

Opinion – Chipko’s Lessons for Today’s Global Environmentalism

Written by Adarsh Badri

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ADARSH BADRI, MAY 28 2024

In the early 1970s, precisely three things happened in global environmental history: at the institutional level, the United Nations held its first Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm; at the academic level, Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* gained prominence for advocating environmentalism; and at the local level, the Chipko (tree-hugging) movement began in northern India as a response to the state’s neglect of ecological concerns. While the Stockholm Conference and Carson’s seminal book have remained the referents of global environmentalism, Chipko’s novel environmental activism articulations have often been forgotten. With the independence from British colonialism in 1947, the Indian leadership focused on rapid development centred around modern industries and agriculture. Once combative against colonial policies, after independence, the Indian State retained most of the authoritarian aspects of colonial rule. These included the regressive forest policies that disenfranchised farmers, forest dwellers, pastoralists, women, Adivasis, etc.

Despite all its tall claims about forest conservation and efforts at turning 33 per cent of India into forests, there was barely any proposal for alternatives in the 1952 “forest policy”—and in most parts, the colonial structure of exploitation persisted. The idea of “reserved forests” was maintained in the name of “national needs”. However, forest resources were exploited, and tree felling was permitted commercially. The State’s favour for commercial interest also came at the cost of peasants and forest dwellers’ “subsistence needs for fuel, fodder and small timber”. Therefore, Chipko began a peasant movement that sought to reclaim and defend community rights over forests.

The Chipko movement began in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh (later Uttarakhand) in 1973. Spearheaded by the locals (mainly women and tribals) who depended on forests for their livelihood, Chipko activists embraced trees to protest the commercial felling of trees. The movement was born in Mandal, an interior village of Garhwal Himalaya, where loggers of Allahabad-based Symonds Company were thwarted from felling ash trees. The Chipko movement, led by Chandi Prasad Bhatt, Sundarlal and Vimala Bahuguna, and Gaura Devi, among others, protested against the unjust treatment of locals against the use of forest resources for their livelihood while simultaneously allowing big businesses to profit from cutting trees.

The movement soon struck a chord with many parts of northern India, with people (men, women, and children) hugging trees and protesting state policies on forestry that had disenfranchised the local communities and favoured commercial interests. The movement successfully brought forth the local community’s interests and helped address their ecological concerns. Therefore, Chipko has often been called the “environmentalism of the poor”. Hence, Historian Ramachandra Guha writes: “Till Chipko, environmentalism was identified with rich countries and middle class. Peasants, it was felt, lacked the knowledge and understanding of ecological processes, and India was too poor to be green.” The movement’s success has been far and wide-ranging in regulating commercial forestry and contractor systems and reclaiming the community rights over the forests. However, despite its tremendous success, there is barely any scholarly discourse in IR and political science about how Chipko’s activism can shape our present-day understandings about environmentalism.

Against this backdrop, I wrote an article titled: ‘Feeling for the Anthropocene: Affective Relations and Ecological Activism in the Global South’ for *International Affairs*. In the article, I sought to understand how ecological activism

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could be thought of/and understood differently. Therefore, I asked: “How do emotions shape ecological activism in the global south?” I have built on the growing scholarly focus on relationality, emotions, and the Anthropocene in IR to fully capture the essence of how differently ecological activism could be thought of. Through my empirical discussion on the Chipko movement, I have argued that it is essential for scholars and activists to move beyond “the dominant rationalist *technocratic fixes*” and understand environmentalism through “affective relations”. I have discussed that “affective relations” can be a frame to situate and sustain human/nature relations. Specifically, I have argued that emotions bind humans and nature. Furthermore, the Chipko movement allows us to consider how feelings, expressed through hugging trees, applying bandages to trees, singing and sloganeering, can act as nonviolent practices and bring social and political change.

Today, as societies grapple with the onslaught of the environmental catastrophe (in the making), the Chipko movement has a few lessons for global environmentalism. This brief essay documents four crucial lessons from this movement for present-day and future ecological activism. First, the ecological activism of Chipko points us to the human-nature interconnection that needs to be acknowledged in our understanding of environmentalism. Global environmentalism has often treated humans and nature as two distinct realms, where economy and ecology are at odds with one another—and that humans can fix ecological problems no matter how ugly things are. However, in Chipko, we see interconnections between humans and nature in consonance with the Anthropocene understanding of the world. Such understandings of human-nature interconnectedness also resonate with other communities in the Global South. Therefore, ecological practices in the global south help situate what Bruno Latour calls “earthbound people”. For example, the Yanomami peoples of Brazil think of themselves as one among many beings that exist in the forest; their stories, songs, myths, and dreams all reflect how they feel—pain and suffering—when the forests are burned down. Global ecological activism should actively leverage this knowledge in its knowledge-dissemination practices. It should actively propel ideas about how humans and nature are bound by one another rather than being seen as one against the other.

Second, Chipko’s activism points to how emotions can harness human-nature relations. In Chipko, we see an act of resistance, where bodies are interposed between trees and the axemen. Given the substantive role forests played in their lives, with dependence on dry leaves and grass for fodder, twigs and branches for cooking fuel, timber for farming tools, and nuts and herbs for consumption, these activists ascribed the forests the role of a teacher who nurtures and nourishes them. Emotions, as felt experiences, help connect humans to nature and help them feel for nature. To feel for nature is to come to terms with our inseparable attachment to nature. Even as emotions help situate and sustain human-nature relations, they become active sites of activism and resistance. It is a space where collective angst for the environment is felt, shared, and expressed. Emotions both affect and are affected by one another. Moreover, feelings for nature frequently “emerge through relations, engagements, and practices” in ecological spaces. Therefore, present-day environmentalism can further leverage the emotional power of binding humans together, humans with nature, and against the coercive state structures.

Third, Chipko points us to new ways of doing ecological activism. In Chipko’s activism, emotions are leveraged to sustain human-nature relations, engage with people about the environment actively, and engage with policymakers and governments effectively. The tree-hugging movement was not merely an act of resistance for these communities but a means of survival. Given this premise, the practice of hugging trees, shouting slogans, and singing songs actively evokes a sense of solidarity among communities over shared anxieties. For instance, in one such practice, Chipko activists applied bandages to the trees that were being felled or marked to be felled. This practice evoked a strong sense of responsibility to protect forests from their destruction and demonstrated how trees have been hurt and need healing, as humans would. Moreover, such practices signify the role of the non-violent Gandhian movement in the face of state power.

In recent years, global environmentalism has leveraged the power of emotional practices. In the 2019 Davis speech, Greta Thunberg, who spearheads the school strike for climate movement called *Fridays for Future*, declared: “I don’t want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act.” The emotional valence of speeches such as this is essential in pushing for environmental awareness. In a similar vein, climate activists have leveraged emotional slogans such as “Climate justice without borders”, “there is no Planet B”, and “climate change is real” to push for environmentalism evocatively. From making posters to singing

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songs to appealing to public sentiment, emotional practices further help build solidarities within and across society. There is a need to do more.

Finally, Chipko’s insights tell us that policymakers and practitioners must be empathetic. They must be ready to listen—listen to how the “subaltern” speaks. Governments must focus on eco-centred communities when dealing with environmental problems. In such communities, nature understands humans and vice-versa. As Governments grapple with the impending ecological crisis, they must leverage the knowledge that is innate to these communities. They must listen, empathise and engage with local communities that depend on their ecology. In doing so, they will be able to appreciate how humans and nature depend on each other for sustenance.

About the author:

Adarsh Badri is a blogger and a PhD student at the School of Political Science and International Studies (POLSIS), University of Queensland, Australia. Earlier, he was a commissioning editor at E-International Relations. His research interests include identity, emotions, postcolonialism, IR theory, and foreign policy, focusing on South Asia. He has also published in the *International Affairs*, *Strategic Analysis*, *Lowy Institute*, *Economic & Political Weekly*, and *NIICE Nepal*, among others. Adarsh holds a master’s in political science from the University of Delhi and was a research scholar at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, India. He tweets at @adarsh_badri.