

# Eco-Feminism and Folk Media: A Case Study of the Chipko Movement

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to examine the aspect of eco-feminism in the Chipko movement and also the role played by the folk media. The Chipko movement is one of the greatest environmental movements that have ever taken place. There are various perspectives on this. While some scholars call it an environmental movement, some others call it an economic one. It is also touted as one of the biggest eco-feminist movements. This paper shall try to assess the perspective of eco-feminism in the Chipko movement and how the folk media of the region helped the females and the activists altogether. The methodology adopted is content analysis in which data gathered from secondary sources shall be analyzed. The main objective of this paper is to assess the element of eco-feminism in the Chipko Movement and how the folk media helped. The term eco-feminism or ecological feminism was coined by French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974. It describes the connection between women and nature and how they are inter-related. Eco-feminism takes its basic tenets from feminism that disregards patriarchal structures and connects feminism with nature. Chipko Movement was spearheaded by the villagers, primarily women, of the upper Alaknanda Valley in Uttarakhand to stop the unscrupulous felling of ash trees. The folk media of the region played a major role in the uprising.

**Index Terms:** Eco-feminism, environment, movement, folk media.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Humans have always been dependent on nature for sustaining their lives. They derive food, fuel and shelter out of the nature. The majority of which comes from the forests as they provide us with food in the form of fruits and other edibles, and woods for fuel and shelter. The tribal people and the villagers living near any forest are dependent on the forest for their survival. However, in India, the laws those were in action before independence continued to operate even after the independence. The Indian Forest Act which came in 1927 restricted the access of local villagers to the forest and continued to be in practice even after independence. It was only in 1958 that a forest management committee was formed that was supposed to address the grievances of the locals. But even after its constitution, the redressal of the grievances was put at the back burner. The villagers were particularly distressed about the large number of ash trees cut by outside contractors which was denuding the valley and adding to the under development. The discontent of the locals was accentuated further when the upper Alaknanda valley was flooded in 1970s and there was destruction on mammoth level. They were able to make connections between the denuding of the forest and the floods. This discontent of the locals and their growing awareness gave birth to the Dasoli Gram Swarajya Sangh (DGSS) in Gopeshwar under the leadership of Gandhian leader Chandi Prasad Bhatt. The aim of DGSS was to generate employment for the local people through the forest by setting small scale industries. The DGSS, in 1973, asked the forest department to grant permission to fell 12 ash trees for the use of local people. But the forest department declined the request. At the same time, Symonds, a sports company from Allahabad that made tennis rackets acquired the contract to fell around 300 ash trees in the Mandal forest, which is barely some kilometers from Gopeshwar. After witnessing this injustice to the locals of Gopeshwar, Chandi Prasad Bhatt decided to hug the trees along with the villagers. As a result of which the representatives of the Symonds company had to back out without touching the trees. In a similar and related incident, the government decided to auction more than 2000 ash trees in the forests of Reni in upper Alaknanda valley. The area was already devastated by the floods in recent times. The denuding of the valley would have only added to the woes of

the villagers who were dependent on the forest for their survival. The villagers decide to protest against the government by hugging the trees. On the eventful day of 26<sup>th</sup> March, 1974, a group of women led by one Gaura Devi went ahead and hugged the trees which forced the contractors to back out. The women had epistemic privilege over the outsider contractors and officials. But the contractors didn't give up and came up with malicious ways to send the men of the village out on pretext of showing them a movie. In the absence of the men of the village they came back to carry out what they had left halfway due to the protests – felling of the trees. However they were met with a solid backlash in the form of the women hugging the trees and refusing to budge. The women of the Reni village called the forest their 'Mayka' or mother's home. This depicts their emotional bond with the forest. The protests continued in the following years under the leadership of Sundar Lal Bahuguna and Chandi Prasad Bhatt. It spread to various parts of Uttarakhand. In 1979, again the same story happened and the contract to fell the trees was again given to the contractors. It resulted in major erosion in the Badyargarh Patti of Tehri Garhwal area. Bahuguna along with other Sarvodaya workers such as Dhoom Singh Negi, Bachni Devi, Pratap Sikhar etc. started mobilizing the people of the area. Bahuguna went on an indefinite hunger strike. As a result of which, in 1981, the Indira Gandhi government came out with a ban on the felling of trees for the next fifteen years. This was a big victory for all the women, volunteers and leaders. The original Chipko movement took place more than 250 years ago in Khairali in Jodhpur, Rajasthan. The women of the local Bishnoi community, more than 380 in number, led by one Amrita Devi laid down their lives in order to protect the trees from being felled. As a result of this, the Maharaja of Jodhpur passed a decree to prevent the felling of trees in all the local Bishnoi villages. In Jodhpur also, like the movement of Mandal and Reni, women were on the forefront. The Chipko movement that took place in Jodhpur more than 250 years ago and the one that took place in Uttarakhand in 1973 had one aspect in common. Women were on the forefront in both the movements. The reason for this can be attributed to the fact that there is an innate connection between women and nature. Nature has always been considered as a female who is tolerant, nurturing and benevolent, very much like the

women. Giving birth to life and maintaining it has been considered the basic work of nature and women alike. And all this goes unappreciated and unacknowledged as both of them are expected to be servile and slavish. The Chipko movement is being considered as an ecological feminism or eco-feminism movement as the women on one hand showed their innate bond with the forest, calling it their 'Mayka' or mother's home, and on the other hand they had to stand against the men of their own respective families- husbands, brothers, fathers who were in support of the government in felling the trees.

### 1.1. Eco-feminism

Eco-feminism is a branch of feminism that connects the women with the nature. It believes in deconstructing the narrative in which the oppression of women and exploitation of nature is justified. This term was first coined by French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974. *Le féminisme ou la mort* (Feminism or Death) was the book that she published in the same year and used the term eco-feminism in the book for the first time. She explored a special connection between women and nature. According to d'Eaubonne, the main cause of pollution, population explosion and other toxic effects on nature is primarily due to the masculinity of the men. Her views are echoed by various other scholars who believe that there indeed is a connection between nature and women. Eco-feminism draws heavily from the basic tenets of feminism which include gender equality and a basic disregard of the patrilineal system that justifies the oppression of women. To these tenets, eco-feminism adds the awareness of the connection with the nature. This branch of feminism examines very closely how both nature and women are treated by the patriarchal society. Eco-feminism came into existence when the women from all over, both academic and professional, held conferences in the United States between 1970 and 1980. The motive of these conferences was to establish a connection between the nature and women and call out the oppression meted out to both of them. These women were of the view that the patrilineal narrative assets women as irrational and in need to be controlled, and men as rational and wise. Naturally, handing the reins of both women and nature in the hand of men to be exploited and oppressed. This is the core reason why eco-feminists have a major disregard for the patriarchal narrative of the society. Rosemary Ruether, one of the founding members of eco-feminism and a theologian is of the view that women should acknowledge the exploitation of nature in order to address their own oppression. By the end of 1980s, eco-feminism became a worldwide movement instead of just limiting to the academic circles. It further branched out into ration eco-feminism and cultural eco-feminism. The association with nature has been largely discussed in the cultural branch of eco-feminism. This branch asserts that women and nature are connected in more than one way. They reproduce, nurture and provide care without any condition and expectation. In 1978, Susan Griffin in her seminal work 'Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her' wrote, "I know I am made from this earth, as my mother's hands were made

from this earth, as her dreams came from this earth and all that I know, I know in this earth...all that I know speak to me through this earth and I long to tell you, you who are earth too, and listen as we speak to each other of what we know: the light is in us (Griffin 1978, p. 227)." In this poem, Griffin talks about the oppression of women in the western civilization in a chronological order. She also indicts the technology and science for destroying the nature. In 1962, Rachel Carson in her book "The Silent Spring" denounced the "elixirs of death" and spoke about the ill effects of pollution on women and children (Carson 1999, p. 204). Carson has described the spring or the nature as silent because humans have refused to listen to the nature and paying heed to what she has to tell about its own degrading state. Eco-feminism has contributed a lot in disregarding the patrilineal narrative of the society. In 1977, a movement was started in which the women protested against the forceful sterilization of indigenous women and sought the removal of harmful factories from the Indian land. This movement was called as 'WARN' or the 'Women of All Red Nations'. In 1980 and 1981, two major movements took place in Washington and England where thousands of women protested against the destruction of nature with the help of technology. There has been a common notion propagated by the patriarchal societies that women and nature exist to fulfill the needs of a man. Eco-feminism aims at deconstruction of this very notion which has been sticking around since times immemorial. In 1989, Vandana Shiva in her book 'Staying Alive' spoke at length about 'maledvelopment', a condition in which science and technology is used without ethical values, which is resulting in death and destruction. The pioneers of eco-feminism, an American philosopher Karen Warren and Australian Val Plumwood contributed a lot in the field. Karen Warren in her work 'Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections', talked about the correlation between patriarchal oppression and environmental degradation. Sexism and racism are major factors that are responsible for the destruction of nature and oppression of women (Warren, 1996). When we say 'dominion' it is automatically interpreted as the dominion over women but it also symbolizes every type of oppression (Plumwood, 1994). Plumwood also talks about the nature of dualism in her book 'Feminism and the Mastery of Nature'. Here dualism is the correlation between separation and dominion along with radical exclusion. Also, the social norms, religion, philosophy, sexual behavior, science and education position the men in the foreground and women in the background (Plumwood, 1993). Eco-feminism focuses on inclusion, prioritizing life and conservation of nature as opposed to individualism (Pulcini, 2009). Karen Warren in her book 'Eco-feminist Philosophy' (2000) has depicted the correlation of the humans and the environment through the phrase "it's all connected". She tries to state in all her works that the women and the nature are interconnected. She along with Val Plumwood talked at length about the tenets of feminism entwined with that of ecology. In 'Eco-feminist Philosophy', she also describes eco-feminism as a 'quilt' in which there various patches of materialism, history and society (Warren, 2000). Understanding Warren's works makes us realize that the concept of eco-feminism is all about realizing the patterns of domination and oppression, both for women and nature. The women fighting for the trees in the Chipko movement had to stand for both the domination of the men in their lives and the destruction of nature.

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## 1.2. Folk Media

Folk media is a term widely used for the forms of communication that are used in the rural parts of India. As opposed to the modern media, folk media are deeply rooted in the rural areas and have greater impact on the rural population. All the major models of communication take into consideration the sender, channel, message and receiver where the sender codifies the message according to their culture. And it is expected from the receiver to decipher the message as desired by the sender. Folk media take into consideration the culture which is why it is largely successful among the indigenous masses. The mainstream media on the other hand fails to take the culture into consideration and more often than not fails to make the desired impact on the target audience. Folk media has been in use in our country since ancient times when they were primarily used for entertainment purposes. With passing time these folk forms started to be used for the dissemination of information from kings. One of the major plus points of folk media is transmission of culture in which a technique or a myth or anecdote or a tradition is passed on from one generation to the next in various forms. Folk media doesn't distinguish between the rich and the poor or the classes and the masses. Each and every recipient is same. But the mainstream media creates a divide between the classes and the masses. The rich can afford various forms such as the television, radio, cinema etc. but the poor people can only resort to the local media for their entertainment. In a country like India, where the divide between rich and poor is more evident, the presence of folk media works towards keeping the lower strata of the society also entertained. We have so many states in the country and each state has their own folk forms such as ballads, skits, folk songs, drama, dances, puppet shows and myths. Folk media of our culture is participative in nature, as a result of which the people who come to witness it feel the emotion of belongingness. Folk forms such as dance, songs, enactments etc. have been used in the traditional rituals such as funerals, marriage ceremonies, death, birth etc. But at the same time folk media have also been used in the mobilization of the rural people.

Folk forms in India have been grouped under various headings such as street theater, puppetry, songs, storytelling, dance, drama etc.

- Street Theatre – This folk form loosely translates to 'nukkadnatak'. This is one of the most famous and effective forms of folk media. The reason is that the performers of street theatre belong to the same culture, primarily same location. They perform in the busy streets where the availability of public is maximum. The performers maintain eye contact with the onlookers, which enable them to establish a trust factor with the people. This is the core reason why the messages that are propagated through this medium make the greatest impact.
- Puppetry – This folk form includes the puppets that are handled and manipulated by the puppeteers. Puppets are called 'putli' or 'putul' in Hindi and other regional languages. Puppetry has many types such as shadow puppets, string puppets, rod puppets and glove puppets. Shadow puppetry involves the projection of silhouettes of the puppets in a dark room to create the desired impact for the story. In string puppetry, the puppets are tied to strings which are manipulated by the puppeteer as the story demands. Glove puppets are made by gloves

where the puppeteer wears the puppets as gloves and through the movement of his hand, tells the story. Rod puppets are the exaggerated version of the glove puppets. In this, the puppets are attached on rods and tied to the waist of the performers. Few examples are Kathputlinaach, Putualnaach, Bommallattam, TholuBommallatta etc.

- Songs – Songs are the most common form of folk media that are in practice in almost every region of our country. In every rite and ritual that takes place in the villages, folk songs are sung. For example, Sohar, Ghazal, Qawwali etc.
- Dance – Folk dances are also very common form of folk media. Kaalbelia, Ghoomar, Bhangra, Lavni, Garba, Jhijhia etc. are few examples of the folk dances that are in practice in our country.
- Storytelling – Storytelling is an important form of folk media that includes the mythologies like Ramayana and Mahabharata. The tales of valor, kindness, humanity, morale and bravery that we know are told to us through this folk form. Also, the old techniques of farming or animal rearing or anything remotely useful are transmitted from one generation to the next through storytelling.
- Drama – Drama pertains to the enactment of a story by various characters. These stories are mainly taken from the day to day life and mythologies. The folk form aims at providing relaxation to the village folks who get back home after a day's hard work.

There are various plus points of the folk media. They are emotionally and culturally connected with the masses. They create a desired impact on the psyche of the audiences as a result of this connection. The language and the dialect are local so it becomes easier for the local people to grasp the message propagated through them. Folk media is inexpensive in comparison with the mainstream media like television and radio. With newspaper, there is the impediment of literacy. Folk media are relatively flexible in their conceptualization so they can accommodate their themes according to changing social narratives. Last but not the least folk can be used in community mobilization. The Chipko movement has been the classic example of this.

## 2 EFFECTS OF GLOBALIZATION ON FOLK MEDIA AND FEMINISM

The process of expansion of social, political and cultural systems around the world is called globalization. The process of globalization has resulted in the shrinking of global boundaries and as a result the economies and political systems are becoming increasingly interdependent. The economic, political and cultural ideas and tenets are exchanged on international level which is why the effects of cross border trends are seen almost everywhere. Globalization can be categorized into three types –

- Economic globalization
- Political globalization
- Cultural globalization

The phenomenon in which the trading and finances are exchanged on the inter-national level is called Economic globalization. Under this type, the sale purchase and export import of different products and services take place. The major things that India exports are gems, jewelry, petroleum, textiles and agricultural products while the major imports of India

include gold, diamond, petroleum gas, crude petroleum oil etc. The exchange of political ideas and notions between and among the nation states is called Political globalization. This provides a common forum for the nation states to come and have their common concerns, opportunities and threats. For example, the United Nations is the classic example of Political globalization. The nation states can discuss the common goals and threats on this platform. Right now the common threat of terrorism has bound the nations together as they strive to get rid of it on multiple levels. But the type of Globalization which matters most for this paper is the Cultural globalization. Cultural globalization means the exchange of social and cultural aspects of societies and communities across the world. This is often called the exercise of soft power by the comparatively powerful nations to influence the developing or underdeveloped countries. For example, the advent of MTV, Star Movies and HBO in India.

### 3 CHIPKO MOVEMENT AS A MELTING POT OF FOLK MEDIA AND ECO-FEMINISM

Chipko movement has been one of the most important environmental movements in which we get to witness eco-feminism at its best. The movement was given a fillip through the extensive use of folk media. In 1973, when the government gave the contract to fell the ash trees in Reni village in the upper Alaknanda valley, a motley group of women led by a widow named Gaura Devi hugged the trees stood their ground. As a result of which the contractors of the sports company Symonds along with their laborers had to back off. Prima facie this movement looks like a typical environmental movement in which the villagers rallied around the trees to stop their felling. But its only if we examine closely do we realize that the Chipko movement is an eco-feminist movement fueled by the folk media. The women who live in the upper Alaknanda valley are dependent on the forests for various reasons. They find wood for cooking and shelter along with wild fruits and vegetables. It is always expected of the women to look after the household chores rather than go out and work. This domination is advocated by the male members of their families and supported by the women of the clan as well. When the government ordered the felling of the ash trees in the Reni and Mandal villages, it received the support of the males of the families too. So the women who went ahead and hugged the trees not only stood against the government in favor of the environment but also against their own husbands, fathers, brothers and other male relatives. The ecological stand of the women in the Chipko movement has put a question mark on their own sociological status in the society. They started asking for the participation in the decision making process which was hitherto kept away from them. The male members of the family decided what should they do and how should they live their lives. This newfound desire of women was vehemently opposed by the men who wanted them to stay at the backseat. Also, Chipko movement involved primarily women because the main victims of the environmental calamities were them. They were the ones who were assigned to take care of the farming, cattle and kids. Depletion of the natural forests of Reni and Mandal villages would have wreaked havoc on their daily lives. So, in a way Chipko became a movement of their survival as well as existentialism. In this endeavor, folk media helped a lot. The volunteers of the movement took the help of folk artists who composed folk songs and sung them to mobilize the local

public in their support. Garhwali folk songs played a vital role in disseminating the messages of the movement to the general public. Folk artists such as Dhoom Singh Negi and Narendra Singh Negi were already a part of the movement. However, a caste of musicians called 'Bajgis' were also added in the movement for mobilizing the general public (Guha, 1990). They sung folk songs on their 'dholaks' and disseminated the messages of the leaders of the Chipko movement. Narendra Singh Negi is by far the most recognized folk singer of Garhwal region. He used his songs to express the distress and struggles of the people of upper Alaknanda valley and of Uttarakhand altogether. He has been one of the front runners in the Chipko movement. He wrote songs and poems for other movements too such as anti-liquor movement and anti-Tehri dam movement. Negi's songs portray the frustrations of the people of Uttarakhand over the depletion of natural forests, lack of basic amenities and absence of proper employment opportunities. His song "dalana kata chuchodalana kata" depicts the plight of trees, forests and valley. Women used to recite the folk songs to not only make the fellow villagers aware but also spread awareness. Folk writers such as Narendra Singh Negi and other folk artists did a lot to support the movement. The Chipko movement featured in many of the folk songs that followed after the movement. "Jagigyan hum beejigyan hum; Abnichalichoronki, Ghorapuna, baunapuna; abnichalialiauronki" translate into "we have risen, thieves shall not have their way, this is our home, our forest, we shall not listen to others". "Maatuhamru, paanihamru, hamra hi chaanyibaunbhi, Pitronnalagaibaun, hamunahi ta bachonbhi" means "this is our land, our water, our forest that our forefathers have planted so we have to protect them". "Maatubikigi, paanibikigi, bikigyahamarabaunbhi, Haathkhaali, pet khaali, thikanunikakhiraunki" means "Soil, water and forests have been sold, our hands are empty, stomachs empty and we don't even have the place to live anymore". The Chipko movement not only gave the much needed identification to the women of Garhwal, especially in the upper Alaknanda valley but also proved that folk media can help in spreading awareness about a social issue and mobilizing the community.

### 4 CONCLUSION

After consulting various secondary sources and an exhaustive internet research, the researcher reached the conclusion that the Chipko movement turned out to a melting pot both eco-feminism and folk media induced awareness. This movement not only gave fillip to the wave of eco-feminism but also showed that community mobilization is possible using the native folk forms. On one hand women were able to come to terms with their own individuality and social stature and on the other hand the movement became a household name because of the folk songs written and sung by the local folk artists and volunteers. The women stood in front of not only the government while opposing the decision to fell the trees of the forest but also they stood against the decision of the male members of their own families who were in support of the government. It is only after the movement that they started questioning the status quo of the society and demanding to be included in the decision making process. This demand was vehemently opposed by the males of the village as they wanted to maintain the status quo and expected to see the women taking care of the family, cultivation and rearing livestock. However, situation was no longer the same after the

movement which is why this movement is often touted as more of an eco-feminist movement. Women started to raise voice against the government decision along with the decision of their own husbands, fathers, brothers and uncles. This is in congruence with the basic tenet of feminism that disregards the patriarchal narrative of society. Feminism talks about the domination of women while eco-feminism aims at defining the connection between women and nature. Both nature and women have been subject to male oppression and domination. The Chipko movement brought forward that aspect within the women of upper Alaknanda valley and used folk media as a tool to propagate the vision of not only protecting the trees but also to awaken the women. The Garhwali folk songs are majorly either sung by women or are about women. The folk songs depict the plight of Garhwali women. The reason why folk songs were able to create an impact and support the Chipko movement was because folk media has a special place in the hearts of rural people. They feel more connected and at ease with the folk media. The performers are mostly from the locality so they are aware of the local language and dialect. This is how they present their content which helps in better understanding of the messages that are propagated. They are better accepted by the local people and have that aspect of credibility. In case of Chipko movement, the folk artists and the women resorted to folk songs because they were aware of the impact the folk media can make. In totality, the Chipko movement can be called a melting pot of eco-feminism and folk media primacy.

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