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Women and People's Ecological Movement

A Case Study of Women's Role in the Chipko Movement in Uttar Pradesh

Shobhita Jain

In the Chipko Movement, which is concerned with preservation of forests and maintenance of the ecological balance in the sub-Himalayan region, is a social movement, an important role has been played by women of Garhwal region. The author contends that women's participation not only played often a decisive role, but that considering the specific existential conditions in the hill region it was easier for women to perceive the need for preserving the ecological balance in the area. However, the mobilisation of women for the cause of preserving forests has brought about a situation of conflict regarding their own status in society—demand for sharing in the decision-making process—and men's opposition to this and to women's support for Chipko movement. The study is based on investigation in Chamoli district in Garhwal division.

Introduction

SINCE no society is found in a state of perfect structural equilibrium, there are always situations of conflict and in each society there are institutionalised ways and means of articulating and resolving such conflicts. If a need is felt for altering or transforming the structure in a certain fashion, some form of collective mobilisation of people and their resources is resorted to and this activity is given the name of social movement. Sometimes, there is resistance against change which may alter or transform the system and there is strong pressure to check this move. This situation again shows the signs of conflict and this activity is also called social movement.

Both these factors of social movement are present in our case-study of women's role in the Chipko movement. The Chipko movement is an ecological movement, concerned with preservation of forests and thereby maintenance of the traditional eco-balance in the sub-Himalayan region where hill people have traditionally enjoyed a positive relationship with their environment. Thus, it is striving for the traditional status quo between the people and the environment. Its proponents have effectively demonstrated that the past and the present forest policy of the Indian government has negatively affected the ecological balance of the area and caused uprooting of indigenous people who previously depended on forests for their survival and in return they preserved the forest by maintaining a strong bond of veneration and love towards the forest around them. In this way it can be said that the Chipko movement, which is now spread from one end of the Himalayas in Kashmir to the other end in Arunachal Pradesh, is endeavouring to alter the government's forest policy by insisting on maintenance of the traditional status quo in the Himalayan and other forest regions of India and, in this sense, there is resistance towards change and opening up of the area for technological development.

Since there is a certain type of development of industry and technology along with mercantilistic capitalism in India, the Chipko proponents argue that in this process there is definite alienation of the forest-dwellers and along with forests also the disappearance of their economy. Thus, there is the short term as well as the long term destruction of the ecosystem and while the traditional preservers of forests are driven away there is no corresponding system of fresh planting in the place of the unmindful felling of trees for commercial use. It is, therefore, argued that the old system of eco-balance should be brought back and hence our characterisation of this social movement in a change-resisting role. Later, while discussing different ideologies of development, we will also look at this movement's links with the people-oriented social movement, initiated by Mahatma Gandhi, of which the Chipko movement is an offshoot.

Coming to women's role in this movement the collective mobilisation of women for the cause of preserving forests has brought about a situation of conflict regarding their own status in society. This situation of conflict is here discussed in relation to women's demands for sharing in the decision-making process along with men; hence men's opposition to women's support to the Chipko movement. Women are, on the one hand, seeking alterations in their position in society and, on the other hand, supporting a social movement which is basically resisting change. To understand these different levels of the movement, it is crucial to ask the questions—why do women support the movement and what is the extent of awareness among them or, in other words, how many women in the hill areas are actually participating in the movement?

Leaders of the Indian nationalist movement at one stage decided to seek women's participation and Mahatma Gandhi gave a call to Indian women to come out of their homes for the cause of national independence. In the

Chipko movement, there was a different process which resulted in women's participation. There was a sustained dialogue between the Chipko workers and the victims of the environmental disasters in the hill areas of Garhwal. Women being the sole in-charge of cultivation, livestock and children, lost all they had because of recurring floods and landslides. The message of the Chipko workers made a direct appeal to women who were able to perceive the link between their victimisation and barring of the mountain slopes by commercial interests. Thus, women clearly saw the reasons behind their problems and needs of sheer survival made them support a movement which is seeking the preservation of the ecological balance in the area. Why men did not see these connections and women did has to do with the way the subsistence economy is organised in this area. It is also related with the way men perceive the Chipko movement as a 'back to nature' strategy and their preference for the alternative type of development that is taking place all around them in the whole country.

In analysing the data regarding women's role in the Chipko movement, I have used the sociological concepts of social movement, development, conflict, power and authority. First I present in brief the social setting—local economy, role of forest in the life of people, development of infrastructure of education, health and communication, followed by an account of the short history of the Chipko movement as reconstructed from published material and personal communication and interviews with women participants in the Chipko processions and meetings. This section is followed by some analytical comments, including methodological problems faced in the study of a participatory social movement. The complex situation, presented by the conjunction of several factors in Garhwal region, provides an interesting case-study from the point of women's development. Someone well familiar with the Chipko movement remarked that it is not a women's move-

ment. Someone else had, on the other hand, described in detail how women's participation gave it a thrust and spearheaded it towards success. Seemingly contradictory facts are not actually so because as a social movement in its change-resisting role, the Chipko movement is certainly not a women's movement and it does not seek change in the traditional social structure. Another observer commented satirically that women of the families of the Chipko workers are so backward and confined to work in homes and fields, that one is hardly impressed by women's level of awareness in this region. Obviously the Chipko workers are not dealing with women's issues and we agree with the observation that it is not a women's movement.

However, the Chipko workers realised it or not, intended it or not, all those women who participated in the Chipko meetings, processions and other programmes have become aware of their potentialities and are demanding a share in decision-making process at the community level. They are seeking alterations in their own situation and unlike Mahatma Gandhi, the leaders of Chipko movement have so far not formulated their views on women and their position in society. We are aware that the study of a social movement is adequately taken up only when it becomes a historical fact and ceases to be of any utility since its purpose is already achieved. We are, however, in this case only in initial stages of the movement, we will have to be content with simply recording the current activities which make us feel that implications of the present situation of conflict are far and wide for the people of the area in general and for women in particular.

I

The Social Setting

The Garhwal division of Uttar Pradesh comprises four districts of Uttarkashi, Chamoli, Tehri and Pauri. The four districts cover a total area of 27,002 square kilometres and a population of 13,90,789 persons, or, 1.58 per cent of the total population of Uttar Pradesh. The two border districts of Uttarkashi and Chamoli are the least populated districts of the state. Districtwise density of population in Garhwal division is below 100. There are more females, 104 females per 100 males, in this area.

We selected the Chamoli district, as our unit of investigation, for studying the role of women in the Chipko movement because the movement, initiated by a group of Sarvodaya workers (followers of Mahatma Gandhi's disciple Vinobha Bhave), originated here. The total area of Chamoli district is 9,125 square kilometres. It has four Tehsil (revenue and administrative sub-divisions), namely, Joshimath, Karnaprayag, Chamoli and Ukimath. Population-wise, the district has fifty-third place in the state. Ninety-six per cent of the district population lives in villages. There are 1,649 villages in the district and of these 1,488 are inhabited. Of the total population of the district 58.01 per

cent persons are gainfully employed. Sixty per cent of the total female population of the district is 'working' while only 55 per cent of the men in the district 'work'. Further, 97 per cent of working women are engaged in cultivation while only 72 per cent of the men are cultivators. Women in this area do not work in mining, quarrying, transport, storage, communication and construction work. A small percentage—1.3 per cent—of working women engage in household industries of manufacturing, processing, sewing and repairs. There are very few agricultural labourers in this district as most families own a small patch of land for cultivation. Female agricultural labourers are only 0.4 per cent of the total number of working women while 2.5 per cent of working men are agricultural labourers.

Not only do females in the Chamoli district outnumber males by four per cent, the single-member female households outnumber single member male households. The majority of these single member households belong to 50 plus age group. Compared to Chamoli district number of female-headed households in other districts of Uttar Pradesh are numerically low. Male migration from hill areas to the armed services and other jobs in the plains is fairly common, leaving women to look after the land, livestock and families. Thus, besides a large number of single member female households and other types of female-headed households, there is also in this area fairly large number of households, though not female-headed in the census books and in legal terms, fully managed and run by females in the absence of male heads who continue to be the legal owners of the family property and *de jure* heads of the households. Nearly 20 per cent of the households are actually headed by females in the absence of male heads and in 0.4 per cent of the cases women head the household even if, the male spouses are present.

A visit to the area is enough to realise that topographic and climatic conditions of the area require special adaptation by people who have to work extra hard to effect their survival. During the fieldtrip¹ to the district, six villages in Chamoli Tehsil and one village in Joshimath Tehsil were visited and open-ended interviews held with rural women and men. Unlike villages in the Indo-gangetic plains, the rural population of this area depends on land as well as forest for its subsistence and other requirements of survival. Heavy dependence of rural population on forest produce makes the character of social life in this region significantly different from that of rural populations in the plains. Nearly each family in the villages owns land, covering an area of less than an acre. Annual crops grown here are wheat, paddy, pulses and oil seeds. Farming is mainly dependent on monsoon rains rather than irrigation channels.

Food grains produced per farm suffice for consumption of three to six months by an average family of five members. For the rest of

the year, villagers have to look for other sources of subsistence and the nearest source is the forest around them. Thus, settled agriculture is coupled with dependence on foraging of minor forest produce. The villagers also use the main forest produce for various purposes like making agricultural tools, dwellings, cooking fuel. Forest also is used for grazing cattle. People generally had a free access to the territory from which they derived nutrition but since 1821 after the 'trial settlement' there began a process of gradual control over the forest area by the government. Among some nomadic tribal groups control over territories holding strategic food resources was specified in terms of customary laws but the government forest policy resulted in their dissociation 'from the management and exploitation of the forest wealth' [Joshi 1981:449].

Among the more settled groups of rural population, labour required for each unit of land is more than in the plains. In terms of day-to-day life the basis for sex-role differentiation and relationship between the sexes are linked with the pattern of cultivation and exploitation of forest wealth and women's position in the society is governed by the norms of patriarchal system of social organisation.

Typically, men must prepare the land for cultivation because there are taboos associated with women operating the plough. Thus, women here are never able themselves to begin the process of cultivating; they must depend on men, who also own the land as property among the Hindus of Garhwal is transmitted in patriline. Labour required to raise crops is, however, almost single-handedly that of the woman. Women do the planting, weeding and harvesting. There are no prestige crops raised by either sex exclusively. Most staple crops are raised by women provided men prepare the land by ploughing it for two days in each cropping season. The preparation of the soil does not automatically give a man the right to distribute food in or outside the family. It is generally in the hands of women.

Households in a village typically consist of nuclear families related through patrilineal descent. Paternally/fraternally extended families live in adjoining houses and their plots of land are situated side by side. Even in nuclear families norms of the joint family system are observed by the Garhwali Hindus. Those Garhwali men who do not migrate to work in armed services or other jobs in the plains, participate little in cultivation. Besides preparing the land for planting men build and repair their dwellings, do the marketing and participate in the socio-religious and political activities of the community. Cash sent by migrant male earners is used by women to pay for family's needs. A man who does not earn cash by doing a paid job is more or less a retired man, and does almost nothing except ploughing his plot of land for two days in each cropping season and repairing his homestead. Even the cattle which

the family may own is looked after by the women of the household. The burden of transporting crops from the fields also falls on women and girls. Senior men of the patrilineage hold political offices and wield social power over junior males as well as over all women of their families.

The major work of cooking and other food processing for daily meals is carried out by women, including collection of firewood and fetching of water. Collection of fuel for hearth and fodder for cattle alone take nearly four to five hours of women's day. Cooking of meals and rearing of children are exclusive responsibilities of women.

For crafts there is no obvious division of labour. Both men and women weave and make garments, though trading in craftware is exclusively in the hands of men. By cultivating crops for household consumption women, have on the other hand, almost an exclusive control and management of food in their hands. The routine physical care of the homestead—house-keeping in its literal sense—is the charge of the wife. Since the labour of a household is never enough to provide a surplus over the needs of the household, the woman, though in exclusive control over the distribution of goods, has hardly a position of command in a society in which the man has ample of surplus time to engage in activities other than subsistence pursuits [Lancaster 1976:539-64]. Control over the allocation of the patrilineal group's resources is solely in male hands. The resources, including land, livestock, the political and ritual offices in the patrilineal group and the control over the marriages of sisters and daughters of the men are in the hands of senior men. Controlling and manipulating of supernatural beings, entitlement to political control on others, leadership and authority are men's domain. Women say that they do not have even a moment's respite from back-breaking routine of housekeeping and cultivating fields, therefore, they do not/cannot participate in political and ritual life of the community as actors. Regular rain-making ceremony, vitally important ritual for the welfare of the entire population, is organised by men.

Women by granting or withholding food and sometimes also sexual accessibility use their rights as sources of control. Men not sexually available to her (her sons/father/brothers) are sources of help and support and similarly, men view women in the role of mother/sister as friendly, supportive and generally venerable. They consider women in the role of wives at best of loyalty and at worst as of hostility, expressed in the form of witchcraft. The degree of sexual freedom before marriage allowed to both boys and girls is confined to the extent that a girl does not become pregnant.

Among most Hindu groups of the twice-born castes, marriage is within the endogamous groups and village exogamy is a norm. There is an exchange of presentations at the time of

marriage between the bride-givers and bride-takers. Gifts are given according to the economic and ritual status of the bride's father. Among the non-twice born castes and also among some tribal groups the practice of bride-price is more common. Both in the case of dowry and bride-price the gift-exchange is, however, not substantial, therefore, there are few repercussions of either norm on the practice of divorce in both types of marriage. Divorce in this area is a realistic option for both men and women. After divorce, the woman calls upon her father/brother to grant use of land for cultivation until she contracts another marriage. Thus, her subsistence is assured and the question of alimony becomes irrelevant.

Regarding the distribution of power and authority in the family men hold assigned power and women are seen to exercise unassigned power, i.e., they seek compliance through withholding food and sexual access. In almost all the villages, we found a separation of political and domestic spheres and along with extended family structures, power and authority are built around a hierarchy of males. Women appear to be trying to influence the men holding authority. One woman said that those men who do not hold any political office—e.g., membership of the Gram Panchayat or village assembly—and try to help the women of their families in their houses and farm work, are made fun of. Thus, some women explained that even if their men would like to help them in child-minding or agricultural tasks, they would not like this to be known to other men in the village. If a woman is lazy or not efficient in housekeeping, the husband is expected to give her an occasional beating. If a woman finds herself managing well in her house and fields and even then if her husband beats her, she decides either to go back to her father/brother or if she is a strong person, to outbeat the man. Such a woman is, of course, only an exception, said the villagers.

IMPACT OF GOVERNMENT INITIATED PROGRAMMES

In almost all the villages we were told that the various development plans and the tribal welfare schemes, introduced by the government have actually failed to make an impact on the poor standard of living of rural people in general and on the worsening conditions of household drudgery of women in particular. On the other hand, there are prominently visible signs of change in the local scene in the form of government initiated developmental programmes of construction of roads, increased number of educational, medical and housing facilities.

In Chamoli district alone there are 66 government intermediate colleges and three post-graduate colleges. The district registered an increase of 50.03 per cent in literacy in the 1961-71 decade. In Kathura, a village of 35 families, there were 55 males and 9 females literate, while in Sainji village, comprising three families, 6

males and 2 females are literate. Education has entered this region in a significant manner. One old woman in Dewara Kharore village requested me to stop the spread of education as under its impact all boys of the village like to migrate out, leaving women to cope with harsh life of the hills. Another woman brought out ill-effects of construction of roads by saying, "Now outsiders are coming to sell their fancy wares to us who had never used these bright things before. The people in hill areas are now being exploited by outsiders and many people are also being displaced from their land by outsiders." She added, "Come with me to the local market and see for yourself that it is monopolised by outsiders who sell things which we have no use for except making us lazy and good for nothing. Previously local people had the habit of walking over-long distances and now even for covering a short distance they prefer to wait for the bus. Now we have more hotels by the roadside and people go and eat in these dirty places, thus contract infectious diseases and require hospitalisation for long periods." Thus, in her views all development has had negative impact on people's life.

Talking with some local teachers and students, it appeared that development in the form of roads, schools, hospitals, hotels, shops and other means of communication like cinema, radio and libraries has ensured increased participation of Garhwal region in the mainstream of national development. Some men in Nail Malana village, with a population of 118 persons only, said that "before all of us walked barefoot and our soles were torn and rough. Now all of us have Hawai chappals and terrycot shirts to keep cold off our bodies. There are hospitals to take the sick persons to. Before people died away in the absence of doctors and medicines". One man said, "If a man could join armed forces, he was lucky. If he could manage to find a job of even a watchman in a big city like Lucknow or Delhi, he was again a lucky person. But mostly, men went out to scrub dishes in hotels and could not send any money back home. Many men remained at home without anything to do except smoke pipe and watch the wife work in the field." "Now", he said, "a man can go out and work at least as a daily wage labourer on a construction site and earn Rs 16 per day". He thought that this was a sign of progress and he gave example of his son who passed out from the local government post-graduate college and became a teacher in a school after passing a course in teacher's training. Another man said that people in this area are simple-minded and so they can easily be exploited by more cunning fellows from the plains. Therefore, he wanted his boys to study hard and outmanoeuvre those fellows. One old man stated in a calm voice, "Whether we like it or not, the government is opening up this area and for sure, the government is only working in its own selfish interests, and it has no aim of benefiting the people. All the same

it is upto us to benefit from the new developments and if we want to take advantage of the new schemes, we much prepare ourselves to come forward and push the outsiders out.'

II

The Chipko Movement

In the context of the above setting, I shall now give a brief sketch of the Chipko movement² as initiated by some Sarvodaya workers in Chamoli district. The movement started on April 24, 1973 at Mandal, Chamoli district. Before this event took place, the organisers of the movement had already been active in this area in the field of social reconstruction for the previous thirteen years. C P Bhatt and his co-workers, belong to Chamoli district and work for the growth of avenues of employment for local people. They believe in the ideology of non-violence as propagated by Mahatma Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave and call themselves Sarvodaya workers. In 1960, they founded a workers' co-operative which organised unskilled and semi-skilled construction workers. For sometime, they worked successfully in this field but later were outmanoeuvred by rich contractors who created stronger lobby for themselves in official circles. Then this group thought of creating more employment through forests and in 1964 established the Dasholi Gram Swarajya Mandal (DGSM) and entered the market by buying rights over forest through auction, for its small workshop making farm tools for local use. Here again after initial success, the group was outmanoeuvred by other contractors.

In the meantime, the DGSM thought of starting a new enterprise—collecting of roots and herbs from the forest. In this field from 1969 to 1972 the DGSM gave employment to about 1,000 persons. In 1971 the DGSM opened a small processing plant in Gopeshwar with the help of Khadi Gramodyog Commission. The plant manufactured turpentine and resin from pine sap. Here, again the DGSM had to face difficulties because the Forest Department did not allot adequate supplies of pine sap even when the price paid for it was higher than the one for a partly state-owned producer in the plains. In 1971-72 for eight months the plant had to be closed down for lack of raw material. The plant worked only for four months and produced resin worth Rs 3,50,000 and turpentine worth Rs 75,000 and distributed Rs 13,000 as wages to labourers. The Sarvodaya workers faced difficulties with the government policy in each of their enterprises, viz, the association of skilled and unskilled construction workers; founding of DGSM for starting small industries using the forest resources; a small workshop making tools for local use; buying and marketing of herbs collected by local people, and the small processing plant.

On October 22, 1971, villagers from nearby areas demonstrated in Gopeshwar (headquarter of Chamoli district) against the government

forest policy. Again on November 14, 1972 there was a meeting of presidents of all village assemblies of Dasholi block, followed by a demonstration which was repeated in December 1972. In January 1973 there were many meetings at Gopeshwar and the leader of this group, C P Bhatt went to Dehra Dun and met the officials of the Forest Department. In February 1973 there were again meetings in Gopeshwar regarding the government forest policy and in March 1973 C P Bhatt resigned from the membership of Uttar Pradesh Cottage Industries Board as a protest against the government forest policy.

The Forest Department which had earlier refused the DGSM's annual (1972-73) request for ten ash trees for its farm tools workshop, allotted 300 ash trees to the Simon Company, a sporting goods manufacturer from the plains. The Forest Department had put tennis rackets before the plough. In March 1973 the agents of the Simon Company arrived in Gopeshwar to supervise the cutting of the trees. There also arrived the Chipko³ movement.

On March 27, 1973 at a meeting in Gopeshwar it was decided that the local people will not let a single tree be felled by the Simon Company. On April 24, 1973 the DGSM workers and about 100 villagers from nearby areas marched out of Gopeshwar, beating drums and singing traditional songs to Mandal village. The Simon Company agents and their men retreated from Mandal without felling trees. This event had an effect on the Forest Department which offered to let the DGSM have one ash tree if it allowed the Simon Company its full quota. The DGSM refused the offer and the Forest Department increased the offer to two, then three, five and finally ten trees, the DGSM's full quota. The DGSM refused all the way. The Forest Department had to cancel the Simon Company's permit and the trees were assigned to the DGSM instead.

The Forest Department also ended the discrimination in pine sap supplies. But at the same time it allotted the Simon Company a new set of ash trees in the Phata Forest, in another part of the district. On June 20, 1973, another local leader, Kedar Singh Ravat (a Communist Party member), joined hands with the Sarvodaya workers and organised the Chipko demonstration in Phata which is 80 kilometres away from Gopeshwar. Villagers of Phata and Tarasali kept a vigil on their trees until December 1973, the last date of validity for the Simon Company's permission. Thus began a long story of the Chipko movement which grew out of the needs of the people in the hill areas. The Uttarakhand Sarvodaya Mandal, based in Tehri Garhwal, decided to spread the message of the Chipko movement to villagers in the whole region of the Himalayas and Sunderlal Bahuguna began on October 25, 1973 his 120 days' march on foot.

Prior to this, the movement had confined itself to the problems of unemployment among

the local people. According to its workers, the mountain people did not benefit from the development schemes, initiated by the government after the 1962 border war with China. Besides in 1970 when the monsoon rains flooded the Alaknanda river, and hundreds of homes were swept away, the DGSM workers also launched a relief operation, reaching the mountain villagers marooned by the flood. During the operation, the workers realised that the chief cause of the flood was the clear-cutting of mountain slopes by the lumber companies, causing soil-erosion. Despite the Forest Department's programme of planting cleared slopes, they remained bare. Along with clear-cutting, the DGSM workers pointed out, the road building often caused landslides. The workers prepared a report and submitted it to the government but they also understood that the government's forest policy was mainly responsible for soil-erosion and hence recurring floods in the area. They did not expect the government to do much to retrieve the situation.

In 1973 again the monsoon rains brought another spate of floods in the area. By this time the DGSM had fairly well spelt out their interconnected goals of raising the local people's consciousness regarding the government's wrong forest policy and conscientising them toward their rights for the use of the local forest (*vanon ke hak hakuk*) as well as their responsibility for preservation of environment through a programme of afforestation. We have already seen that during their history of twelve years (1962 to 1971) the DGSM workers were able to organise local people. They themselves belonged to the area and therefore, realised the actual problems of the area and could easily explain them to the people in their own language. Thus, critical awareness of injustice and systematic inculcation of attitude, required for appropriation of resources was gradually built up by the movement. So long the workers of the movement organised people to get employment through exploiting local resources, it was mainly in relation to the men of the area, that the DGSM operated.

The flood relief work organised by the workers added to the movement another dimension, i.e., the preservation of the environment. While the two aspects—employment for local population and reservation of their customary rights over the minor forest produce and the conservation of forest are interrelated problems, it was the last problem which connected the movement to a larger body of population and included women along with men in its fold. During the flood relief operations, the DGSM workers observed the sad plight of the women who lost their houses, farms and cattle in floods. Besides the floods, recurring landslides (massive ones in 1977, 1978 and 1979) in the area caused severe damage to life and property, making villagers almost paupers. While working in areas affected by floods and landslides gave C P Bhatt and his companions an

insight into women's problems and a direct contact with them.

In the background of this experience, we can appreciate the turn of events with the Chipko struggle at Reni (Joshimath tehsil). The Forest Department announced an auction of almost 2,500 trees in the Reni forest overlooking Alaknanda river. On March 15, 1974 C P Bhatt reminded the villagers about the 1970 flood and warned them of more landslides and floods if the remaining forests were cut down. He suggested to hug the trees as a tactic to save them. Who heard him carefully? As the consequent events show, it was women who got his message. A woman leader, called Gaura Devi, organised the women of her village, Lata, and faced the men of the company which had won the auction for felling the trees of Reni forest. It was a situation, which almost forced women to take action which they did with firmness and unyielding courage.

As a matter of fact, as a result of a preplanned conspiracy on March 26, 1974 C P Bhatt was kept in Gopeshwar by a visit from a high level Forest Department official and the villagers of the area near Reni forest were asked to go to the town of Chamoli to collect the compensation money due to them for land taken for military purposes after the 1962 war with China. Thus, the local men had all gone to Chamoli and C P Bhatt was held back in Gopeshwar when the employers from the lumber company reached the outskirts of the Reni forest. Here they were spotted by a little girl, who informed Gaura Devi, a middle-aged Bhotia woman. She realised that something was to be done immediately if the trees were to be saved from felling.

In the absence of men, the women of Lata did some quick thinking and took an immediate course of action. A group of 30 women and children hurried and caught up with the contractor's men who had set up a camp and were cooking their mid-day meal. They (the women) asked the men to finish their meal and then return to the village (Lata) and wait to talk with the village men on their return from Chamoli. Gaura Devi described the encounter in graphic details by commenting on the rude behaviour of some men and her courage in pushing herself forward in front of the gun of one of the labourers. She challenged the man to first shoot her down, then only to touch the trees. She compared the forest with her mother's home (*maika*). By facing the men squarely, she and her companions forced them to retreat. Following this demonstration of strength by women, the Uttar Pradesh government decided to set up a committee of experts to investigate the situation and the lumber company withdrew its men from Reni to wait for the committee's decision.

The committee after two years reported that the Reni forest was a sensitive area and no trees should be cut in this region, therefore the government put a ten-year ban on all tree-felling

in an area of over 450 square miles in the Reni forest tract. This event blazed a trail. At Gopeshwar in June 1975, at Bhynder valley (Valley of Flowers) in January 1978, at Parsari (Joshimath) in August 1979 and at Dongri Paintoli in February 1980, women came out to take lead in the Chipko demonstrations and saved forests from felling. After the Reni success C P Bhatt and his workers began to address themselves to women and found them very sensitive and responsive to ecological problems. Women, who were never seen before in any of the village meetings were asked to attend them and began to turn out in great numbers.

As C P Bhatt explained, the events at Dongri Paintoli village indicated a new development in the movement. During a meeting between the members (all male) of the village council and the officials of the Horticulture Department, it was decided that the Oak forest near Dongri Paintoli will be given to the Horticulture Department for felling and this department will provide the villagers a cemented road, a higher secondary school, new hospital and electricity for their village. Some of the DGSM workers and C P Bhatt on hearing of this decision held a public meeting in the village and explained the importance of the conservation of their forests.

The villagers, specially the members of the village council, did not, however, agree with C P Bhatt and maintained that school, hospital, road and electricity are far more important for the village than a few hundred trees. All the same, efforts of C P Bhatt and others did not go waste on local women, who decided to hold a Chipko demonstration if anyone came to fell the trees of Oak forest. They even asked C P Bhatt and his men to come and help them in this task. On hearing about the invitation to C P Bhatt by the women of the village, members and president of the village council felt infuriated at the outrageous behaviour of their women. They, on the one hand, issued a written warning to C P Bhatt that if he would interfere with the village women, he will be dealt with by being killed upon his arrival to the village, and on the other hand, issued oral threats to their women.

All this did not deter the women of Dongri Paintoli and on February 9, 1980 they did not even wait for C P Bhatt to arrive. They came out in large numbers and held a Chipko demonstration and saved the forest. On February 18, 1980, the government ordered the stoppage of the forest felling in that area and on March 9, 1980, in accordance with the recommendation of a high power committee, the forest felling in that area was banned.

It was reported by members of the Mahila Mandal (Women's group) in Gopeshwar that women of Dongri Paintoli village were oppressed by men of their families. Defamation of women leaders was resorted to and women were asked not to attend the Chipko meetings, presided by a leader who was painted as a wick-

ed man. Here again, as we learnt above, the women showed a better sense of judgment than the menfolk of the village. Once they were convinced of the basic issue of forest conservation, no amount of threatening behaviour of their men could stop them from acting.

III

Comparison of Two Cases

If we compare the Reni and Dongri Paintoli cases, in Reni women simply acted as there were no men in the village and they only asked the labourers to wait for their men to return so that some talk could take place between the two sides of equals. Women took charge of the scene only in the absence of men. Once they did take charge, they succeeded in what they attempted. In Dongri Paintoli case, it was much more than taking a decision in the absence of men. Here they stood up against the decisions made by their own men. They faced opposition from men and held to their conviction.

In order to explain this show of power on the part of women, it was pointed out by a member of the Mahila Mandal of Gopeshwar that since women control most of agricultural operations and cattle rearing, men are quite dependent on them for their daily subsistence, it is not, therefore, easy for men to coerce their women into compliance of their wishes. In this situation we are able to study a subtle interplay of power and authority. Because of different situations assigned to males and females in the Garhwali society, they tend to have different interests and consequently there are conflicts over issues as discussed above.

The less powerful group in the situation tends to create its own values and norms although the dominant group tries to overpower the less powerful. Nonetheless as we can clearly see in the present case the subordinate group is a source of dissent, alternative ideology and agent of change. The Dongri Paintoli event shows that whenever there is even a little bit of expression of dissent, there is an encounter with powerholders. Women's decision to overrule men's objections and follow their own conviction is one expression of womanpower and implications of this expression for the existing power structure need to be studied.

Routinely inflicted violence on women by men becomes more visible in situations of open defiance by women and the crisis of conflict deepens rather than being solved. In some villages, women have demanded an equal right along with men to decide the affairs of their villages. They argue that since agriculture and animal rearing are entirely dependent on them and both are closely linked to the forest, women must be consulted regarding decisions on forestry. They asked, why are they not members of the village councils?

It is obvious that in this area the woman is the nucleus of the family—in many cases support of the man is not even available. Apart from the months of February, March, June,

July, September and October when they are busy in cultivation, women spend most of their time collecting minor forest produce. The forests are an integral sphere of daily activities of these women. With the disappearance of forest from areas nearer villages, women have to walk eight to ten kilometres to meet their daily needs. They have to walk over slopes with heavy loads of firewood and grass on their backs. Often they fall and meet death (see issue of the fortnightly newspaper *Devabhumi* from Nanda Prayag). For lack of time they are unable to look after their children. The mental and physical strain of daily life affects their health and also that of their children. The village songs express the resentment by women of their drudgery. Having become conscientised of the forest's role in their lives and their role in saving the forest, women find it natural to ask for their share in decision-making process whereby they can also decide as to what trees will be planned around their villages and whether or not anyone should be allowed to cut a tree.

In Gopeshwar, women have formed a Mahila Mandal to ensure protection of the forest around the town. Its guarding is carried out regularly by watchwomen who regularly receive wages in kind and under their watchful eyes the extraction of forest produce for daily necessities is done in a regulated manner so as not to harm the trees. Anyone violating these rules is fined and this fine is deposited in a common fund. Those who do not obey rules also risk the punishment of their tools being confiscated. Collection of dry twigs and grain leaves in March and April is allowed freely but any kind of misuse is severely dealt with. More and more of the DGSM educational camps are now attended by women despite their busy routine. They take part in discussions and become articulate in expressing their views through this form of non-formal education. Their programme is, of course, in initial stages and in most villages women were found busy in their day-to-day tasks with no time for the Chipko meetings and camps.

We can only say that the two cases of Reni and Dongri Paintoli and the organisation of women into Mahila Mandal at Gopeshwar are indicative of latent potentialities of organisation and mobilisation of resources by conscientised women. The situational analysis of the crisis-periods show how rural women work in handling their problems. When new ideas and methods of handling problems are introduced by leaders, they are quick on the uptake.

The situation of conflict arose because of the different meanings to development being attached by different groups. Men, who sit in village councils and other village bodies and head their families view the government officials with a great deal of respect and fear. They dare not oppose these officials. Women, on the other hand, never had any contact with government officials or other outsiders and had no model of interaction with them. They only

understood that felling of trees is harmful for their well-being and they simply acted according to their convictions. On the basis of their past interaction with government officials, men are convinced of the great powers of the government and its policies. They consider it wrong to oppose the government.

LESSONS OF THE CHIPKO MOVEMENT

The conceptual models of development are generally Eurocentric and thereby reflect the colonial approach of social sciences and policies based on them. This approach does not provide a context for the study of development in Third World countries. The non-indigenous means of education in most Third World seats of learning give rise to imitative and uncritical learning without concern with the major problems of the people. Even in Garhwal, men belonging to educated and progressive class simply follow the pattern in taking the western model of development as an ideal. As a result the general attempt towards self-reliant development are not appreciated by educated official class and are treated as reactionary and 'back to nature' approach.

There, however, have come up original approaches based on specific experiences of particular societies. These approaches use the concepts like marginality (Paso Gonzales Casanova of Mexico), action research (Orlando Fals Borda in Colombia), social investigation (as developed in China). One such approach was developed by Mahatma Gandhi who conceived action-oriented strategies, based on the poorest of the poor and aimed at a non-violent world order. His disciple Vinoba Bhave initiated a movement known as Sarvodaya which sought development of all-high and low, rich and poor. Inspired by these ideologies, some social workers began the Chipko movement for preservation of forests in the sub-Himalayan region of Garhwal. They emphasised the aspects of need-oriented programmes, endogenous strategies, self-reliance, ecological balance and structural changes so that there is a high degree of participation by all in national development. There is also included the choice of 'applying small-scale technology as a positively superior method of development to high technology' in the west.

Garhwali men and women, belonging to higher castes placed in the government, administration, politics, business and other fields, feel that with the government's interest in their area after the 1962 border war with China, they have already got roads, schools, colleges, hospitals and other development schemes. Men in rural areas feel that it is no use opposing these moves of the authorities. Some men said that there is always some cost of the development and in their case the cost was the loss of the innocence of Garhwali men. Yet, the men I spoke to in villages feel that it was not for them to stop development. Some also said that the DGSM wants people to go back to primitivism of

depending on nature. One man commented, "once we know what it means to ride a bus and travel long distances without walking, we cannot go back to old ways". Some even talked with enthusiasm about the schemes of generating hydro-electricity in the area whereas immediately some women retorted that generating electricity will mean giving shocks to the Himalayas and more of soil-erosion and loss of environment for the local people while the electricity will be used by the people in the plains.

It is clear that the prevailing model of development based on modernisation (westernisation) theory has meant a high social cost which the ordinary people pay. For poor men more of hotels, shops, construction work, schools, hospitals and other such developments mean further avenues for reducing their dependence on women by earning cash hence their option for this kind of development. Conversely, women who produce most or all of subsistence goods wish to maintain the *status quo* by retaining the traditional eco-system. Women see the question of forest conservation as one of their survival.

Thus, we have a situation where female energy is concentrated in subsistence, reproductive and nurturing spheres and the male energy is concentrated in public power and authority. Women did not traditionally command public power and authority. New ecological questions have sensitised these women towards issues, so far dealt with by men only. In our case women are dependent on men to meet their non-subsistence needs. Now with more paid jobs available to men in construction and other labouring sector, men are not so much dependent on women for their subsistence needs. These changes are causing reformulation of traditional relationships between the sexes in this area.

Women's participation in the Chipko movement has implications for possible changes in gender relationships in the Garhwali society. In an interview the leader of the Chipko movement in Chamoli district, summarised the present situation by saying that presently 90 per cent of women and 10 per cent of men of the area are with him while 90 per cent of men and 10 per cent of women are against him as they consider him to be a foe of local people. He considers that only through working with non-violent methods of spreading the awareness about ecological problems and their solution through a positive programme of afforestation, the movement will one day win over the other 90 per cent of men. He claims, "Even if I have to die for the cause of our movement, I and my companions are prepared for the same".

It appears that what we read about women's participation in the movement and what its leaders talk about are simplified and idealised images of the reality. The idealisation has, in turn, led to an unrealistic belief that participation of women in the development process can

be achieved by a mere ideological commitment and a few organisational devices. As the above account of the DGSM and its activities has revealed the release of spontaneity and creativity of rural women of Garhwal is a by-product of actions initiated at grassroots level by the Sarvodaya workers for increasing awareness of people about environment. Presently, the workers and their leaders face the problem of handling an unforeseen release of womanpower in this area. Traditionally the basis for sex-role differentiation and types of relationship between the sexes are mainly linked with the pattern of cultivation and exploitation of forest produce. Though not recognised as owners women have rights to dispose off crops by home consumption, of retention as an emergency resources, of exchange and gift giving. As ecological balance is an important aspect of new approaches to development, women's concern with local ecological problems is vital for their own sake. Change in traditional pattern of power and authority is being demanded by some women.

In a majority of programmes for women's development there is the topdown approach in which decision-making, evaluation and control lie with planners and policy-makers while actual participants do not have scope for growth of skills and political say to decide their own affairs. But if we aspire for change in social and political situation of women we have then to look at alternative approaches to replace the traditional power structure; hence the need to study women's participation in social movements.

In India in recent historical times women participated in the nationalist movement and studies of their role in the freedom movement have provided insights into the potentialities of women's organisational power (Minault 1981). In the post-independence period, there have, however, been very few cases of women's participation in social movements in India. To get at the forms of participation most beneficial to women, we need to have a broad multi-dimensional approach taking account of the costs involved in the implementation of a programme. If the cost is reduced by the use of local resources and voluntary labour as is provided by women to the Chipko movement, this leads to self-reliance which is a pre-requisite for change in women's own situation. Undoubtedly, the principle of self-help, involves a heavy burden on the already overworked and deprived section. This approach, however, bypasses the problem of the dependencies often encountered in topdown projects.

Although with increasing number of changes in the law there may be less of explicit oppression of women, sex-based inequalities are part of social values existing informally and unofficially. Even the supporters of the Chipko movement and its leaders are not free from these constraints. In home and family situations egalitarianism is almost absent and there are in-

variably tensions and inequalities which have implications for the stratification system of the society as a whole. The questions are: Is it possible that few instances of successful exercises of power by women would lead to further demands of sharing power in public and private? Are women able to face opposition from men and for how long? Does coercion by men alienate women from their families or does there come about another relationship between the sexes? These questions cannot be answered right now. As the movement is still in its infancy, we have to observe further developments and again discuss women's role in it.

One of the possible explanation of why women of this region participated the movement can be the ideological basis of the Sarvodaya workers. Belief in non-violence, co-operation and self-help are the basic axioms of the Sarvodaya philosophy and it would appear that women, away from the intricacies of public power and political activities, genuinely believe in the ideas of co-operation and self-help. The norm of non-violence comes to them as a natural and more effective weapon in terms of moral pressures on offenders. This is only a hypothesis and not an interpretation of the patterns of behaviour among rural women of Chamoli in the face of adverse circumstances, threatening their survival and continuity.

In the present situation it is hard to perceive if the model of Reni and Dongri Paintoli women will become common in Garhwal region. Alternatively they may define their needs in terms of a culture, disseminated by the mass-media which is yet another product of the dominant ideology, fast entering the hills of Garhwal from the Indo-gangetic plains. Spontaneous behaviour of the Reni and Dongri Paintoli villages was not reflected in the conscientisation process of the literate women and girls one met in the six villages of Chamoli

Tehsil. In the existing power structure, men dominate, women find themselves too oppressed to wage a war against oppression. The impact of the Chipko movement is certainly visible in some of the places while resistance by majority of men against its advance also is equally apparent.

Notes

- 1 The author is grateful to the Indian Social Institute, New Delhi for financing the field trip to Garhwal, during September-October, 1982.
- 2 It is fairly clear that the Chipko is one of the people's ecological movement, existing over past ten years. These movements are basically different from recent concern over economic-crisis in the western world, where industrial pollution is threatening the life style of people in developed nations. In the Chipko movement there is a concern over the very survival of people in the hill areas and therefore we have the popular struggle by the people rather than the use of media to influence policies of the government, which would be seen as a bourgeois deviation (cf Mitra 1982).
- 3 Originally for hugging the trees the local people used the word *angavaltha* which literally means 'embracing'. Later the Garhwali word was replaced by the Hindi word *Chipko*, meaning 'hugging'.

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