

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHIPKO BAHUGUNA

(The interview was taken by Sri Pandurang Hegde in December 1982, during the time Sri Sunderlal Bahuguna was trekking through Bhutan in his historic Kashmir to Kohima Chipko Footmarch)

PH: Why did you decide to undertake such a hazardous march and what are the main goals of this march?

SB: Many people see Chipko as a localised movement, restricted to Garhwal, we wanted to give a wider perspective and to widen the base of this movement to other regions in Himalayas. Hence we began this hazardous march. To widen the base of the movement it is essential that local activists at large number of places emerge. These activists are capable of taking up issues relevant to their area. So our goal is to mobilise local people to form a group which is able to work on long term developmental goals. We also want to understand the hill economy of the Himalayan villages and to share our experiences with brothers and sisters in the great Himalayan parts of the country.

PH: Do you think you have achieved part of the objective in the 4000 km march already completed?

SB: We are sowing seeds in the desert hoping to see a grown up tree in future. The effect of the march can be judged only in the long run. But to our surprise, already three activist groups have emerged one each in Bhadarwar of J&K, in Chamba of Himachal Pradesh and in Nepal. This unforeseen success is a great morale booster to the Chipko Andolan. These groups have taken up local issues like rights of villagers on forest produce etc., and have succeeded in mobilising support. We are regularly following up these groups so that there is a strong well-coordinated movement in Himalayas on ecological issues. Our success is due to active participation of youth, especially women. All along the march we have tried to involve as many young people as possible. It is through our informal meetings, slide shows and discussions on local issues that helped us to communicate the message. The emergence of three groups show that our ideas are relevant and the methods used are also successful.

PH: Who is sponsoring your march?

SB: Our sponsors are the people, the common people of hill villages. The villagers support us in all ways, they provide food and shelter and look after us as their own people. This generous hospitality reduces all our worries. We also sell books on Chipko Andolan. We have also printed them in local languages like Nepalese. At times we get some donations from villagers during the march. Thus we are self reliant depending on local resources and support, we are volunteers working for the cause of environment and our needs are meagre. We have no funding from large agencies nor have we asked for any.

PH: It is widely understood that ecological demands like those of the Chipko Andolan are obstacles to the economic growth of the country. How do you explain your stand in this respect?

SB: Yes, you have touched the right point--economy vs. conservation. There is always hue and cry about economic development being put ages behind by conservationists. But let me tell you, we through our experience with villagers have brought out a new slogan "Ecology is Permanent Economy". About 10 years back we also believed that it is necessary to have forest based industries and also that forest wealth should be utilised for commercial purposes. During those years we worked intensively among forest labourers to better their condition etc. Dhum Singh Negi, our colleague stayed two years with labourers in forest. It is during this period that our belief of economic/commercial necessity of forest was shattered. We were able to observe how even careful felling disturbs eco-systems, how the coniferous trees dominate over broad leaf trees. We saw how this depletes and washes away the topsoil during monsoon. We also saw perennial springs in the villages and we also saw forests drying up and leading to scarcity of drinking water. And during this period Garhwal Hills experienced massive land slides killing and burying hundreds of people, and livestock. Villages were wiped off and the debris covered fertile fields. And do you remember the havoc caused by Bhagirathi in Uttar Kashi in 1973. All these experiences lead to the realisation that to save the lives in catchment areas the solution is total conservation. Man has to live with nature and it is necessary to preserve these delicate areas from manipulation by human beings. That is the reason why we shifted from economic approach to conservation, for a stable permanent economy.

Now you may further question--won't this pure approach lead to decrease in demand of labourers or render labourers without work. We have practical data to show that if existing land/forest is to be managed in a way beneficial to the society then the existing labour force can be conveniently absorbed in taking care of the forests. We need them for afforestation programmes. The management of forests and raising new fruit and fodder trees will definitely call for more labourers. It only depends whether government has will, or whether it is interested in changing to a policy which will benefit the village people. The slogan for this new policy should be "Ecology is Permanent Economy".

PH: How does your march help in the fight against poverty in India?

SB: Environmental problems are very much related to the day to day living of poorer people. For example the disappearance of fuel wood. Where will the people go? What will happen to those forest tribal people who live on forest products like Mahua and other fruits? Where will the tribal people of Bastar go if the forests are cut down and pine is planted

for newsprint factory? Will it not effect poor people if eucalyptus is planted instead of staple crop like ragi? Who are the people to be thrown out when a major dam is built? All these questions threaten the basis of development-- that is going on in our country. These developments have made the poor people poorer. Through our march we just try to convey to the hill people the ill-effects of the current development strategy and how we can evolve an alternative which helps poor people. The march is to make poor people conscious of their fights on natural resources.

PH: During your march you have crossed parts of the sub-continent with diverse religious fiaths, like Islam in Kashmir, Hinduism in U.P., H.P. and Nepal, Buddhism in Bhutan and in your next part you are going to face people with Christian belief. How have you faced this diversity?

SB: Religion has always been related to nature. Aryans and Dravidians worshipped trees. Religion, whether it is Islam, Hindusm, Christianity or Bhuddhism is an internal part of the culture. To communicate any new ideas to village people is a difficult task. And it becomes more difficult if you are trying to convey scientific ideas. But if one tries to link these scientific ideas more quickly. In Kashmir we took help from Quran, we interpreted Quran and linked it with ecology. It was more effective. In Hinduism, there are Bhagwat Kathas--which has relevant aspects of forestry. This has been effectively used to communicate the message of Chipko in Tehri-Garhwal. And now in Buddhism--Buddha, has 2000 years back said about planting more trees. Thus it is a matter of understanding local culture and communicating to people at their level. We have yet to walk through the Christian dominated parts. But we have some idea how nicely the forests are managed in the further eastern parts of the Himalayas where the Christian brothers and sisters live. I am looking forward to the march in those places.

PH: What is the significance of preading the message of Chipko from Kashmir to Kohima as compared to working intensively in your village? People often identify you as a 'publicist journalist' and imply that you do not want to do grassroots levelorganisation. Would you comment on it?

SB:As I have already pointed out, so far we were intensively working with village people in Garhwal. But the ban of U.P. Government on cutting green trees have given us an opportunity to spread this message to wider areas in Himalayas. If we have to save the Himalayan ecology we have to spread out. At the end of the march we will again concentrate on specific local areas and also collaborate with all the newly formed groups. Regarding fyour comment on publicity, it is a part and parcel of the movement. You cannot change government policies without popular awareness. I do thank them who look at me as a publicist because they honour me with their recognition of my work in this direction. But that is only one side of the story. There are several dimensions of our publicity which are more important than publicity in the press. That is grassroots publicity which we do with slides, lectures and long marches.