

CHIPKO MOVEMENT: A LANDMARK EFFORT IN ADDRESSING ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS IN INDIA

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Abstract: India is such a country which is very much rich in terms of forest resources. These forest resources have been contributing for centuries towards the development of the country. As India is mainly a developing country, these forest resources are very much necessary for development purpose. But in the last few decades it is seen that in the name of development, these resources are being misused. However various movements have emerged to address such environmental crisis happening in the country. In this regard Chipko movement has become a rallying point which has focused worldwide attention on the environmental crisis in the Himalayas of Uttarakhand. But in spite of the successful implementation of the Chipko movement, there has been happening lots of devastation regarding the forest in the present time. This paper has mainly tried to draw the attention towards the Chipko movement, the most successful environmental movement ever happened in India along with the present devastating situation regarding the forest resources in India.

Keywords: Chipko Movement, Environment, Ecology, Crisis.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Chipko movement, which is a very popular one amongst all the environmental movements in India, has focused worldwide attention on the environmental crisis in the Himalayas of Uttarakhand. The word “chipko” means “to stick” or “to embrace”. It is a movement that adopted the Gandhian principles of Satyagraha and Non-violent resistance, through the act of hugging the trees to protect them from being felled.

Before 1970's, people like Sri Dev Suman, Mira Behn and Sarala Behn fought for the social justice and ecological stability in the hills of Uttarpradesh and these Gandhian activists provided a solid ground of inspiration for the Chipko movement.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

There is not a single objective, but a number of objectives behind the study, such as –

- To draw attention towards the most successful environmental movement ever happened in India.
- To analyze those areas which have made the Chipko movement a significant one and a milestone in the field of environmental movements in India?
- To depict the present devastative and deplorable condition regarding the forest in India.
- To provide some remedial measures in order to prevent the devastation of forest.

III. THE MOVEMENT AND BACKGROUND

Even after the achievement of independence, the Government of India made the continuation of earlier forestry practices which were unable to meet the local needs of the people. In this context, we may refer to the forest conservation policies like The Indian Forest Act, 1927 which restricted the access of the local people to the forests. Although in 1958, a committee was formed to enquire into the grievances of the people of Uttarakhand concerning forest management, but because of the absence of concrete programmes, the villagers became dissatisfied and they continued to express their great dissatisfaction against the practice of large timber coups being sold to outside contractors, looting of natural resources from the hills and the continuing underdevelopment of the hills. This dissatisfaction was given a new momentum by the 1970 flood which caused severe devastations in the Alakananda valley. The villagers recognized the causal relationship between increasing land erosivity and floods on the one hand and the mass scale felling of trees on the other.

This dissatisfaction along with the rising awareness of ecological crisis resulted in the growth of a co-operative organization named Dashauli Gram Swarajya Sangh (DGSS). It was set up by a Gandhian social worker Chandi Prasad Bhatt in Gopeshwar and it aimed at establishing small scale industries using the resources of the forest and tried to generate local employment.

In early 1973, DGSS asked the Forest Department for the allotment of 12 ash trees. But this request was turned down by the Government. But at the same time, the Symonds Company of Allahabad was given a contract of 300 ash trees in the forest of Mandal, barely several miles from Gopeshwar. As a result of this blatant injustice, Chandi Prasad Bhatt thought of embracing the trees to protect them. Thus, the first protest through chipko was followed by the villagers of Mandal and the labourers and the agents of Symonds Company were forced to turn away from Mandal without felling a single tree.

But, despite this early protest, in January 1974, Government decided the auction of over 2000 trees in the Reni Forest situated in the Alakananda valley. It was a locality affected by landslides in the recent past. Immediately the villagers decided to protest against the actions of the Government by hugging the trees. Over the next few weeks, rallies and meetings continued in the Reni area. The landmark event in this struggle took place on March 26, 1974, when a group of peasant women in the Reni village of Uttarakhand acted to prevent the cutting of trees and claimed their traditional forest rights that were threatened by the contractor system of the state forest officials. Although the forest officials adopted dishonest actions in Reni, however, finally the villagers were able to save the forest.

Following Reni, forest auctions were opposed in different parts of Garhwal. Subsequently, over the next 5 years, the movement spread to many districts in the region and within a decade it spread throughout the Uttarakhand Himalayas.

But in spite of the success of these major chipko agitations, in 1979, the contractor was given a big contract for the felling of trees in the Badyargarh Patti of Tehri Garhwal District. The felling was very destructive. It happened because of the erosion of community co-operative spirit. At this juncture, Sundarlal Bahuguna along with the Sarvodaya workers, Dhum Singh Negi, Kunwar Prasun, Pratap Sikhar and Vijay Jardari came to Badyargarh and mobilized the people about the harmful ecological consequences of the felling. At the same time, Bahuguna's wife, Vimla and other ladies mobilized the village women on the issue. The movement reached a new height with Bahuguna's hunger fast from 9 January, 1979 which very much inspired the villagers. Bahuguna was arrested on 22 January. But because of the determined resistance of the villagers, even after the removal of their leader from the scene, the contractor and the forest officials had to admit defeat and abandoned felling.

Methods Adopted By the Movement:

Fully non co-operation tactics were adopted in the entire movement. Moreover, no question of violence was being used. Rallies and meetings were continuously held. A reading of Bhagawad Gita was also organized. Along with these, women tied 'rakhees' around the wounded spots signifying their close relationship with the trees. Finally, hunger fast was also adopted by the leaders like Sundarlal Bahuguna during the movement.

Participation in the Movement:

A positive aspect of the movement was the active participation of all social groups. The Bajgis, a group of musicians, were solicited to mobilize the villagers through their dholaks. Although, many of its leaders were men, women also played a very prominent role, because they were the ones most affected by the rampant devastations which led to the shortage of fodder and firewood as well as water for drinking and irrigation. Even the children joined the movement.

Role of Leaders:

While speaking about the role of leaders in the movement, we must admit of the leadership given by Sundarlal Bahuguna, who was perhaps the best known Chipko leader. Adopting the Gandhian method of non-violence, he became able to strike a chord in the hearts of the people. Such a leader with the capacity for physical suffering as well as the spirit of sacrifice in an age of selfishness gave a new level to the movement. Along with Bahuguna, leaders like Chandi Prasad Bhatt, Dhum Singh Negi, Kunwar Prasun, Pratap Shikhar and Vijay Jardari very much contributed towards the movement. Moreover, the contributions made by the organizations like DGSS were unforgettable.

Government Response towards the Movement:

During the initial period, Government response towards the movement was not so encourageable. However, after the Reni incident, the Chief Minister of Uttarpradesh, H.N.Bahuguna agreed to set up a committee headed by a Botanist, Virendra Kumar to investigate the incident. A second Government committee headed by K.M.Tewari was also formed. But, although detailed project reports were prepared by both the committee, their recommendations were never implemented by the Government. But, when in April, 1981, Sundarlal Bahuguna went on an indefinite fast demanding a total ban on the green felling in the Himalaya, the Government led by Mrs. Indira Gandhi recommended a 15 year ban on commercial green felling in the Himalayan forests of Uttarakhand and this was the greatest victory of the movement.

Significance of the Movement:

The significance of the Chipko movement can be analyzed through the following points –

Firstly, the Chipko movement which later became a national campaign, was successful to challenge the activities of the state forest officials and also it had able to allow a 15 year ban on commercial felling of trees in the Himalaya and declared that area as protected area.

Secondly, the movement stood for a broad purpose. Although, in the initial period, it fought for the village people's rights over the resources of the forest, but in the later phase, it fought for the ecological stability of the region. So, it had represented a heightened awareness to ecology.

Thirdly, all social groups actively participated in the movement. Moreover, the active participation of women in a large scale made the movement more significant. Because of the active participation of women in a large scale, many people regard the Chipko movement as 'eco-feminist movement'.

The significance of Chipko can also be analyzed from the point of link between forest and people. Almost everyone was aware of the importance of forest cover in regulating soil and water regimes.

The moral content of Chipko made it too significant. When the contractors abandoned their labourers, the locals fed them from village ration shops and petitioned the officials to alleviate their plight.

The Chipko movement was also significant as it dealt with the question which was posed towards the livelihood of the people in the hills of Uttarpradesh because of the activities of the Government. As a result of the deterioration of the forest cover, the life of those people became threatened who were involved in labour intensive fodder and firewood collection. Because of the contribution made by the movement in this regard, it was awarded the '**RIGHT LIVELIHOOD AWARD**' in 1988.

Last but not the least, the movement became a rallying point for many future environmentalists, environmental movements and protests all over the world and created a precedent for non-violent protest. It occurred at a time when there was hardly any environmental movement in the developing world and its success meant that the world immediately took notice of this non-violent movement. It also revealed that even a Gandhian movement can become successful in this time also.

Accordingly, it can be said that, the Chipko movement is definitely a successful and significant movement. However, before Chipko, people like Sri Dev Suman, Mira Behn and Sarala Behn fought for the social justice and ecological stability in the hills of Uttarpradesh. Moreover, in 1763, in village Khejarli in the Jodhpur District of Rajasthan, 363 members of the Bishnoi sect laid down their lives to protect the trees from being felled under the order of the Maharaja of Jodhpur. But all these efforts were not so strong and organized as we see in case of the Chipko movement.

But, at the same time, it would be wrong to ignore the importance of other forest based movements which occurred before Chipko as they had provided a solid ground of inspiration for the Chipko movement.

Present Scenerio:

In spite of the successful implementation of Chipko movement, there has been happening lots of devastations regarding the forest in the present time. There are various reasons behind this devastative situation. Some of these are –

Firstly, as India is mainly a developing country, therefore, forest resources are very much necessary for development purpose. But in the name of development, these resources are being misused.

Secondly, in the present material world, people are becoming more prone towards the fulfillment of material needs. In the process, people are using the forest resources for business purpose without caring for the ecological stability.

Although in the last decade, we have seen the emergence of several forest based movements in India, but none of these movements have become successful. One reason for this is that the regions in which these movements have arisen, have undergone rapid economic differentiation. They are also facing internal contradiction and have lost the community co-operative spirit. As a result of this, such regions become unsuccessful to present a united form in opposition to unjust forest policies. Moreover, these movements have also tended to be more violent.

Moreover, in the present time we have seen a tendency among the young generation that they like to go outside for higher education or for job purposes rather than involving in any kind of movement. This kind of attitude of the young generation has also contributed towards ecological instability to a certain extent.

Along with all these, the non-implementation of Government policies and ignorance of the views of the local people by the Government are equally responsible for the present situation. In this context, Bandana Shiva has also stated that the alienation of the common people from their rights over the local resources is the main reason behind the devastations of ecology. But it will be wrong to blame the Government completely for all these. It will be injustice to say that Government has not taken any step for the preservation of forest and ecology nor has implemented the policies whichever it has taken. No doubt, Government has adopted policies regarding forest and ecology from time to time.

For one time, if we accept that Government is responsible for all these devastations, then what we common people are doing? We people are also not lagging behind. We are also doing the same thing. Even I think, common people are contributing more towards this situation. No Government policy can stop the people from harming the forest until the people do not understand the importance of forest resources and their link with the ecology. We must have consciousness ourselves. We must have an inner responsibility to save the forest resources. Yes, Government is responsible to some extent. But we common people must cooperate with the Government to save the environment because, if devastations of ecology will happen, then everyone will be affected by that.

IV. SUGGESTION

In this context, I would like to suggest some remedial measures –

- To plant more and more trees around houses as well as in public places like parks, gardens, play areas etc. In other words, a process called reforestation should be adopted everywhere.
- Wastage of paper should not be made. Instead, we should try to recycle paper as much as we can. Moreover, we should try to imbibe the same sense in our parents, children, and friends and so on.
- Every knowledgeable person should become an advocate of reforestation and should raise awareness among the common masses about the potential hazards that will occur if deforestation continues unabated.
- There should be some national policy regarding plantation and replantation. Moreover, we common people should develop a sense of tree care. In the event that we must have to remove a tree for a legitimate reason, another tree must have to be planted in its place.
- Paste placards saying “PLANT MORE TREES” , “DO NOT WASTE PAPER” , “STOP CUTTING TREES” and the like in venues like the neighboring community, schools, colleges, restaurants etc.
- Forest conservation organizations should be supported as far as possible through donations, money or actions.

- Governmental and non-governmental institutions and policies should be strengthened and their fuller implementation must be ensured as soon as possible.
- There should be the adoption of environment friendly development approach. In the name of development, the forest resources should not be misused.
- People as well as Government must be conscious regarding the importance of forest resources and their link with ecology and environment.
- Last but not the least, we should try to arrange conferences and meetings to enlist support of the local people for the purpose of conservation of forest.

V. CONCLUSION

I would like to sum up my paper on the “CHIPKO MOVEMENT: A LANDMARK EFFORT IN ADDRESSING ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS IN INDIA” by referring to one well known slogan of the famous Chipko leader Sundarlal Bahuguna, that is – “ECOLOGY IS PERMANENT ECONOMY”

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