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The Chipko Movement: A People's History

By Shekhar Pathak, translated by Manisha Chaudhry. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2020. 371 pages; ISBN: 978-8-178-24555-3

YOGESH UPADHYAY

"If trees remain, the mountains remain, and so does the country"¹

The Forest Rights Act, 2006, recognised the historical injustice done to forest dwellers in both colonial and independent India in not acknowledging their centrality to the very survival of the forest ecosystem and promised to invest them with forest rights. Promising as the law seemed, my year-long engagement with the Himalayan forest dwellers in 2019 revealed that the recognised injustice continues unabated. Using the case study of the Chipko Movement, this book (*The Chipko Movement: A People's History*) attempts to enliven the politics around forest management and suggests historical reasons for the continuing problem and its solution. Given ongoing corporatisation, centralisation and dilution of environmental laws on the one side, and burgeoning ecological disasters on the other, this book can be read as an attempt to bring home the point that the permanent and immanent solution to our ecological and economic crisis lies in giving forest

¹ Pathak, S. *The Chipko Movement: A People's History* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2020), 157

rights to forest dwellers, who know the forest more deeply and are more farsighted in managing it than any other agent.

This English translation of Shekhar Pathak's 'Hari Bhari Ummeed'² by Manisha Chaudhry offers us the Chipko Movement from the vantage point of the people who took part in it. Unfolding deep and nuanced insights, the book, consisting of ten chapters along with the signature introduction by Ramachandra Guha, takes the reader on a slow and passionate journey of one of the iconic social movements of contemporary India. The author, himself active in the movement, relies on lived experiences, situated intimacies, personal collections and letters of and interviews with hundreds of Chipko activists, and 'local' newspaper reports. The nuanced contextualisation happens in the process of going beyond the movement, as Pathak provides an enriching historical, socio-cultural and naturo-economic account of Uttarakhand in the introductory chapters. As the book is full of interactive overlaps, a thematic review will allow me to engage better with the larger rubric of the movement.

Tributaries and Distributaries, and a Moral Lesson

From the beginning, Pathak makes clear that the focus of the book is not only on the 'glorified' personalities or events but, more importantly, on some of the unheard voices of Chipko. This contrast is well depicted in two interviews with women, where one group exclaimed that their role and participation was not even remembered, while the other group was fed up with being endlessly interviewed by 'visitors'.² Like a river formed of tributaries, Pathak details how actors from numerous strands of society came together to save their forests, rivers, and livelihoods and shows how other local movements and regional natural disasters contributed to raising the consciousness

² Ibid., 293

that led to Chipko. Along with the prominent role of Sarvodaya activists and women, he brings to light the uncompromising role of university students and the local members of the Communist Party of India and Indian National Congress, who sometimes worked in opposition to the party line.

Pathak points out that, like a river's distributaries, as the years passed, Chipko also fragmented into various smaller streams, which I sincerely hope will unite again to heed the cry of degraded forests, dried rivers, and denied livelihood. His years of field experience provide a deeper understanding of these distributaries, often reduced to just three streams of 'Sarvodaya', 'socialist', and 'left party politics', as the last chapter discusses in detail the multifarious 'living lights of Chipko'. These lights, he suggests, are 'together but not united.'³ In his innovative approach to the topic, Pathak lucidly describes the unfolding and re-unfolding of Chipko, thereby highlighting the multi-layered complexity of the movement at all points of space-time.

As presented, the story of Chipko is a story of small victories, smaller setbacks, big victories and bigger setbacks and offers equally useful lessons from its successes and failures. In this age of a forward-looking, core-driven, and megalomaniac development system, when the height and capacity of the dam and the length and width of the road are its only boasted features, this book reveals to a young, urban-dwelling reader like me the overwhelmingly frightening price that peripheral nature and nature-dependents have to pay. Against the obsessive, individual-profit centred exploitation in the Himalayas, Pathak highlights, was the foresters' sustained *constructive resistance*, which meant taking individual responsibility for rebuilding the forest and installing forest-based, small-scale, cooperative industries in the hills while fighting the systemic oppression.

³ Ibid., 262

The moral lesson here is the undying patience and dedication of forest dwellers in protecting their life source in the face of equally undying and violent state repression.

State Apparatuses

Post-independence and post-emergency are marked as critical but failed, junctures in bringing change in forest governance, as the political activists demanding the granting of forest rights to forest communities took an absolute U-turn after getting to power. By peeling off various layers of forest governance, Pathak provides a revealing account of the seemingly concerned central government, the sly state government, and the Forest Department as the biggest land hoarder. Two stark characteristics of governance become apparent at various points in the book: *firstly*, lack of coordination between the departments, and *secondly*, and more importantly, *governance for the benefit of the few*. As constantly shown, the immediate dependency on natural resources involves not the few but the remaining most, and to ensure the fulfilment of the *wants of the few*, the state compromises with the *needs of the most*. Pathak brings to light both the repressive and ideological state apparatus that made this possible. The book is replete with episodes of inhuman brutality and repressive state measures, which in some instances, like the ‘Haldwani Repression of 1978’, counter-functioned and awoke and united the entire Uttarakhand.⁴

What truly weakened the movement was the ideological state apparatus, in the form of government policies of reserving forests, and the final nail in the coffin was the Forest Conservation Act, 1980. Under these laws, the forest dwellers struggled to acquire resources even for their most basic needs. Measures taken in the name of ‘conservation’, centralised and corporatised forest exploitation ultimately for the benefit of the few. It was so unprecedented that the poet-comrade Ghanyan

⁴ Ibid., 198

Sailani commented, 'neither the British nor the Tehri Raja plundered as much.'⁵ However, the elements that broke the unified movement beyond repair were the state-sponsored accolades and honours in the name of individuals or groups, which Pathak suggests, brought friction, jealousy, pride and rivalry in the members, reflecting that they were 'subject to the same feelings as most people.'⁶

The Movement (In)visibilised

The celebration of 'visibility' in grassroots movements is put under a critical light in the book, as Pathak suggests that the national and international media and academics' *distanced-attention* did more harm than good to the health of the movement. The media, Pathak states, in its search for 'real Chipko' created a parallel Chipko. The extent of it became clear as Chipko was *essentially* imagined as people 'hugging or embracing' the trees, while Pathak discloses that Dhoom Singh Negi was "perhaps the only person to actually hug a tree."⁷ The blatant reduction and over-simplification limited the peoples' rights movement to the spurious debate of economy v/s ecology. Contemptuous of the writers and media persons 'wanting a share of the limelight',⁸ Pathak straightforwardly debunks the separation by showing them as two sides of the same coin and demonstrates that in every conservation matter, the answer of livelihood and rights is inherent.

So, we see that a flurry of films, books, research papers, and publicity events reduced the *multi-personality, multi-region, and multi-ideology* social movement to hero figures, heroic events, and

⁵ Ibid., 294

⁶ Ibid., 250

⁷ Ibid., 289

⁸ Ibid., 260

consensual ideology. Pathak elucidates, “Chipko was being appropriated now by a shallower world intent on espousing singular identity and shunning actual complexity.”⁹ As the book is painstakingly detailed, it takes the reader beyond the spectacular. Indeed, it is full of episodes where numerous letters and memorandums are written to various office bearers, who in turn set up committees with positive inscriptions on paper, only to leave the forest dwellers further dissatisfied with the non-application of what was proposed and with no other option but to resist on the ground.

The poetics of the movement have been beautifully captured by Pathak and would have been more delightful if the text was accompanied by corresponding photos, more so as he points that some of the comrades were handy with the camera. The imagery of the book is so sensitive that it feels like watching a movie. However, unlike a movie, where every character is introduced as they enter the scene, the biographical accounts of the lesser-known characters are only revealed in the second-last chapter, which was a slight editorial disappointment. This book would be a crucial read for anyone interested in the Chipko movement, in particular, and in the modern history of environmentalism in India, in general. As the book traverses the nearly wholesome journey of Chipko, it is highly recommended to anyone interested in activism, for the knowledge of precedence never goes to waste.

⁹ Ibid., 276