

# A culture of resistance: the chipko movement

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Society as a collective entity could easily influence an individual but in the same manner the society could also be shaped by people. This is exemplified through the idea of cultural resistance which is a political activity that enables individuals to create or change political discourse and eventually political practices (Duncombe, 2002). The Chipko Movement of India is a good example to better understand this.

The Chipko Andolan also known as hugged the trees movement is an environmental activist that started in the grassroots level. Its origins could be traced back in March 1973 at Gopeshwar in the Chamoli district, in Uttar Pradesh, India.

A group of citizens hold each other hand in hand to create a human chain and hugged the trees to prevent a sport company from cutting it down. The same incident took place in the village of Reni in the Himalayas during the year 1974.

Women coming from this village also protected the trees by hugging them despite the license given by the Government Department of Forests that enables the contractors to cut them. Ever since the Chipko Movement attracted attention coming from other people in India (Dwivedi, 1996).

The Chipko Movement addresses the problem of inequality that is happening in the distribution of natural resources. The usage of commodities like trees creates a conflict in the country of India because of the contradicting demands for it. The marginalized minority utilizes this resource as a means that would support their livelihood. On the other hand, trees are needed in

order to address the demands of commerce and industry (Shiva & Bandyopadhyay, 1986).

The inequality in this situation is not only in terms of the unequal distribution of natural resources but also in terms of the power and influence that big corporations have as compared to the marginalized citizens of India. It is something that usual political practices could not solve and sometimes even tolerate as in the case of the 1974 incident in the Reni Village, which is why the Chipko Movement decided on a new method of addressing the problem.

In order to fully comprehend this movement as well as the tactics that it utilized there should first be an understanding of Mahatma Gandhi's ideology when it comes to conflict as well as the diverse religion of India. Gandhi is famous for leading non-violent forms of struggle that overthrew the colonial rule of the British in India.

He was able to combine the idea of " ahimsa" meaning " no harm" or " wanton killing" with social struggle. This non-violent activists deems that the truth will eventually emerged as long as one party is committed in standing for it (Kamieniecki, 1993).

Gandhi's " Satyagraha" or the search for truth was adapted by the Chipko movement through the " Forest Satyagraha" which means the continuous search for truth in terms of the rights of trees. This movement follow the idea of non-violence in fighting for their cause that goes as far as including non-human forms (Dwivedi, 1996).

Forest Satyagraha does not only answer economic and environmental problems because it also has its religious aspect. The major religions in India

promotes compassion for all life regardless of its contribution to human beings (Kamieniecki, 1993). Its religious basis also comes from the fact that this movement is participated and led by women. Women play a very vital role in the family particularly in the Himalayan area.

They are more in touch with the natural environment because they have the task of gathering woods and other agricultural products for their family while their spouses leave them behind to work in urban areas.

Himalayan women are also more religious than their male counterparts which is why they believe that green trees are the dwelling place of " Hari" or the Almighty Father. Every tree has their own " Vriksadevata" or tree god and that the goddess of the forests, " Van Devi" will assure the safety of their family (Dwivedi, 1996).

Mahatma Gandhi strongly believes in the importance of India's various values and cultures. He deems that the problems they are facing could find its solutions in the very ideals that they have. His concept of " Satyagraha" which was later on used by the Chipko movement as " Forest Satyagraha" is a clear example of how non-violent form of resistance could work against unequal and cruel foes like large corporations.

This method that they have utilized is rooted in the very culture of India which is their strong religious belief that gives importance in valuing all forms of life (Dwivedi, 1996).

The tactics that was used by the Chipko Movement tends to reform the issue of inequality in the local and structural level. It is well-known that Hindus

practice the caste system wherein its citizens are divided according to particular groups (Perez, 2004).

This kind of structural system already paved the way for inequality to propagate. There are people who enjoy the privileged and powerful position and those who are marginalized. Being the case, inequality in the distribution of natural resources is bound to happen with such kind of system.

The Chipko Movement strives to change this very inequality that is embedded within India's structure and it became evident in a more localized level in the issue of logging. This movement started tackling inequality in the issue of the utilization of trees in the grassroots but this problem is just an effect of what is really happening in the structural level.

Their actions started in giving immediate response in what is happening in the local level but the attention it acquired enabled it to highlight the root cause of the problem in the upper level. It does not only stop within the state institutions of the Indian government but it also reach the international level.

Many states are using the ideals of the Chipko movement as an example on how the pressing problems in ecology and environmental sustainability could be deal with. (Agarwal, \_).

Using a non-violent method to addressed the causes that the Chipko Movement is advocating for reflects that they decided to take a different approach in solving problems. It is an approach that embodies their very culture and ideals.

Their understanding of the problem is dependent upon the thinking that its solution would come from these factors that they uphold. This is supported

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by Gandhi's same belief in the power of India's rich cultural heritage and its capability to solve the dilemma that their country has (Dwivedi, 1996).

This social movement greatly believes in non-violence and the preservation of all forms of life. These beliefs influence their understanding of the problem and the path that they chose to address it.

They saw the importance of trees in their livelihood that is why they protected it through the embraced tree tactic. This non-violent form of resistance symbolizes their understanding that to be able to solve this dilemma compassionate means should be practiced.

If they decided to find solution to the problem by using adversarial tendencies then they contradict the very ideal that they are fighting for. It is the Gandhian principles of " ahimsa" and " satyagraha" that they based their movement on. They have to uphold these principles in the decisions that they make and in the actions that they take.