



Department of Communication
The University of Texas at El Paso

Hugging Trees in the Himalayas¹



**Birthing a Global
Movement
to Conserve Mother Earth**

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The *Social Justice Wisdom Series* is a publication of the *The Social Justice Initiative (SJI)*, Department of Communication, The University of Texas at El Paso. SJI is an action-based platform deeply committed to issues of justice, equity, and peace. It is an open forum for all those who are interested in engaging in conversations, partnerships, and actions to improve the human condition. In a world that is too focused on cultivating the “habits of the mind,” the Social Justice Initiative seeks to open conversations and actions that also cultivate the “habits of the heart.” It is a volunteer effort of committed individuals and takes pride in being self-sustaining through its series of publications, products, and programs.

Publication Price: \$2.00 The price includes cost recovery and all net proceeds (each cent) goes to further the work of the Social Justice Initiative. Checks can be made to *University of Texas El Paso*, with *Social Justice Initiative* on the memo line.

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One way to understand the sentiments behind hugging trees is to read the simple prose of Shel Silverstein's 1964 book, *The Giving Tree*.

Translated in over 30 languages, and one of the best-selling children's books of all time, *The Giving Tree*² tells the story of a relationship between a young boy and a tree³. The tree provides the boy branches on which to swing, shade in which to sit, fruits to eat, branches with which to build a home. As the boy grows older he requires more and more of the tree. The tree in acts of selfless love willingly gives him what he asks for, even letting the boy cut it down so he can build a boat to sail in. The boy leaves the tree, now a stump. Many years later, the boy, now

an old man, returns and the tree notes that it has nothing else to offer. The man says he does need much now, just a quiet place to sit and rest. The tree happily offers its stump.

Is it the nature of the tree to give? Is it the nature of the human being to take?

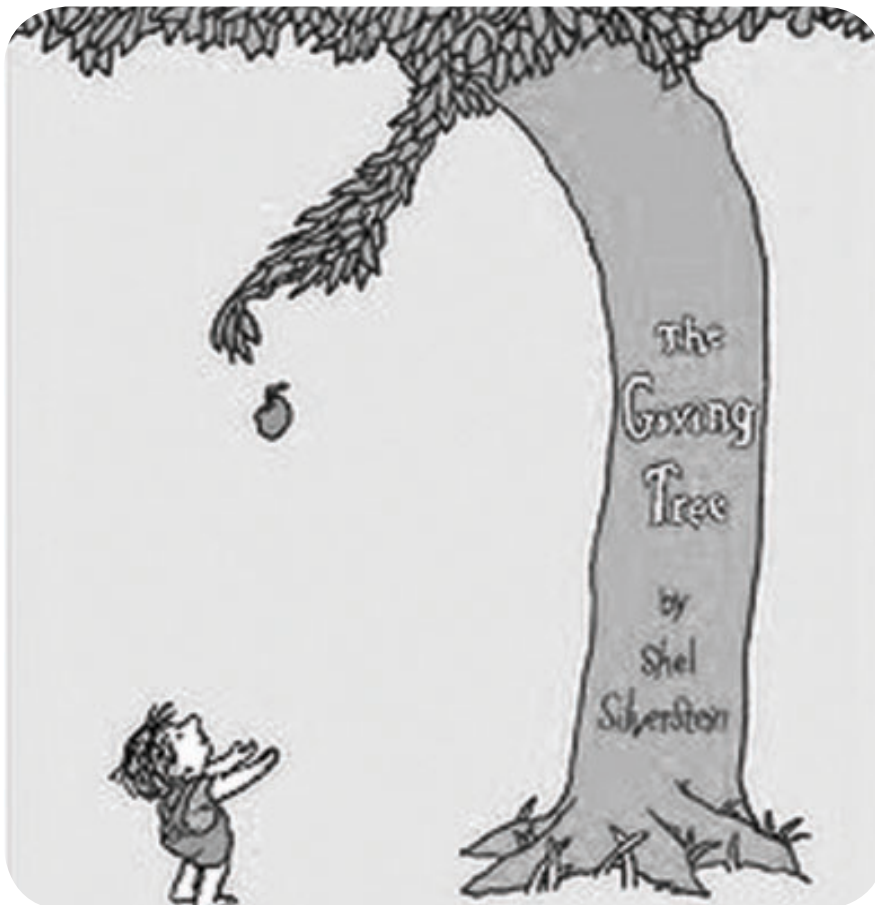
Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed.

Mahatma Gandhi⁴

The issue, is not development vs. environment.

It is extinction vs. survival.

Sunderlal Bahuguna⁵



The Chipko (literally “hugging” in Hindi) movement in India to conserve mother earth came to public attention in April 1973 when a group of women in Mandal village, located in the mountainous Himalayan region of Uttarkhand, “hugged” trees in order to prevent them from being felled⁶. In the next several years, more than a dozen confrontations between women and lumberjacks occurred in Uttarkhand -- all non-violent and effective, enshrining forever the term “tree hugger” in conservation parlance⁷.



In 1974, an especially notable confrontation occurred in Reni Village of Uttarkhand where a women’s group led by Gaura Devi blocked an army of lumberjacks singing: “This forest is our mother’s home; we



Gaura Devi: “Cut me down before you cut down a tree”

will protect it with all our might”. They admonished the lumberjacks: “If the forest is cut, the soil will be washed away. Landslides and soil erosion will bring floods, which will destroy our fields and homes, our water sources will dry up, and all the other benefits we get from the forest will be finished⁸.”

Stories and photographs of women’s bodies in Mandal and Reni villages, interposed between the trees and the gleaming axes of timber cutters, spurred word-of-mouth buzz in neighboring communities, and made interesting news copy for local, national, and global media. The notion of “Cut me down before you cut down a tree,” generated a lot of media coverage, bringing with it a new humanized morality to abstract environmental concerns⁹.

Two local activists -- Chandi Prasad Bhatt, a Marxist, and Sundarlal Bahuguna, both inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, led the Chipko movement, albeit

somewhat independently¹⁰. They both exuded characteristics that fuelled the spread of Chipko bringing it to the national (and international) consciousness. Well networked with journalists, they both wielded a prolific pen, writing with ease in both Hindi and English and thus mobilizing their rural and urban elite constituencies¹¹.

Chandi Prasad Bhatt was greatly inspired by Gandhian follower Jayaprakash Narayan, whom he met in 1956 in Uttarkhand, and felt compelled to respond to Narayan's call for serving the nation. As a youth leader in Uttarakhand, Bhatt led various initiatives premised on Gandhian ideals, organizing villages to be self-sufficient, promoting socio-economic development, and propagating moral and ethical public conduct, including the non-consumption of alcohol and cigarettes.

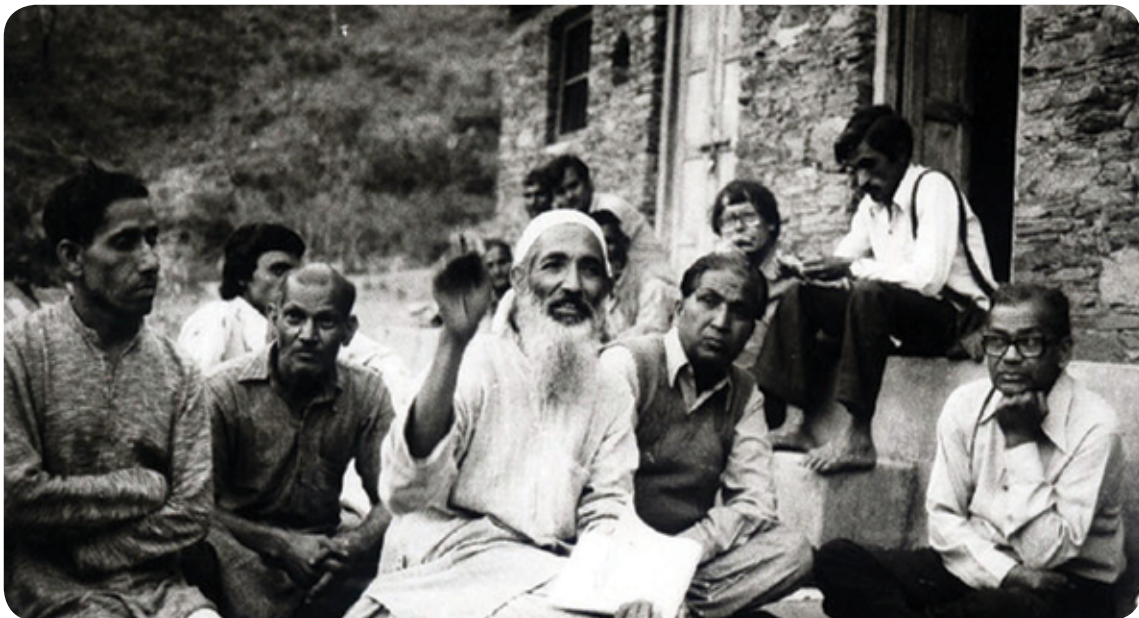


Chipko activist Chandi Prasad Bhatt

was also charismatic, credible, and spoke forcefully in both Hindi and the local Garhwali dialect.

Sundarlal Bahuguna was also greatly inspired by Gandhian ideals and became active in the freedom movement in 1940 at the age of 12, being mentored by an older friend Sridev Suman. Like Bhatt, Bhaguna

In the Uttarkhand region, the communication media underlying the Chipko movement was remarkably small-scale and low-tech, emphasizing local knowledge, local resources, local leadership, local language, and



Activist Sundarlal Bahuguna (Center) on his quest to save the mountain and the forests

locally relevant methods of communication¹². Poets and singers were frontline motivators, writing verse and songs for public performance to inspire grassroots participation. Ghanshyam Sailani emerged as the poet laureate of Chipko, penning verses such as

“Let us protect and plant the trees
Go awaken the villages
And drive away the axemen.”



Poetry, singing, and public performances to inspire participation in the Chipko movement

When women of Uttarkhand heard that the lumberjacks were on their way, they would sing such songs and walk toward the forest. The chorus would get louder and strident when the timber-cutters arrived. The women would hold hands and form a circle around the tree, hugging it as a group. What could the lumberjacks do? They were rendered powerless even with their axes and saws.

The Chipko movement gathered rapid momentum as it rode the wave of spirituality. *Bhagwad kathas* (large prayer meetings) were routinely organized

in forest areas of Uttarkhand, emphasizing that God resides in every living being, including in trees. To protect the trees was a sacred act, blending environmental science with deeply-ingrained spirituality.

Chipko's appeal was uniquely wide-ranging. Thus the movement was co-opted, shaped, and popularized by groups as diverse as local and global journalists, grassroots activists, environmentalists, Gandhians, spiritual leaders, politicians, social change practitioners, and feminists. The feminist movement popularized Chipko, pointing out that poor rural women walk long distances to collect fuel and fodder, and thus are the frontline victims of forest destruction¹³. The Gandhians accentuated the Chipko movement through symbolic protests such as prayers, fasting, and *padayatras* (ritual foot-marches). Further, Chipko is synonymous with the growth of ecology-conscious journalism in India and around the world.

The media that the Chipko movement generated went beyond the notion of just saving trees but, rather, was imbued with the belief that the forest belonged to the people, and only they could ensure its wise use¹⁴. And, as the movement spread, and generated more media, it humanized environmental concerns for local, national, and global audiences.

In India, the media generated by Chipko put the notion of saving forests squarely on the political and public agenda of the country. Sundarlal Bahuguna brought the movement into national and international prominence by undertaking a 5,000-kilometer trans-Himalaya march in the early-1980s, gathering

support for the Chipko movement one village at a time, and presenting the peoples' call to save India's forests to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Subsequently, Mrs. Gandhi's government legislated a 15-year ban on felling of green trees growing over 1,000 meters above sea level in the Himalayan forests. This decree was extended to the tree-covered forests of India's Western Ghat and the Vidhya mountain ranges. Mrs. Gandhi hailed the Chipko movement as representing India's "morally conscience" gift to the world¹⁵.

Tree-hugging caught on all over the world, a symbolic act to conserve and honor Mother Earth. Thousands of little Chipkos sprouted everywhere. For instance, a German youth organization, Grüne Jugend Freising, established a tree-hugging campaign with the motto: "Preserve, what preserves you"¹⁶. In Netherlands, Princess Irene, launched a heartfelt movement to put issues of environmental protection, climate change and nature preservation on the political and public agenda. The simple act of tree-hugging had caught

the imagination of conservationists, activists, and artists on a global scale.

Environmental artists Agnieszka Gradzik and Wiktor Szostalo took a novel approach in creating Chipko art. Gradzik and Szostalo ask local participants to gather branches, twigs, vines, and flowers, and fashions these materials into groups of natural figures "hugging" trees¹⁷. The artists' stated intention is to "remind us that we humans are still very much a part of our natural surroundings"¹⁸. Gradzik's and Szostalo's art installations have occurred in cities all around the globe, including an exhibit she fashioned in India with the pioneering women of Uttarkhand who gave birth to the Chipko movement.

The Chipko movement, born in India, has inspired many initiatives and activists to use the symbol of tree-hugging to conserve and preserve our environment. The symbol reminds people to honor the "giving" tree and treat it with love and care as Mother Earth.



Gradzik's and Szostalo's Tree Hugging Art Installation



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Endnotes

1. This case and some of the featured quotes draw upon Singhal and Lubjuhn (2010). Photos are taken from Mark Shepard's website http://www.markshep.com/nonviolence/GT_Chipko.html where permission is granted for use: "May be freely copied and shared for any noncommercial purpose as long as no text is altered or omitted."
2. Silverstein (1964). Also, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Giving_Tree
3. The summary of the story is adapted from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Giving_Tree
4. Quoted in http://www.markshep.com/nonviolence/GT_Chipko.html
5. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sunderlal_Bahuguna
6. Routledge (1993).
7. Shepard (1982; 1987).
8. Bhatt (1992, p. 66)
9. Guha (1989).
10. Shah (2008).
11. Shah (2008).
12. Shah (2008).
13. Shah (2008).
14. Guha (1989).
15. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sunderlal_Bahuguna
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