

## Indian Women in Defence of Forests

by Malini Chand Sheth

The Hill District of Uttar Pradesh is the birth place of the famous Chipko Movement -- the world renowned grassroot ecodevelopment movement. The main problem in Uttar Pradesh is that women, who are the main users of forests, have been denied access or control in the management of forests. The Chipko Movement has succeeded in articulating this need.

Chamoli District of Garhwal is one of the five hill districts of Uttar Pradesh. Many of the menfolk, whose livelihood depends on trees, have fled to the cities due to deforestation. The entire responsibility of running households rests on the strength of women. Tending the home, looking after cattle, producing the crops, collecting firewood and water all fall on women, whose life depends on the availability of natural resources. Their entire existence revolves around the patterns of nature, and its destruction spontaneously brings about harsh problems.

Can women shouldering the burden of collecting firewood, cultivating, looking after the house and

children find time for conservation? Experience in ecodevelopment camps revealed that women in these parts, despite a long and rigorous working schedule, had a great interest in restoring the ecosystem. In fact, the role of women in preventing deforestation has been outstanding.

In 1978, for instance, women organised a movement in the Bhyuvdyar village area that leads on to the famous valley of flowers. They faced their people who were going to cut trees to meet the fuel demands of the 250,000 pilgrims who visit the Badrinath Temple annually. In spite of 40 cms. of snow, the women went into the forest and did not retreat till they had gathered the implements from the laborers who had come to fell the trees.

In Duagar-Paitoli, the battle was even more bitter and set wife against husband and mother against son. In 1978, the government's horticulture department negotiated with the male dominated *panchayat* for the acquisition of a nearby community forest for a potato farm. The men believed they

would get employment in the farm, and with its construction, the village would get a road, electricity, a health center, and the upgrading of its primary school to a high school. The women protested strongly on learning that the forest had been sold. By refusing to let the forest be destroyed, they avoided a daily extra 5 km. walk to fetch fuel and fodder. In spite of strong opposition and threat, from their men and the district administration, they won.

In another protest involving the cutting down of 2,500 trees in Reni village, women, whose men had been lured away from home, clung to the trees and told the cutters that they would have to cut off their heads before cutting the trees. The men withdrew and the forest was saved.

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## A Call for Action

A sustainable model of forests, water and energy management, agriculture and livestock exploitation, implies a technology that preserves the environment, turns the peasant agriculture economically viable, increases the absorption of low-qualified labor force, uses locally adapted crops and animal species, produces most of its inputs locally or regionally, turns the food production independent from international trends and consequently, assures the national sovereignty of each country.

The growth of women power and the sustainability of development are ecologically tied. It is therefore imperative that their participation and the incorporation of the specific planning for their own involvement within development projects be assumed a priority for governments, NGOs and community-based groups throughout the industrialized and developing worlds.

We, as women concerned with the issues that affect humanity, the environment and our gender, encourage the United Nations system to find the best ways to make these suggestions viable as an urgent task.

*Final statement from the Women and Environment workshops to the UN Decade for Women Conference.*