



The Right Livelihood Award

for outstanding vision and work on behalf of our planet and its people

The Chipko Movement (India)

(1987)



...for its dedication to the conservation, restoration and ecologically-sound use of India's natural resources.

Sunderlal Bahuguna

The forests of India are a critical resource for the subsistence of rural people throughout the country, especially in hill and mountain areas, both because of their direct provision of food, fuel and fodder and because of their role in stabilising soil and water resources. As these forests have been increasingly felled for commerce and industry, Indian villagers have sought to protect their livelihoods through the Gandhian method of satyagraha or non-violence resistance. In the 1970s and 1980s this resistance to the destruction of forests spread throughout India and became organised and known as the Chipko Movement.

The first Chipko action took place spontaneously in 1973 and over the next five years spread to many districts of the Himalaya in Uttar Pradesh. The name of the movement came from a word meaning 'embrace': the villagers hugged the trees and thus saved them by putting their bodies in the way of the contractors' axes. The Chipko protests in Uttar Pradesh achieved a major victory in 1980 with a 15-year ban on green felling in the Himalayan forests of that State by order of India's then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. A similar ban was later also implemented in the states Uttaranchal and Himachal Pradesh. (In 2005, the ban was still in place regarding felling for commercial purposes except for Himachal Pradesh where it had been lifted again in 2004 despite Chipko's protests.)

The movement spread to Himachal Pradesh in the north, Karnataka in the south, Rajasthan in the west, Bihar in the east and to the Vindhyans in central India. In addition to the ban in Uttar Pradesh, the movement succeeded in halting clear felling in the Western Ghats and the Vindhyas, as well as generating pressure for a natural resources policy more sensitive to people's needs and environmental factors.

The Chipko Movement was the result of hundreds of decentralised and locally autonomous initiatives. Its leaders and activists have primarily been village women, acting to save their means of subsistence and their communities. Men have been involved, too, however, and some of them have given wider leadership to the movement. One of the most prominent leaders has been Sunderlal Bahuguna, a Gandhian activist and philosopher, whose appeal to Mrs Gandhi resulted in the

green-felling ban and whose 5,000-kilometre trans-Himalayan foot march in 1981-83 was crucial in spreading the Chipko message.

In the late 1980s, Bahuguna joined the campaign that already for many years had been opposing construction of a proposed Himalayan dam on the river near his birthplace of Tehri. In 1989 he began the first of a series of hunger strikes to draw political attention to the dangers posed by the dam and in due course the Chipko Movement gave birth to the Save Himalaya Movement.

Bahuguna ended a 45-day fast in 1995 when the Indian government promised a review of the Tehri dam project. But the promise was not kept and the following year he committed himself to another fast, only broken after 74 days when the Prime Minister gave a personal undertaking to conduct a thorough review, largely on Bahuguna's terms. The veteran environmentalist, then in his 70th year, told the Prime Minister that the Himalayan glaciers were receding at an alarming rate. If this was not checked, the glacier feeding the Ganges would disappear within 100 years.

In the new millennium, Bahuguna has continued to warn about water scarcity and to campaign for the protection of the forests. He has proposed to the Prime Minister a Himalayan policy in which the mountain slopes would be covered with trees giving food (nuts, edible seeds, oil seeds, flowering trees for honey and seasonal fruits), fodder, fuel and timber, leaf fertiliser and fibre trees. Each family should be given land to grow 2000 trees and a subsidy to rear these trees.

In 2009, Bahuguna was honoured with Padma Vibhushan, India's second highest civilian award.

Quotation

"We in Himalaya are facing a crisis of survival due to the suicidal activities being carried out in the name of development... The monstrous Tehri dam is a symbol of this... There is need for a new and long-term policy to protect the dying Himalaya. I do not want to see the death of the most sacred river of the world - the Ganga - for short-term economic gains."

Sunderlal Bahuguna

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