

The Chipko Embrace

It is the strength of women which is the source of the staying power of Chipko - a movement in India which, in its two decades of evolution, has widened from embracing trees to embracing mountains and waters.

Vandana Shiva talked to Chipko activists, **Chamun Deyi** and **Itwari Devi** of Nahi-Kala village in North India about their commitment to Chipko, and about a protest against local mining which they remember vividly. In June 1987, the people of Nahi-Kala were still protesting against the government's reluctance to close down a mine operating in forest lands.

Chamun Deyi: Seventeen years ago the forests were rich and dense with woodlands but they have been destroyed by mining. Our water sources, which are nourished by the forests, have also dried up. Mining is killing our forests and streams, the sources of our life. That is why we are ready to give up our lives to save the forests and rivers.

Itwari Devi: Sinsyaru Khala was a narrow perennial stream, full of lush bushes. Today it is a wide barren bed of limestone boulders. With the destruction caused by mining, our watermills, forests and paddyfields have all been washed away.

The Chipko protest was precipitated when the boys went to demand royalty payment for the mining in village land. The mine-owner said to them, "You have grown up on the crumbs that I have thrown you - how dare you demand royalty from me?" The boys turned around and said, "We have grown up with the nurturance of our mothers - and mountains and forests and streams which are like our

mothers - and we will no longer let you destroy our sources of sustenance. We will not let your trucks go to the mine."

Chamun Deyi: For seven months we camped on the road, and in March we saw the trucks come. They pushed away five people who were at the camp. In the meantime the women rushed down to the camp. We physi-

A fight for truth has begun at Sinsyaru Khala,
A fight for rights has begun in Malkot Thano,
Sister, it is a fight to protect our mountains
and forests,
They give us life.
Embrace the life of the living trees
and streams to your hearts,
Resist the digging of the mountains which kill
our forest and streams,
A fight for life has begun at Sinsyaru Khala.

--*Ghanshyam 'Shailini', Chipko poet*

cally held on to the trucks and cried, "Please stop, listen to us". They had hired women from the Dehra Dun slums to assault us - they pushed us aside and went to the mine. Eight thugs stayed behind and said, "Listen, mothers and sisters, ask us for whatever you need - we will provide it."

We said, "We have only one need, one demand, that the mine be closed." They said, "We will not mine anymore - we will only remove what has been mined." We said, "No, those stones have come from the mountain and we will put them back to stabilise the mountain. We will make checkdams with it. We will protect our forests and mountains with the boulders. These boulders are the flesh of Dharti Ma, our Mother Earth. We will return them to where they belong, and heal her wounds."

Vandana Shiva: What are the three most important things in life you want to conserve?

Chamun Deyi: Our freedom, forests and food. Without any of these, we are impoverished. With our own food production we are prosperous. We don't need jobs, either from businessmen or the government. We have our own livelihood. We even produce crops for sale, like ginger-root.

Vandana Shiva: What is the source of your shakti, your strength?

Chamun Deyi: Shakti comes to us from these forests and grasslands. We watch them grow, year in and year out. Through their internal shakti we derive our strength. We watch our streams renew themselves and we drink their clear and sparkling water; that gives us shakti. We drink fresh milk, we

eat ghee, we eat food from our own fields - all this gives not just nutrition for the body, but the moral conviction that we can determine our own future.

Our power is strengthened by attempts to oppress and bully us with the power of money and muscle. We have offered ourselves, even at the cost of our lives, in a peaceful protest that will challenge and oppose the powerful. Each attempt to violate us has strengthened our integrity. They have stoned us. They stoned our children and hit us with iron rods. But they cannot destroy our shakti.

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