



CHIPKO MOVEMENT

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- Environmental movements are generally understood as those movements that are taken up against the development projects as the latter depend on vast amounts of natural resources and their injudicious use and exploitation.
- Environmental movements in India have been more or less conducted at the grassroots level and more so not by the educated elite but by simple village folk and tribals depending on the region. These have been initially characterised by protests against the big companies indiscriminately using the forest resources for commercial purposes. Later the movements focussed on water issues, flora and fauna, biodiversity, and massive deforestation till the recent river pollution, the prime examples being the Ganga and Yamuna clean-up action plans.
- One of the earliest known cases of forest conservation dates back to 1730, where around 300 members of the Bishnoi community in the Rajasthan State, led by a woman called Amrita Devi tried to protect the *Khejri* trees from felling by clinging to them and sacrificed her life in the process.

- The Chipko movement, finds its origins in the protests against commercial exploitation of the forests by the contractors in connivance with the forest officials, is a landmark environmental movement in India, marked by the adoption of Gandhian mode of protest.
- The Chipko Movement, which is also identified chiefly as a women's movement, originated in the Garhwal Himalayan mountain region of the present Uttarakhand state.
- The region is known for its fragile ecology, often prone to earthquakes, erosive rivers and steep valleys that are least conducive to agricultural growth. Its vast forest cover and reserves enables the local communities to pick the fodder, fuel and fibers that contribute to their daily sustenance.
- The region was also prone to massive deforestation as the commercial exploitation of forests took place on a gigantic scale in order to meet the needs of ever growing population and urban settlers.

- With massive felling of trees and deforestation in the hills, and with the trees becoming few and far, the village women, who rely mainly on the forest resources for the sustenance, found it difficult to spend enormous time and energy in collecting the necessary fodder and fuel. They would, sometimes go to distance of at least five kilometers to collect the necessary supplies. With the denuding forests, there was also a danger of devastating floods and landslides submerging the houses, crops, and affecting the movement of people and throwing out of gear the irrigation facilities.

- One of the inspiring words against this exploitation was put down by Raturi in his famous poem:
- *Embrace our trees*
- *Save them from being felled*
- *The property of our hills*
- *Saving it from being looted*

- One of the key events took place ‘in 1973 when around 300 ash trees had been auctioned in Mandal to a manufacturer of sports goods’. With the protest against it by the women of the region led by a 75 year old Shyama Devi, the contractor withdrew but the focus subsequently shifted to the Alaknanda valley, in the village of Reni. The region was already devastated by the massive floods of the 1970 wherein water inundated 100 sq.kms of motor roads, washed away 6 metal bridges, 10 kms of motor roads, 24 buses, 366 houses collapsed, 500 acres of paddy crops destroyed (Guha, 1989, p.155). It was attributed to the denuding of the forests for commercial purposes and felling of trees in the region. Large scale auction and plans for felling of trees in the region was planned by the commercial contractors but had to backtrack their activities because of the active role of the women and the villagers who kept constant vigil on the former’s activities. On one such occasion, sensing the absence of men from the village, the commercial contractors sent their labour to axe the trees before the villagers get to mobilise and start protecting the trees. Later, as the women spotted the labour with axes, who came to cut the trees, they protested and vowed to protect the trees. Small groups of women kept constant vigilance and hugged the trees in order to prevent the felling. Led by Gauri (sometimes referred as Gaura) Devi and Gunga Devi, along with their co-workers, the movement was a much successful one. Consequently, the government imposed a ban on the commercial green felling in the region.

- The most beneficial outcome of the movement has been the Government's order imposing a ban on the felling of trees in the region apart from the joint forest management mechanisms that followed later. Chipko thus stands out as the most significant movement in the arena of environmental protection. It further highlights the role of women as the torchbearers of similar movements everywhere.