

12. The Struggle for a Safe Environment



Discussing deforestation, Junagadh, Himachal

The Second Citizens' Report (CSE Report) on the state of India's environment in the late 1980s points out:

probably no other group is more affected by environmental destruction than poor village women. Every dawn brings with it a new march in search of fuel, fodder and water. It does not matter if the women are old, young or pregnant: crucial household needs have to met day after weary day. As ecological conditions worsen, the long march becomes longer and even more tiresome. Caught

between poverty and environmental destruction, poor rural women in India could well be reaching the limits of physical endurance.¹

As long ago as 1952 the Indian government targetted that 33 per cent of the geographical area of India was to be brought under forest cover in order to have an ecologically balanced environment.² Recently, the government's Approach to the Seventh Plan reiterated this saying: 'The highest priority should be given to restore forest cover with 33 per cent of the geographical area of

the country being brought under forests from the present level of 23 per cent. Measures should be intensified to restore forest cover to the full where it is at present degraded . . .¹⁵ In other words, the target was never achieved.

Today, India uses only a tenth of the rainfall it receives, the water table has declined in large areas, and high profile projects such as dams, reservoirs and canal systems—on which the government has laid stress—have not been able to provide adequate irrigation or to arrest the cycle of floods and droughts that annually hits the poor in India.

The consequences have been especially grim for women. Rural women have to traverse greater distances and spend more hours collecting fuel, fodder and water: in some areas, the distance covered in search of these has quadrupled from 2 to 8 km, while the extension of hours spent in collection of basic survival necessities has both cut time available for wage labour and stretched the normal working day to 14–15 hours.

The health effects of this highly increased workload are naturally detrimental. And to these must be added illness due to inefficient stoves in closed rooms, while scarcity of fuel in conditions of poverty often forces women to cook faster—cooking less nutritious foods, or to undercook—both of which increase their ill-health, as well as that of their families.

It was against this depressing backdrop that the Chipko and Appiko movements arose. The struggle for a safe and sane environment has a history of protests in India. Among the better known of these is that of the villagers of Tilarī in Tehri Garhwal in 1930, when the villagers gathered to protest the forest laws of the rulers of Tehri and, although several were killed and injured in the reprisals that followed, they did succeed in winning their traditional rights to forest produce. In the Chipko movement it was the women who came into the forefront and transformed the struggle into something that was particularly theirs, although initially the movement is said to have been initiated by men, notable among whom were two activists, Sunderlal Bahuguna and Chandi Prasad Bhatt.

The Chipko movement got its name from the word 'chipko' which, in Hindi, means to cling. This, clinging to trees, was the particular action people used to save trees from being felled. Exact histories of Chipko differ. According to the Second Citizens' Report, the movement began one morning in 1973 in the remote hill town of Gopeshwar in Chamoli district, when representatives from a sports goods factory in Allahabad arrived in Gopeshwar to cut 10 ash trees for their use. To begin with, the villagers requested them not to do this, but when the contractors persisted, the villagers came up with the idea of hugging the earmarked trees. Defeated, the contractors were forced to go back: some

weeks later the villagers marched, along with Chandi Prasad Bhatt, to Rampur Phata, another village, to foil the same contractors once again.

Women entered the movement one year later, in 1974. The villagers of Reni, some 65 kms from Joshimath town, had heard that the forest neighbouring their village was to be auctioned. Chandi Prasad Bhatt, who was at that time touring the area, came to the village and talked to the villagers about the success of Chipko in Gopeshwar. The men, however, decided that a first step was to protest to the authorities in town against the action. While they were away doing this the contractor seized his moment to start felling trees. The women of Reni, who had not formally been included in the meeting between Bhatt and the men, had nonetheless listened in because they saw this as their issue, now decided to take independent action. Led by Gaura Devi, 50 years old and widowed, they barred the path to the *karez* (which lies behind the village) singing

This forest is our mother's home
We will protect it with all our might

and the contractor's men were forced to turn back.

Again, in June 1975 women stopped the felling of trees in a forest near Gopeshwar village by clinging to them. They took their protest further by gheraoing (surrounding) some government staff quarters where young trees were to be cut down for kitchen fuel. The gherao was stopped only after they heard from the district magistrate that the trees would be protected.

Within a few years the Chipko movement had spread all over Chamoli district and parts of Tehri Garhwal, with women being in the forefront in many places. Indeed, after their first entry into this movement they have evolved a series of innovative ways to register their protest. In Henwal Ghati, for example, they protested against the indiscriminate tapping of pine trees by dressing the 'wounds' of the trees with mud and sacking. Each protest, whether it was to embrace trees, or to bandage them, reinforced the women's closeness to nature and their belief that natural resources were theirs to protect and conserve, not to exploit and destroy.

As the movement spread, women began to realize the need to get organized and to sustain the struggle. With the help of the Darauli Gram Swarajya Mandal, an organization headed by Chandi Prasad Bhatt, women formed Mahila Mangal Dals (women's groups) in many villages, and many of them began to claim the right to decide what was done in forests and fields. The traditional division of labour in the region was that men tended cattle and women tended fields. In both Reni and neighbouring villages the Dals now clashed with the male-dominated panchayat over the protection of

these crops. The men, when they took the cattle to graze, habitually cut through the fields. The cattle would trample the crops, or worse, eat them. The Dal decided to build walls around the fields to protect the crops. The men were furious and called a panchayat meeting. The panchayat expressed outrage at the Dal's temerity in taking such a decision, and insisted that only they could decide such matters. The women, however, asserted that since they were the people who tended the fields, they were the ones who should decide. The CSE Report cites another panchayat-Dal fight:

In one village the women fought the sarpanch over the distribution of the grass from their allotted patch. A woman from the sarpanch's family carried away grass that had not been authorised by the MMD. Usually the Dal announces a day when one person from each household can come and take grass as a simple way to ensure equitable distribution. The village women protested strongly against the sarpanch, who in turn had a case filed against them. But the district magistrate had to withdraw

the case when faced with a combined protest from all the women . . .

Needless to say, these actions were not popular with the men. According to Gopa Joshi, the men of Reni now began to harass and humiliate their women into giving up:

The harassment by the village menfolk 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 2415 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 . . .

Gaura Devi stood by her action. First the contractor tried to bribe her into letting his men enter the



Cheraing district government officials, Junagadh, Himachal

forest. When she refused his offer, the forest department personnel threatened to call the police and arrest her. The contractor, in league with some of the villagers, composed folk songs describing the arrest of Gaura Devi . . . They used to sing these songs all night long and dance together . . .

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 . . . activists are being made out to be the villains of the piece . . .²

In a paper presented at a conference some time ago, Chandi Prasad Bhatt confessed that the activism of the women at Reni in 1975 came as an eye-opener to him and it was only after this that he realized how much more important ecology was to women in Garhwal than it was in men. Since then both he and Bahuguna have done considerable work with women. The Dausali Gram Swarajya, which Bhatt heads, holds regular ecodevelopment camps where women also preside at meetings. They have been helping to get biogas plants and smokeless stoves for women—something that more and more women are asking for.

As the Chipko movement grew and developed, so did a movement for a safe environment in Uttarakhand. It was hoped that the two movements would unite the two areas which have common cultures and problems, and in some ways this has happened with the forestry movement spreading to Almora and the anti-alcohol movement (which is discussed later) spreading to Garhwal. However, while in Garhwal women's protests in the Chipko movement had been against timber contracting, in Almora they branched out into a resistance to mining. Kharakot, a small village in the Sonaneshwar valley, lies above the Kosi river on the lower slopes of the hills. It has a population of 150 families. Above the village lies the village forest and above this the government's reserve forest. Over the years Kharakot has had to see intensive male migration. Radha Bhatt, one of the activists from this area, points out that out of some 500 men, only 25 or 30 remain in the village. The women, however, have found their own resources and ways of organizing. Several years ago a contractor from Kanpur secured a lease for soapstone mining from the government. In order to carry stone to the road, he had to pass through the outskirts of Kharakot, cutting across fields and narrow paths the villagers used whenever they went to cultivate their fields, to fetch water or fuel and fodder. According to Devaki Jain:

The man initially transported these loads by human labour. He found the business so remunerative that he decided to set up a power mill. The mill, in turn, had a capacity which demanded much larger volumes of stone from the quarry. This led to the use of donkeys as pack animals. Convoys of donkeys used to go from the quarry to the road, occupying the narrow footpaths used by the local population, especially the women . . .³

Not only did women find that the bridle paths to the reserved forests that they would normally have used were crowded with mules carrying stone and that their access to the forests was blocked, they also discovered that mine debris was cluttering their protected forests. During the rains this mine dust was carried into the fields where it settled and formed a crust that made it impossible to plough. To begin with, the women appealed to the men of the village who first talked to the contractor and, when they found he was not prepared to listen, stopped working in the mines and built walls to protect their fields. The contractor responded by filing criminal cases against them and many were intimidated and began to weaken. However the women forced them to fight the court battle, collecting money from each household to do so. Meanwhile they resorted to direct action and tried to obstruct the pack trains by narrowing the footpaths so that the donkeys could not walk on them. The miner then registered a case against the women who responded by intensifying the obstruction and physically occupying the paths. The miner once again went to the courts. The women also forced men to stop work in the mines. Saad one: 'we would catch hold of the workers' implements and not let them dig.' And another: 'we asked them to kill us first, to bury us in the mountain, before they could touch the hill.' A third put it thus: 'their mining was destroying our lives, our children's futures. How could we let them mine?'

The contractor tried various ways to crush the women. He hired thugs to intimidate them, then resorted to stoning their houses. He also had a cloth shop owned by one of the women's sons burnt and when all this failed to stop the women he tried to bribe them by offering them ownership of the mines. Then, he hired outside labour but the women would not let the labourers—mainly Nepalis—work. Meanwhile the women continued to fight in court and after two years, the District Magistrate was persuaded to visit the village and taken round and shown the damage. He was so moved that he recommended that the case be cancelled and the women won their case. In late 1982, the mines were finally officially closed and:

The women of Kharakot settled down to repair the damage: they filled the ditches, built a protective



Public meeting on World Environment Day, Saklana, Garhwal, 1986



A woman activist addressing the public meeting on World Environment Day, 1986



Chipko activists gather together on World Environment Day at Saklana in 1986

will to prevent the debris from destroying their fields, and planted oak trees in the panchayat forests. But their biggest reward is similar movements emerging in other parts of the region, in Pithoragarh and in Jirault, sparked off by the flame of protest in Khirakot.¹

In another instance in Khirakot women found that they themselves had contributed to the depletion of their environment as they, and neighbouring village women, had been lopping off pine trees in the village forests and this had resulted in a lack of pine needles which the women used as bedding in their cattle sheds. According to Radha Bhatt

They (the women) discussed the matter among themselves, and decided that they should protect their village forest against the lopping of branches for fuel by their own and neighbouring village women. If the pine trees grew bigger then their needles would be available close to their homes. And if the forest were managed properly, the fuel wood would also be obtainable from these trees without destroying the whole tree. They spread their ideas among the other women of the village, and they all became convinced, not by holding any formal meeting, but at the water places or along the village paths where they met one another.

Thus, after four years of continuous efforts by the collective leadership of these women, a fine pine forest can be seen above Khirakot village. The forest has already begun to provide dry pine needles for their cowsheds. This leadership is not tired, but rather increasingly enthusiastic In the first month of 1983 they involved the menfolk in their endeavours. Every family of the village agreed to pay a rupee a month as salary to a forest guard, a young man from their village. The women's group collected the money and helped the young man guard the forest.²

Closely linked to the Chipko movement in Garhwal and Kumaon is the anti-alcohol movement. Activists working in these areas discovered, in the course of their discussions with people, that alcoholism among men posed a major problem for the women. In some areas it resulted in severe wife battering. In others, although a large number of men had migrated to urban areas in search of work, those that remained in the villages would squander their family's earnings on liquor. Not only did this affect the men's health (much of the liquor they drank was illicit) it meant the women had less money to run the household, were often beaten and even had to resort to cutting down on their own diet in order to make do.

The problem of alcoholism among men was confirmed by the Uttarakhand Sangharsh Yuhini, one of the groups responsible for spreading information about movements in this area. Formed in 1977, the Yuhini has been active in the Chipko movement and its activists go from village to village to spread and collect information. In addition, they try to build networks through two papers which they bring out from Nainital: *Jangal ke Doodhar* (Owners of the Forest) and *Nainital Samachar* (Nainital News). In 1983, the Yuhini held a large public meeting in Almora where hill people of Garhwal and Kumaon discussed their problems. At this meeting alcoholism emerged as a major problem. This was not, however, the first time that people, especially women, had complained of the problem. According to Uma Bhatt, a sustained agitation against the sale of alcohol had taken place from 1965-71 in Uttarakhand.

Agitations against alcohol and distribution of liquor have existed since the early days of the social reform and nationalist movements. Prohibition was declared in several areas as a result of such movements in independent India. The issue of prohibition has aroused a variety of responses which we need not go into here. What is important for us, however, is to see how and why women have been involved in anti-alcohol movements and how this issue has been important in different radical movements, especially tribal and hill movements. In Jharkhand, for example, anti-alcoholism was seen as a major part of reform, since liquor consumption had played an important role in tribal acquiescence to land alienation. Generally, Hindu landlords would get tribals to sign away their land rights in return for a bottle of distilled liquor, hence activists felt that the only way to curb this was to get the tribals to forswear all forms of alcohol, even *mahua*, the local brew. In the hill areas, especially Uttarakhand, men tended to spend all their money on alcohol, leaving little or nothing for the family to subsist on.

The agitation against liquor in Uttarakhand between 1965-71 was so widespread that the government had to declare prohibition in some areas, but despite this they could not wipe out liquor distribution as alcohol is used in Ayurvedic tonics as 'sura'. Though, officially, the alcohol content in these tonics is supposed to be limited to 20 per cent, surveys have shown that some of contain up to 80 per cent alcohol. Not surprisingly, the main use of these is not medicinal.

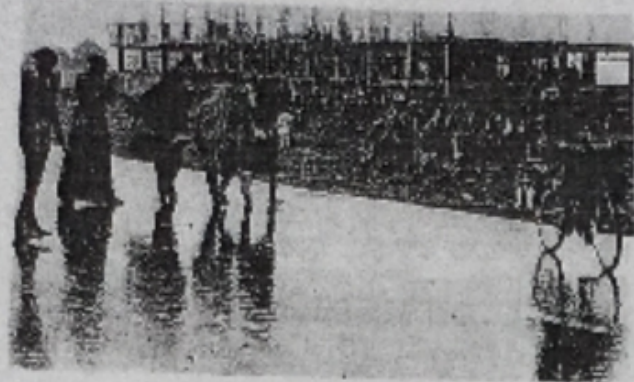
In February 1984 villagers of Bashhiva, Chaukhuya block in Almora found a man who possessed illicit liquor. Though they complained to their local officer about this, he took no action. It was later discovered that this was because he (the officer) smuggled liquor himself. The villagers responded by gheraoing him; the authorities responded in turn by threatening to kill one



Liquor contractors arrested by people at Gosainpari

of the activists. The Yuhini then organized a public meeting at which it was decided to launch an anti-alcohol movement. In village after village all liquor found was thrown away, pots and shops were smashed, and in some instances liquor sellers were made to apologise in public for distributing liquor and they had to promise never to do so again. Women were in the forefront in these campaigns and they continue to keep the anti-alcohol movement sustained. In Himachal, groups of women close down liquor shops, keep guard outside and if there is any threat to them, use drums and songs to inform their sisters who are elsewhere. Women have also used the tactic of 'shaming' the liquor sellers and drinkers, often by blackening their faces or by parading them through the streets of the town or village. For example in Dhulia in Maharashtra in the early seventies women broke wine jars, beat up individual wife beaters with broomsticks, made them promise never to beat their wives again, seized men who beat their wives or molested women, festooned them with garlands made of shoes, tied them onto donkeys' backs and paraded them around the village.

While there is a long history of rural women's environmental activism, tied to scarcity of fuel, water and fodder, the Bhopal disaster of 1984 saw the rise of a massive



Monsoon shown forces demonstrators to seek shelter, Bhopal, 1985



Bhopal victims demonstrating outside collectorate, demanding relief, 1985

movement of women gas victims. On the night of 2-3 December 1984, over twenty tonnes of methyl isocyanate (MIC) exploded out of a pesticides plant in Bhopal, owned by the U.S. multinational, Union Carbide. Several thousand were killed on that night, and thousands have died as a result of exposure since. The official toll today is over 4,000 dead, and around 500,000 potentially injured. We use the term potential here because little was known at the time about the health effects of MIC, and most experts believe that it might take twenty years at the very least before adequate information is available.

Known as 'killer in the night', because it escaped in the early hours of the morning, and because it is odourless and invisible, the gas is estimated to have spread over almost the entire old city of Bhopal, which was the most densely populated—and poorer—part of the city. The worst affected areas were the shanty towns and slums adjacent to the factory, whose inhabitants worked as cheap daily labour.

In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, the city was chaotic. None of its facilities were equipped to deal with an accident of such magnitude. Chaos was

compounded by the facts that no-one knew how to treat—or even diagnose—MIC exposure. A whole range of people poured into the city: from relief workers and activists to Carbide officials, medical specialists, and lawyers looking for victims to sign up for compensation litigation.

As it became evident that the case for compensation was going to be an enormous one, involving both the U.S. and India, relief, medical aid, and rehabilitation all grew to be viewed through the litigatory lens. The central government stepped in, and said that it—and only it—would conduct the case on behalf of the victims. All medical information was put under the Official Secrets Act, for fear that if the information was freely available the other side would build up false counter-information. Documentation of the medical information was also put under the Official Secrets Act. Relief and rehabilitation, however, were left to the state government, and as this was a mammoth task, considerable resentment was created amongst the state bureaucracy—and this found its inevitable outlet in penalising the gas victims.



Bhopal activists leaving police station, Bhopal, 1985



'Union Carbide, quit India, quit the world,' Bhopal, 1985



Jamwadi Mahila Samiti demonstration against Union Carbide, Delhi 1985



Zahreeli Gas Kand Virodhi Sangharsh Morcha (Joint Front against Bhopal disaster) Bhopal, 1985

From the very start, it was women gas victims who were most active in campaigns for relief, medical aid and information. In the initial years, the ratio of women to men in demonstrations was something like 60:40, but as the years passed this ratio grew to 80:20, even 90:10. One of the reasons advanced was that sooner rather than

later men had to find work, but women, as housewives, had more time—at any rate, their time was more flexible.

While there is some truth in this argument, it has only limited validity. A large number of the women gas victims were themselves workers; many of them became,



Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Udyog Sangathan (Organization of Bhopal Women Worker Victims) demonstrating against the Supreme Court's upholding of the government's settlement with carbide

after the disaster, the sole supporters of their families. Further, the organization of gas victims which emerged as chief campaigner from 1986 on was an organization of women gas victims who were employed in the sewing centres which were opened by the government as rehabilitatory training. The centres were opened in 1985, and gave training to roughly 2,000 women; one year later, the government announced that they were going to close the centres down. In protest, the women occupied the centres; the protest lasted well over a month, and out of it emerged the Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Udyog Sangathan (the Bhopal working women gas victims organization).

From a campaign to ensure the continuation of employment, the organization took on local campaigns for relief and rehabilitation for all gas victims, and then went on to approach the Court for relief. When in 1989, the Government of India arrived at a shameful

settlement with Union Carbide under the aegis of the Supreme Court, the Sangathan launched a massive campaign against the settlement, adopting a multi-pronged strategy of demonstrations, litigation, publicity and lobbying. With the election of a new government in late 1989, they achieved the major breakthrough of winning Rs 360 lakhs as a three year relief grant from the government, getting medical information released; and gaining the support of the government in pleading that the case against Carbide be re-opened.

Sadly, the Supreme Court upheld the settlement in 1992, with the important proviso that this only applied to a settlement of the civil suit against Carbide. Damages under criminal charges remain, thus, as a possible avenue for gaining more adequate justice. The real battle, too, of how to ensure the proper distribution of compensation, has now begun.

NOTES

1. *The Second Citizens Report on the Environment*, Delhi, Centre for the Study of the Environment, 1987. Hereafter CSE Report.
2. B.B. Vohra *The Greening of India*, Delhi, Intact Environmental Series, 1985, p. 1.
3. Quoted from *The Approach to the Seventh Plan* in *ibid* in p. 1.
4. CSE Report, *op. cit.* pp. 183-84.
5. Gupta Joshi, 'Slandered by the Community in Return' in Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita (eds), *op. cit.* p. 125.
6. Devaki Jain, in *Manushi*, no. 6, 1980.
7. CSE Report, *op. cit.* p. 178.
8. Radha Bhatt, in *ibid.*