

## **Environmental movements: Chipko, Silent valley, Bishnois of Rajasthan**

An environmental movement can be defined as a social or political movement, for the conservation of environment or for the improvement of the state of the environment. They can also be called as green movement or conservation movement. The environmental movements are outcome of people trying to gain control over their natural resources, unjust developmental policies of government, socio-economic inequity and environmental degradation. So, these movements mainly center on ecology, health and human rights.

### **Chipko movement**

- Year: 1973
- Place: Chamoli district and later at Tehri-Garhwal district of Uttarakhand.
- Leaders: Sundarlal Bahuguna, Gaura Devi, Sudesha Devi, Bachni Devi, Chandi Prasad Bhatt, Govind Singh Rawat, Dhoom Singh Negi, Shamsher Singh Bisht and Ghanasyam Raturi.
- Aim: The main objective was to protect the trees on the Himalayan slopes from the axes of contractors of the forest.

The Chipko is one of the world known environmental movements in India. It brought world attention on the environmental problems of the Alaknanda catchment area in the mid-Western Himalayas. The trigger for the modern Chipko movement was outcome of the growth in development that took place with the perspective of border security, after 1963 China border conflict. It proved to be disastrous for forest and total environment of the area. Widespread floods inundated the area in 1970.

The other reason was that the villagers were not allowed to cut the trees for fuel wood or for fodder and for certain other purposes. However, a sports manufacturing company was given the permission to fell trees and use them to make equipment, this was final provocation and a people's movement was born. Environmentalist and Gandhian social activist Chandi Prasad Bhatt, founder of the cooperative organisation Dasholi Gram Swarajya Sangh, led the first Chipko movement near the village of Mandal in 1973.

When their appeals were denied, Bhatt led a group of villagers into the forest and embraced the trees to prevent logging. The name of the movement i.e. 'Chipko', means 'embrace', in English. After many days of agitation, the government canceled the company's logging permit. The Chipko movement can essentially be called as women's movement. Women, being solely in charge of cultivation, livestock and children, suffered the most due to floods and landslides, caused due to rise in deforestation in the face of urbanisation.

The message of the Chipko workers made a direct appeal to them. They were able to perceive the link between their victimization and the denuding of mountain slopes by commercial interests. Thus, sheer

survival made women support the movement. On its doodle blog commemorating the 45th anniversary of the movement, Google wrote, “The Chipko Andolan also stands out as an eco-feminist movement. Women formed the nucleus of the movement, as the group most directly affected by the lack of firewood and drinking water caused by deforestation. The power of protest is an invaluable and powerful agent of social change.”

The Chipko Movement gained traction under Sunderlal Bahuguna, an eco activist, who spent his life persuading and educating the villagers to protest against the destruction of the forests and Himalayan mountains. It was his endeavor that made then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi banned the cutting of trees. Mr. Bahuguna is best remembered for the slogan “ecology is the permanent economy”.

The original Chipko andolan dates back to the 18th century and was started by Rajasthan’s Bishnoi community. The Bishnois may be considered as India’s first environmentalists. Amrita Devi Bishnoi, her daughters and a group of villagers, laid down their lives while protecting trees from being felled on the orders of then King of Jodhpur. After this incident, the king, in a royal decree, banned cutting of trees in all Bishnoi villages.

### **Silent valley**

- Year: 1978
- Place: Silent Valley, an evergreen tropical forest in the Palakkad district of Kerala, India.
- Leaders: The Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP), many NGOs and the poet-activist Sughatha kumari.
- Aim: To protect the moist evergreen forest in Palakkad district from being destroyed by a hydroelectric project.

Silent valley was named by English man during colonial rule, who found that there was no noise of cicadas after dark. It is one of rich bio diverse areas of India. It has a triangular shape. On two sides are the Kozhikode and Palghat cities in Kerala and on the other side is located the Coimbatore city in neighboring Tamil Nadu.

Kunthipuzha is a major river that flows 15 km southwest from silent valley. The idea of a dam was first proposed in 1920s by British technical expert. The first survey on this project was carried out in 1958. In 1970, the Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB) proposed a hydroelectric dam across the Kunthipuzha river that would have submerged 8.3 sq km of untouched moist evergreen forest.

Steven Green in 1972, expressed his concerns about the possible threats to the rare lion-tailed macaque from the project. Around the same time, herpetologist Romulus Whitaker wrote to the Bombay Natural History Society about the need to conserve the Valley. Reports like these alert other naturalists. But, the Planning Commission approved this project in 1973. The project planned to generate 120 megawatt of

electricity initially and 240 megawatt subsequently. However, due to lack of sufficient funds, implementation was delayed. There was not much protest initially.

In 1976, the project attracted the attention of some environmentalists. A task-force was formed under the chairmanship of the Zafar Futehally. This task Force recommended that scrapping of project, with a loophole that, if abandoning the project was not possible, a series of safeguards should be implemented. The Kerala government decided to proceed with safeguards. In the same year, M.K Prasad wrote an article about the disastrous effect of project on silent valley in Kerala Sasthra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP). His article got huge response. The General Assembly of the IUCN, many eminent people like Salim Ali, Madhav Gadgil, CV Radhakrishnan, MS Swaminathan, Subramaniam Swamy, etc. also wrote to central government not to sanction the project. However, then Prime Minister Morarji Desai rejected all the appeals and recommended the proposal.

A public interest litigation was filed in the High Court in 1979. The Silent Valley Samrakshana Samiti and Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad started awareness campaigns, held protest meetings, rallies and debates all over the state, turning the campaign into a mass people's movement. Famous writers from Kerala also joined the movement. The then PM Charan Singh instituted a Central Committee to re-investigate the issue, headed by M.S. Swaminathan. In 1980, the High Court rejected plea. Then, a small group of campaigners met the Kerala Governor and requested her to issue a stay order untill Committees' report was issued. Work was halted once again. But the awareness campaigns continue. PM Charan Singh was replaced by Indira Gandhi. She took active interest in silent valley project. She constituted M.G.K. Menon Committee in 1983 to re-examine the project, which recommended abandoning of the project. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi formally inaugurated Silent Valley National Park in 1985. The silent valley movement saw many twists and turns in politics but it gave birth to the idea of environment impact assessment of every project before its initiation.

### **Bishnois of Rajasthan**

- Year: 1700s
- Place: Khejarli, Marwar region, Rajasthan state.
- Leaders: Amrita Devi along with Bishnoi villagers in Khejarli and surrounding villages.
- Aim: Save sacred trees from being cut down by the king's soldiers for a new palace.

The Bishnois living in western Rajasthan on the fringe of the Thar desert, for centuries, have been conserving the flora and fauna. For them nature-loving people, protection of the environment, wildlife, and plants is a part and parcel of their sacred traditions. In the fifteenth century, Jambhoji, a resident of a village near Jodhpur, had a vision that the cause of the drought that had hit the area and hardship that followed was caused by people's interference with nature. Thereafter, he became a 'sanyasi' and came to be known as Swami Jambeshwar Maharaj. This was the beginning of the Bishnoi sect. He laid down 29 tenets for his followers which included *Jeev Daya Palani* – Be compassionate to all living beings and *Runkh Lila Nahi Ghave* – Do not cut green trees. Nature protection was given foremost importance in these tenets.

The sacrifice made by Amrita Devi and over 350 others is a heart-rending example of their devotion. The Maharaja Abhay Singh of Jodhpur wanted to build a new palace and required wood for it. To procure this his men went to the area around the village of Jalnadi to fell the trees. When Amrita Devi saw this she rushed out to prevent the men and hugged the first tree, but the axe fell on her and she died on the spot. Before dying she uttered a couplet, 'A chopped head is cheaper than a felled tree'. People from 83 surrounding villages rushed to prevent the men from felling the trees and by the end of the day more than 363 had lost their lives.

When the king heard about this, he felt remorseful and personally came to village to apologize to the people. He promised them that they would never be asked to provide timber to the ruler, no khejri tree would be cut and hunting would be banned near the Bishnoi villages. The village of Jalnadi thus came to be called Khejarli. The Bishnois will go to any extent to protect the wildlife and the forests around them. Recently this sect was in the news due to the hunting of Black buck by some Mumbai film group.

The heartland of the Bishnois in the forests near Jodhpur is abundant in trees and wildlife. The landscape here is greener than elsewhere and the animals mainly antelopes, particularly the blackbuck and the chinkara, in these forests are not afraid of humans and are often seen near the villages eating out of the villagers' hands. The Bishnois have indeed proved that human lives are a small price to pay to protect the wildlife and the forests around them.

Though they are staunch Hindus but they do not cremate their dead but bury them, as they are not permitted to use wood for the cremation.

There is a saying that goes "Sir santhe rooke rahe to bhi sasto jaan" this means that if a tree is saved from felling at the cost of one's head, it should be considered as a good deed.