

Hentralghati—Recalling Those Memorable Days of Protecting Himalayan Forests

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In the middle of increasing reports of ecological ruin from Himalayan region, there are growing signs of campaigns to protect Himalayan environment in this ecologically crucial yet fragile region. In fact at an event organized in Delhi called 'Mountain Dialogues' on July 26, very eminent persons like NN Vohra, former Governor of Jammu and Kashmir (also former President of the Indian Mountaineering Foundation) and Shyam Saran (former Foreign Secretary and presently President of India International Centre) expressed the need for a national level campaign for saving Himalayan ecology.

While this call for a campaign given by eminent persons should be widely welcomed, at the same time there is need for making this a pro-people campaign, not an elites-oriented campaign, so that people's concerns of protecting sustainable livelihoods and protection are well covered in this campaign and environmental concerns are linked to these concerns.

It is in this context that this writer would like to recall the spirit of the Chipko movement or hug the trees movement. As a writer writing extensively during the 1970s and 1980s on this and related issues, I am presenting here my description of a few days in the history of the Chipko movement in Hentralghati region, Tehri Garhwal district, Uttarakhand (then in Uttar Pradesh).

It was a biting cold day in December 1977. Nearly a dozen youths had assembled in a hut in Jajal, a Himalayan village located in Tehri Garhwal district of India.

Dhum Singh Negi, a Gandhian social activist rose to speak.

"It appears most likely that the government will not agree to our requests for cancelling the felling of trees in the forests of Salet and Advani. The administration can even send its police force to get the trees axed. Now we have to decide about our course of action. All of you have worked to prevent this slaughter of trees, and have to suggest the further path."

For some time there was silence. It was not easy to give a decisive reply. All these youths were keen to protect forests, but they were also aware of the difficulties and risks if the administration sent a big force.

In these Himalayan villages, forests play a very protective role. They provide villagers several kinds of fruits and vegetables, as well as fuel for their kitchen, fodder for their cattle and leaf-manure for their fields. Forests conserve water and help to maintain soil and rocks in their place, thereby reducing the risk of soil erosion and landslides.

Due to a complex of reasons the forest cover had been diminishing in recent decades and this is why it was all the more important to protect the few good forests that were still intact. Advani and Salet were two such forests, located in the valley of Herval river. Yet some officials, concerned more with earning quick money than with the protection of environment and livelihood, had thoughtlessly auctioned these forests.

This act of folly had not gone unchallenged. In recent years a movement of Gandhian activists had emerged in this Himalayas region of Uttarakhand for protection of forests. This movement became famous as Chipko (hug the tree) movement. Some of these most dedicated Gandhi activists such as Kunwar Prasun and Vijay Jardhari lived in the valley of Herval. Dhum Singh Negi, who had been the principal of a local school, was like a teacher to younger activists. They along with Sundar Lal Bahuguna, and Vimla Bahuguna, the most well-know Gandhian activists of this region, had protested as soon as they had heard about the auction of these forests of Advani and Salet. But their protest was not heeded by officials and now the contractor was anxious to cut these trees as early as possible.

It was in this situation that several villagers, particularly youth, had assembled in this hut of Jajal to decide their future plan of action.

These villagers did not have to be told about how harmful the felling of trees will be for them and their villagers. There will be shortages of food, fuel and fodder, and the threat from soil erosion and landslides will increase. But despite this realisation, there was some reluctance about how far the villagers can go to stop the powerful contractors and their legally obtained the permission to cut hundreds of trees in these forests. The administration was likely to provide the contractors all the support needed by them to get the trees axed and transported?. So if villagers opposed the axing of trees, the government will send in its police with lathis (batons). Can the villagers face such an opposition?

Most of these hill villages consist of small and scattered settlements. It is not possible to collect a large number of people immediately. It is difficult to go from one village to another and mobilise the people living there on such an issue.

The hill women go out very rarely and their interaction with the outside world is minimal. It is true that they work very hard to collect fuel and fodder, and their life will be worst affected by the felling of trees but given their isolated existence, can they be expected to suddenly gather courage and confront the contractor or the policemen?

It were questions such as these which bothered the villagers. But finally, the villagers gathered courage from the story of how on an earlier occasion the liquor contractor held some of these villages in terror, but when the villagers got united, they had driven him away from the village. "If we could do it then, we can do it again", said Kunwar Prasun reassuringly, and the doubts slowly melted away.

From Jajal, the youths went to villages like Advani, Salet, Piplet, Rampur and Gaind to mobilise more and more people to oppose the axing of trees. They heard that some workers were brought from far away areas in Kashmir to cut the trees in Salet. These workers were approached by the activists of Chipko movement.

"Brother", the activists told them, "Why do you participate in this slaughter of trees. Our villages will be ruined and we'll not get food, fuel and fodder if these forests are destroyed."

These workers had also lived in Himalayan villages. They were aware of the crucial role of forests in these villages. They sympathized with the villagers and wanted to avoid a confrontation with them. But they were also helpless as they didn't have any money to go back to their homes. This they could only get from the contractor who brought them here, and the contractor wanted them to cut trees.

Finally they reached a compromise. The villagers collected some donations to help to cover a part of the expenses of going back and the Kashmiri workers decided to go away.

The contractor was infuriated. He decided to bring other workers to replace the Kashmiri workers. The villagers responded by taking out a protest demonstration inside the forest. Beating drums and blowing bugles, they marched in a colourful procession to the forest of Salet.

They had thought of confronting the workers and their contractors and peacefully persuading the workers not to cut the trees. But the contractor proved to be a clever man. When he saw the procession of villagers approaching from a distance, he asked all the workers to hide themselves in the forest. When the villagers reached the forests, they saw a few, half-cut trees. Who could be blamed for this mischief? After waiting for some time they concluded that the workers had left the forests and decided to go back.

However Dhum Singh Negi had some doubt at the last stage. He had a feeling that perhaps the contractor is hiding and will resume the work when the villagers return. So he along with a youth Hukum Singh decided to stay back in the forest. The villagers were reluctant to leave them in the forest during the night, but when they insisted on staying back, the other villagers had to agree.

The apprehensions of Dhum Singh Negi proved right, for soon the contractor emerged smiling from his hideout. Negi tried to reason with him not to axe the trees, but he was in no mood to listen to this and ordered his men to start working immediately. Negi immediately hugged tree which were being axed. Then the workers shifted to another tree. He soon rushed there and covered it in such a way that the workers couldn't use their saw or axe without hurting him. So they stopped working, wondering what to do in such a situation.

"Don't stop, continue your work." The contractor shouted.

"How can we?" A worker replied, "We'll hurt this man."

"I don't care!" The contractor shouted, "You just go ahead and do your work."

"We have come here to cut trees and not human beings", the indignant worker replied.

Clearly the determination of Dhum Singh Negi had an impact on the soul of those workers.

Despite this, Negi knew that this was a losing battle. The workers were many, and he was alone. He could be held back by one team of workers while another team of workers continued work on another tree.

So he asked Hukum Singh to go and fetch some help from Salet village. By this time it was already getting dark and night was beginning to descend. Some women who had gone to cut grass were also going back to their village. Negi also requested them to inform other

villagers about the situation in the forest.

He then set down at a place where the trees being cut were likely to fall, and started saying his prayers. Even the contractor was scared that if Negi was hurt and the villagers came back, then he could be in serious trouble. So he continued work only for some time and then left. Soon some help came from the village. However his family in Piplet village was still worried. So he lit a small fire to send a signal that he was safe at this place.

However this was only a small victory. A much bigger confrontation was awaiting the Chipko movement in Advani forest. When the movement's activists had first approached the people of this village they had assured them that they'll come forward to protect the forest. But meanwhile the contractor and some officials had threatened the people of serious consequences if they tried to oppose the axing of trees.

As a result of these threats, when Negi reached this village, he found that most of the villagers were not keen to join the protest in the forest. Negi was disappointed at first, but as he walked to the forest and looked at the beautiful trees whose life was threatened his determination came back to him. He sat down in the shade of one of the trees. A villager whose son he had taught in his school brought food for him. But Negi told him that he had decided to go on a fast till the protection of the trees would be assured.

When this news reached other villagers, they started coming to the forest and as they discussed this issue in the shade of the threatened trees, their courage came back to them. They started coming in increasing numbers to the forest to reassure Negi that they'll protect the forest. Several women tied sacred threads on trees to symbolise this.

Sundar Lal Bahuguna was ill but he still left the nature cure hospital, where he was being treated, to visit this village and prevail upon Negi to give up his fast. When this fast ended on the fifth day, the involvement of most villagers, particularly women and children had been secured.

Recalling those days, Kunwar Prasun said, "During those days children had become our best friends. As soon as we reached a village to spread the message of Chipko movement, they joined us in large numbers and started shouting slogans with us. They had learnt quite a few of these slogans and often greeted their friends with these slogans. Our slogans and actions had become a part of their play."

In several incidents that followed, the contractor tried his best to smuggle in his men into the forest to fell trees secretly but such was the vigilance put up by the activists and villagers that at the most they could cut only a few trees before activists or villagers reached the scene and prevented further destruction by hugging the trees. In Advani even when the contractor could bribe three local villagers into working for felling trees, he could succeed in felling only about a dozen or so trees.

Later the son of one of these villagers who had worked for the contractor refused to touch food till his father expressed regret at his participation in tree-felling work. The presence of police or other officials and the threats of implicating them in legal cases also did not deter the villagers from participating in the movement. In the case of some families men and women, children and old people all participated. Women were the most enthusiastic supporters, as they were the ones who would have to bear the main burden of deforestation.

All this while newsletters about the movement's progress and problems were being mailed to newspapers and various sympathisers of the movement. Hence news of what was happening in the remote forests was having a wider impact and receiving the sympathy of various concerned people. When there was no action in forests, guard was still maintained and protest demonstrations were organised in one of which visiting officials were shown lanterns in the afternoon sun to symbolise the darkness of the existing forest policy and those who implement it.

Matters came to head on January 31 1978 when two truck loads of P.A.C. (a police force) was sent to the area to prevent the movement's supporters from obstructing the work of tree-felling. At first they staged a march on the road to frighten the villagers into not going to the forest. Then next day they along with senior officials left for Advani forest.

On 1st February 1978 nearly 500 people gathered in Advani forest heard the distant din of approaching vehicles. For a short while the slogan-shouting stopped as people strained their ears to make out from this dim sound what the approaching vehicles could be. Then on the last visible portion of the serpentine hilly road appeared a jeep, then another and then one more. Last came two trucks, exuding thick clouds of smoke.

Now there could be no mistaking the identity of the approaching caravan. The police has come, said one of the young men with an air of finality, his eyes moving from the approaching vehicles to the colourful gathering of men, women and children before him. Then, louder than ever before, these Himalayan hills reverberated with the six words which had shattered the calm and quiet of this secluded forest since morning.

Aaj Himalaya Jagega

Arur Kulhara Bhagega

The Himalaya will awake today,

The cruel axe will be chased away

The contractor, after hurried consultations with the forestry and police officials, asked his men to pick up their axes and saws. But as soon as the labourers moved towards the forest, the assembled villagers formed themselves in groups of three and four and each group surrounded the nearest marked tree. Whenever some labourers advanced towards one of these trees, they immediately hugged the tree, clasping their arms firmly around its thick trunk. For more than an hour the frustrated contractor went around the forest with his labourers, seeking to fell at least a few trees, but whenever he approached a marked tree which had been left uncovered by the tree - huggers women and children standing on the road below rushed to the tree to protect it.

The police-force had no answer to this unique form of tree-protection. The only way of felling trees was to drag each one of the tree-huggers away from the forest and then arrest him.

There was no possibility of a violent retaliation as these protesters had throughout remained nonviolent, again and again shouting two slogans.

Hamla chahe jaisa hoga,

Hath hamara nahi uthega

No matter what the attack on us

One hands will not rise in violence

and

Police Hamari Bhai Hai

Usse Nahi Larai Hai

The policemen are our brothers,

Our fight is not with them.

Thus the police had no fear of violence on the part of the assembled people if it decided to arrest them. But it could not possibly take the drastic action of dragging away each of the demonstrator from the forest, and then sending them to the nearest prison against people who were exuding all warmth and brotherhood towards the assembled officialdom and reassuring them time and again that their only intention was to protect the trees and not to create any disturbance.

After waiting for over an hour, the officials consulted each other and decided to move away. While leaving, some of the PAC men exchanged pleasantries with the assembled villagers and even congratulated them on their success.

As the jeeps and trucks roared off, the joyous people gathered to shout in unison their last message, "If the axe falls on the trees we will offer our bodies first."

Thus Advani and Salet forests were saved-by the determination of villagers and Gandhian activists of Chipko movement. The forest continued to protect the land from erosion and destruction, and provide villagers fuel, fodder and food. The determination of the villagers provided protection not only for their own children but also for the life of several other villagers who come from long distance to obtain fuel and fodder from here. The children protected their own future when they happily assisted to protect these forests. Some women who protected the forest had small children in their lap. These small children also protected the forest from the lap of their mothers.

The movement remained peaceful in the best traditions established by Mahatma Gandhi. He emphasized that injustice should always be opposed, but this opposition should be in a peaceful way and the conscience of those being opposed should also be touched. Some workers who had come to axe tree were so impressed by the Chipko movement here that their own interest in axing trees diminished considerably although this was supposed to be their main source of income at that time.

The sincerity and dedication of Gandhian activists like Dhum Singh Negi and Kunwar Prasun also proved to be a source of inspiration for villagers. When the villagers saw them making so much effort and enduring the Himalayan winter in remote areas without any protection to save their forests, they were also inspired to come forward and save their forests. Above all the courage of ordinary rural women like Sudesha Devi made a very big impact.

Having saved their own forests, these villagers decided to go a step further and take the initiative to save the forests of several other areas also which were to be auctioned at a

nearby town called Narendra Nagar. Fresh from the enthusiasm of chasing away the police and the contractor from their forests, on February 7, these villagers marched to Narendra Nagar, beating drums and singing songs. They went straight to the hall where the trees were to be auctioned and occupied it.

Soon the police came and asked them to leave the building, but the villagers refused to go away. Finally they were lifted forcibly by the police and left outside the gate. The contractors used a back gate to enter the hall.

Meanwhile a new group of women came with Negi from the villages to join the protesters. The women started singing songs about the importance of forests in their life and how these were being destroyed by the contractors. This enthused the protesters and they entered the hall again. Immediately the contractors and the officials ran away. The auction could not proceed further. Sudesh Devi of Rampur village, who had also played a leading role in the Advani moment, occupied the seat of the senior forest official and announced, "We are the real conservators of forest and we do not want this auction and axing of trees."

Meanwhile the people of the town started coming to offer their support and arranged food for the protesters. However as the night descended there were other, less welcome visitors. The police came again and asked the villagers to leave immediately. The people said that they can go only after receiving an assurance that the forests will not be auctioned. Finally the police told the protesters that they were under arrest and tried to drag them away. Several activists hugged each other and it became difficult for the police to carry them. But finally Negi declared that to offer themselves for arrest while fighting injustice is very much a part of the Gandhian peaceful methods of arrest and they did not resist the arrest too much.

The police did not even wait till the dawn. They carried away the protesters to Tehri jail in the thick of the night to avoid the protests from people in nearby villages. But even at night the arrested activists and villagers kept shouting slogans for protection of forests during the two hours drive which took them to the jail.

The officials who had taken them to jail had thought that this will scare villagers, particularly women and they'll soon apologise for their protest session. But despite numerous hardships caused to them and their families, the protesters maintained their determination and high spirits. They held joint prayers, sang songs and discussed future strategies. One youth even made a ball from old clothes to play cricket.

Finally, the government decided to release them after 23 days. As they prepared to leave, the villagers gathered at a sacred place within jail, the cell which had been occupied by a former freedom fighter and martyr, Sri Dev Suman. "Give us the courage to continue the struggle," they prayed at this meeting.

They kept this pledge - the movement continued in Khuret, Badiyar and other villages till the government finally agreed to stop commercial felling of green trees in Uttarakhand region to a substantial extent.

Note: Several years later a new threat appeared in the Advani forest and other nearby areas as thousands of trees were marked for felling due to the laying of power lines to carry the electricity from Tehri Dam Project, something that was not mentioned in its environment appraisal report.. This time Kunwar Prasun took the initiative to mobilize villagers. By this

time the Chipko movement was better known and the authorities were more responsive. They said that some trees will have to be cut for power lines but they can try to reduce this. So teams of officials went with activists and villagers for a second survey and a very large number of trees could be saved, sending a lesson to other areas affected similarly. Once again I reported on this and this article was given a prize by Grassroots journal. These chipko activists also tried to improve welfare of workers and with their help I reported on forest workers also and this report on forest workers published in Link journal received the Statesman award for Rural Reporting.

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