media, they became very jealous. How could a poor widow gain such recognition and acclaim? Hence they took every opportunity to foment petty quarrels with her. In such a quarrel, her son was beaten up. Now she is being threatened that her son will be murdered. The Mahila Mangal Dal (Women's Welfare Society) had got some funds for repair of the water tank but the villagers opposed this and would not cooperate, even though it was for the benefit of all.

Another instance of women being harassed by the village men is Dongri Paitoli villages. These villages are situated at a height of six to seven thousand feet in the catchment area of the Pinder river in Chamoli district. The nearest motor road is at a distance of ten kilometers. Hence these forests had not been commercially exploited. But the government decided to "develop" this region by replacing the dense oak forest with a sheep centre and a potato seed farm. The village headman who owns shops at the bus stand, along with other male leaders, entered into an

agreement with the horticulture department, to let the 62 acre village forest be used for construction of a farm in exchange for a motor road, electricity and a hospital. No thought was given to the question of women's gathering of fuel and fodder.

When the contractor started construction, the village women were horrified to see their village being encircled by the boundary walls of the proposed sheep farm, potato farm and junior school. There was no outlet for the cattle! The Mahila Mangal Dal of women resorted to Chipko action and saved about 40 acres of their oak forest. This success made both the horticulture department officials and the influential men in the village bitter against the women and the Chipko activists.

In June, when I, with two friends of the trees (*dalion ki dagaria*), visited the village to study the role of women, we were confronted by a hostile mob of the headman's henchmen. They asked why we had not sought the headman's permission to enter the village. When we returned to Gopeshwar, the deputy district magistrate confirmed that no one's permission is needed to enter the village. On the pretext of the village being a border village, the headman is on the one hand, restricting the fundamental rights of citizens and on the other, spreading rumours against the village women.

Chipko women activists are being accused of getting the village blacklisted. The men say that since the village is blacklisted due to the behaviour of the women, now the young men, most of whom are in the army, will not be given employment anywhere, and also that the village will not be supplied with essential commodities like salt and kerosene. Also, the village will be deprived of a motor road, electricity, hospital. The women activists are being made out to be the villains of the piece and rumour is being used as weapon to isolate them.

Another rumour being spread is that there are warrants of arrest against these women and that they are not being arrested only because the headman is exercising his influence to protect them. But that one day the women will be arrested and put behind bars! The impact of these rumours is so strong that the villagers thought we had gone there in plainclothes to arrest the women! The husbands and sons of the women activists have also turned against them. The son of Gayatri Devi, the secretary of Mahila Mangal Dal, openly disapproves of her activities. Every day, the men return home and fling accusations at the women. This constant harassment within the family causes the women immense mental agony. They were very relieved when we told them that there are no warrants of arrest against them and that the village has not been blacklisted.



Outside the village, rumours are in circulation about the “loose” character of the women. They are accused of being rude and “leader types”, that is, unfeminine and bold. Actually, as Gayatri Devi puts it, the success of the Chipko movement demonstrates the intellectual superiority of the women over the men in the village. She adds that in the last 33 years the village has not got even basic facilities like hospital, electricity. The only existing junior school was constructed by the villagers in 1945. Later, it was taken over by the district board. This school has not yet been upgraded to high school level. She is resolved that the Mahila Mangal Dal will get these facilities for the village. But we were told that the village head has sworn to see to it that the Dal’s attempts do not meet with success.

In contrast, women in Gopeshwar got cooperation from the men for their agitation in 1975. There, under the leadership of Gaura Devi, women protested against the practice of the government staff who used to cut down young, tender trees for their own kitchen gardens. The staff women snubbed them so they gheraoed the staff quarters. They lifted the gherao only after they received an assurance from the district magistrate and a public apology for the misbehaviour of

the staff women. The men cooperated, perhaps because the conflict there took the form of a tussle between women of two classes and the village men supported women of their class against the wives of government employees.

As for the “protection” given by government machinery, it is nothing but a hoax. In Dongri Paitoli, for instance, Bhatt was afraid that the women might be harassed after the agitation, so he wrote a letter to the district magistrate asking that measures be taken to prevent such harassment. The magistrate responded by saying that there was no harassment and the situation was “normal.” Yet when we reached the village, we found the women totally isolated and unnerved, sure that they would be arrested any day!

The women feel an acute need for full-time women activists who can travel from village to village, counter rumours, erode fear and spread awareness among women about the harassment faced by women activists, so that resistance can be organized. Only united and organized women will be able to relish the fruits of their victory. If not united, they will continue to be harassed for hurting the ego of the village men. □

### ***I BELIEVE WE CAN...***

*Sisters, listen,*

*Listen to me.*

*Don't turn away and tear me apart over coffee mornings :*

*“These young girls –*

*No concern, no respect for their elders –*

*Wayward, irresponsible –*

*How is she ever going to find a husband ?”*

*Listen,*

*Because,*

*Different as we are –*

*You, sari-clad and burdened with atta and sabzi responsibilities,*

*I with my rockmusic and blue jeans*

*And the movie scene –*

*We are one,*

*We are women*

*Now and always*

*Fighting our own battles.*

*You against that unthinking life*

*Which you were always told was right,*

*And I the equally dangerous quicksand*

*Of a hep existence*

*Despite which I will end up like you.*

*But may be we can struggle together...*

*By the hearth, at college,*

*There are women*

*Strong and beautiful...*

*Together we can make it come right*

*So that your children –*

*My sisters and brothers*

*May one day be free,*

*As we are now struggling, hoping, longing to be.*

*—Kavita Ramdas*