

Hugging the Trees: The Story of the Chipko Movement

By Thomas Weber

176 pp., *Figures, Notes, Bibliography, Index.*
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Thomas Weber's *Hugging the Trees* is one of the few books on Chipko movement that must be read by every environmentalist, the students of human ecology, activists and social workers and those interested in the sociology of social movements. Having spent a lot of time with the Chipko workers (or 'co-workers' and 'spreaders' of the message, as they are called) and having accompanied Sunderlal Bahuguna on various expeditions and *padayatras*, Weber has a first hand knowledge of Chipko, and in this book of 175 pages, he narrates its story, the issues with which it has grappled overtime, the role of women to its success, and its future.

Chipko, in its contemporary form, crystallised after a long non-violent struggle. It was on 27 March 1973, that the movement acquired its name when the activists who had assembled to moot a strategy to frustrate the attempts of felling trees by the agents of an Allahabad-based company. According to one version, Chandi Prasad Bhatt announced in his speech, "Let them (the fellers) know that we will not allow the felling of ash trees. When they aim their axes upon them, we will embrace the trees" (p. 40).

Though saving trees by 'hugging' them under the canopy of the Hindi term 'chipko', 'to hug' may not be an old idea, the movement against environmental despoliation began in the middle of this century. The process of de-forestation started in the hills of Garhwal and Kumaon regions, when the British found the *deodar* trees excellent for the manufacture of railway sleepers. Till the passing of the Indian Forest Act of

1865, which conceived of some measures to conserve the forest wealth, many valuable forests were denuded by government contractors. In addition, the forests were, on some occasions, put on fire by the people who wanted to register their protest against the alien rule. How could the not-so-easily renewable wealth survive when the forest was used as a political weapon?

Economic problems of the people of the small communities having forest-oriented economic life-multiplied as the forests were destroyed. Environmental hazards like flooding, landslide, etc., became a prominent feature. In this background of deforestation, two of Gandhi's disciples, Mirabehn and Sarala Devi, and a number of *sarvodaya* workers worked untiringly with the people raising their environmental awareness, and at the same time, they demanded an end to commercial exploitation of the Himalayan forests.

Once Chipko was born in 1973 as a fine example of non-violent struggle, as an extension of the philosophy of Gandhian *satyagraha*, the activists launched intensive campaign to save the forests. The worst sufferers of deforestation, the women, who had to travel long distance to collect fire-wood, actively joined the movement. The concerted campaigning by the activists gradually gave rise to the Chipko culture, with its songs, slogans, methods of communication, inter-personal relations and working with the local people. The issues which confronted the Chipko 'co-workers' were of global relevance, but the techniques they resorted to and the cultural bulwarks they adopted, were fundamentally local.

Chipko has been able to reach the grass-root levels because of some important reasons. Firstly, it is neither an organization nor one movement. It is an ideology of saving trees from being felled down for commercial use. Under its ideological rubric survive a plurality of movements, each

adopting a particular area of the Himalayan landscape, or any other forested belt, for speeding up environmental awareness and generating enthusiasm of the locals to safeguard and protect their eco-zone.

No hierarchy is set in the group of co-workers; every decision is reached after debating where the local men and women are encouraged to take part and voice their opinion. The ideology Chipko adheres to is simple, easily communicable, and in its explanation, scientific researches on bio-mass and sociological researches on the relationship between 'developed' and 'developing'/'underdeveloped' nations in terms of resource import are funnelled down to the people.

As oral tradition is still very strong in India, the most effective way to instil the message of Chipko is through *padayatra*. And Bahuguna and his co-workers' *padayatra* of almost 5000 kilometres, extending from May 1981 to February 1983, did a lot to arouse awareness among the people of diverse cultures but equally affected by the destruction of their environment, and to spread the strategy of endogenous development—development without destruction. These types of *padayatras* have educated the people: the relation between deforestation and floods has been explained; the problems of fire wood and fuel—how cow-dung instead of adding rich manure to the soil is now being used as fuel, in the form of cakes, because of scarcity of fire-wood—are detailed out; the methods of activism are discussed; and the Chipko culture is enriched by addition of new folklore, invoking Indian heritage. Thus, Chipko is an educational effort; it is not emotive and romantic. It is working on scientific lines, incorporating new researches which have whole-heartedly supported endogenous and

culturally-rooted development; Chipko is not anti-scientific as it was looked at earlier.

Gaura Devi's august role in saving Reni forest is worth-emulating. She is a Bhotia woman from Reni village in Chamoli. Now 66 (and not 'in her fifties', as Weber writes on page 45), she was widowed at the age of 22 and since then has been a very active person. Recently, in September 1989, she was felicitated by *Daliyon ka Dagdya* ('Friends of Trees') and the narration of her confrontation at Reni is worth-remembering. Let me reproduce here from a description provided to me by P.C. Joshi (on 4 October, 1989), a 'co-worker' of 'Friends of Trees'.

It was in 1974 that the *Malدار* and Police came to cut our trees. Initially came a batch of labourers, all from Eastern U.P. When we protested, they all left. The *Malدار* came once the labourers had returned frustrated. They threatened us that they would take us to the jail. I said I would like to see the jail. At that moment, we thought that the forest is our life. If it is destroyed, what would life mean to us. We would be as good as dead. We were nearly twenty-five women. Some of us hugged the trees, others stood in the way. We were abused and insulted.

The Reni forest was saved. Kudos to Gaura Devi!

Weber's concluding note is interesting. Regarding Chipko's future, he says that it is now an 'umbrella term' to include any non-violent action, locally accomplished to save trees and environment. As an ideology, it will survive eternally, and its impact on various peoples' movements in European countries is gradually being felt. The book ends with a flow-diagram identifying landmarks in the evolution of Chipko. The seven appendixes to the book provide useful material to further researches on this movement.

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