

Role of Indigenous Communication Strategies in the Success of Chipko Environment Conservation Movement

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ABSTRACT

The central motivation of the present paper is to trace out the tactics used during the Chipko movement. To protect their forests and natural resources (*jal, jungle, zameen*) from the external bodies, native residents came up with some unique strategies that primarily acted as an awareness method within the region but soon propagated Chipko as an ecological movement. The study is exploratory and in the present paper, how locally originated strategies were initiated as a medium of communication has been explored. The curiosity of the present paper lies in the fact that in the absence of any refined communication method within the region how merely their concern towards trees turned it into Chipko as an environmental conservation movement. The study is exploratory in nature and data has been gathered from the village areas where Chipko movement was conducted. The data has been analyzed via simple percent analysis. The result of the study approves that although the past movements have contributed Chipko to shape up as the movement but it was innovative methods and collective efforts of country-dwellers, local leaders, women, and enthusiastic workers who collectively practiced and brought up some unique indigenous communication methods that sustained the movement for the longer time.

Keywords: Chipko movement, Indigenous strategies, awareness, communication methods

INTRODUCTION

Chipko emerged as an anti-deforestation movement in the Garhwal region of the Himalayas in the early Seventies (Heaslip, 2005). Numerous actors such as local and global media, environmentalists, Gandhians, spiritual leaders, politicians, social change practitioners, and feminists shaped and disseminated Chipko (Shah, 2008). Uttarakhand has a good history of conflicts and movements and notable movements like Doli-Palki (1913), Tilari Jan Andolan (1930), Kuli beggar (1916), University Movement (1972), and Anti-liquor (1815) provided a strong ground to Chipko movement. The contours of Chipko remain incomplete without talking about the past conflicts and movements. The first among them was the 'Dola Palki' controversy and Shilpkar Andolan of 1913. It was a tradition in Uttarakhand to carry bride and grooms in Dola and Palki by *doms*. Although the 'dola' and 'palki' were prepared by *doms* but using them was confined to the upper caste only. Its use by the lower caste was considered derogatory and a violation of social custom. 'Dola Palki' movement became a symbol of getting social

equality for *doms* who also wanted themselves to be called *Shilpkars*.

Another remarkable movement Kuli-Begar Movement (1916-1921) was a cruel exercise of British officials forcing the poor population to work as laborers and coolies for them whenever they toured Hills (Pant and Rawat 1922). Such treatment and torture developed a kind of resentment among the community that blurted out as the Kuli Begar Movement in 1921. Dola-Palki movement looked more towards leaders' participation in it whereas Kuli-begar strengthened more on the participation of local communities. The success of this movement boosted people's confidence and strengthened them to remain proactive in the future.

At the time (1927-28), on one hand, the local communities were solely dependent on the forests for fulfilling their daily needs, and on the other hand, they were restrictedly allowed to access forests. This frustration and anger constituted 'Azad Panchayat' demanding their rights for forests that further ended with the tragic Tilari Movement in 1930. Post-Independence, another significant movement was University Movement (1972-73). Uttarakhand (then

Uttar Pradesh) had no State University but degree colleges affiliated to Agra University. University Movement demanded a separate University for the region and was one of the most successful movements (Upreti 2014). The anti-liquor movement is as old as British intrusion in the State. Deepa Nautiyal aka *Ichagiri mai* also known as *Tinchari Mai* played a major role in the fight against Alcoholism. This movement succeeded and liquor was prohibited for a few years but the alcohol menace never lost its grip over the state (Pathak 1985). It can be assumed that these movements filled residents not only with the needed confidence and enthusiasm but also with learning ways and tactics to be vocal about their stand. Notably, these past conflicts and grassroots level of movements followed methods that were practiced during Chipko as well (Bose 2000).

It remained probably the most mystical and broadly a misrepresented environmental movement as far as leadership and leaders were concerned. Various viewpoints nullify a single person to take the onus of Chipko. The movement was pushed and pulled among numerous groups and activists within the region. However, there have had been a little hesitancy among the people of Raineer and Lata in announcing the main Chipko leaders. According to them, leadership(s) was there, but the Chipko leader still has to be identified. However, one cannot deny the major roles played by CPI (M) leader Govind Singh Rawat in initiating the movement. Gaura Devi and her companion women's group for their significant contribution. The Movement was propagated by Sunder Lal Bahuguna, Chandi Prasad Bhatt, Dhoom Singh Negi, and later by Kunwar Prasoon, Shekhar Pathak, Pratap Shikhar, Shamsher Bisht.

Chipko recognized grassroots, community-based development. In the Uttarakhand region, the communication media was limited and technology independent (Shah 2008) so it would be interesting to understand how Chipko shaped an ecological movement without using any tech-based communication methods. The present paper would be an attempt to explore the said notion.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present effort is to study the organizational dynamics of Chipko and the communication

strategies used to sustain it. The present paper is purely based on an exploratory study. It attempts to bring communication strategies to the center stage. Besides, how Chipko emerges and was sustained is a case in point.

The data for the present study is based on primary and secondary sources. Given the background of the exploratory study, data collection was more dependent on the availability as well as willingness to talk about Chipko. There was no as such fixed or decided number of respondents but since the information has been gathered from the people of Raineer, Laata, Peng, Mandal, Joshimath, Tapovan, Badrinath, Gopeshwar, Henvall ghati including villages in Pipelaith, Khaadi, Narendra Nagar, Jhanjra, and Dehradun city it was around 100 respondents altogether who entertained and acknowledged the queries (Fig. 1).

Respondents talked mostly as per their willingness, interest, and convenience. Consequently, unstructured interviews along with a schedule with a set of open-ended questions were used. The schedule worked as the best method inviting a face-to-face interaction of oral-verbal questions and answers. Observation, Interviews, and review text/document are the used techniques in the study. Patterns observation and anecdotal evidence collectively acted as a way to understand the movement. Data were analyzed by simple percent analysis. Literature provided insight into the way the movement articulated the issues and mobilized people. In-depth analysis and discussion have been summed up supported by the tabular and diagrammatic presentation. Several related questions were asked under the following theme questions: 1) How did the past conflicts and movements of the region provide a ground for the Chipko movement? 2) What were the usual modes of communication during Chipko and what kinds of strategies were used while using different methods of communication?, and 3) How did communication strategies propagate Chipko's movement?

RESULTS

Chipko Movement added a new dimension to the struggle by raising the survival, dependence, and control of people over their resources. Chipko validated the contribution of old peasant struggles



Figure 1. Village areas where Chipko movement was conducted (Source: Kumar 2011)

and nonviolent resistance brought out unique strategies to sustain the movement (Table 1). It can be interpreted that the past movements grant an interesting facet that standing for their rights was not a sudden but a gradual phenomenon by the time of Chipko. The success of past movements encouraged residents' confidence and strength that further encouraged them to be proactive against any suppressing exercise in the future (Fig. 2).

Communication Strategies

Indigenous Communication strategies at the very early stages of the movement

Musically meaningful marches were invoked as the primary strategy during the movement. *Padyatra* has traditionally been an obvious choice for mountain dwellers, and it was an inexpensive and reliable method of connecting people. More convincing and friendlier, *padayatra* provided a broader space for face-to-face interaction. Music as a vehicle of religious expression created a close link amongst the region. *Folk songs, slogans and conducting meetings* were remarkably used as the popular modes of communication. Even today, it is quite popular in the region. Popular writer, composer, singer of Garhwali songs, and social activist Ghanshyam Raturi 'Sailani' was called the Voice of the Chipko

Movement. His songs were used as a source of motivation for villagers; "*Chipka Chipka*" popularized the 'Chipko'. Dhoom Singh Negi and Bachni Devi invented the slogan. '*What do the forests bear, Soil, water, and pure air.*' Songs were central to mobilize support for these protests. The songs reminded mountain dwellers of their forest-based culture and its protection (Fig. 3).

Indigenous Communication strategies during the Chipko movement

Dhandak as a peaceful protest was used in the past movements of the region that gave enough courage to use it during Chipko as well. *Visiting homes* and convincing the population for the conservation of natural resources, holding *discussions* distributing *pamphlets* with messages like, *Chipko paido par ab na katad daya, Pahado ki sampatti ab na lootad daya, Thekedar-maaladar paisa kamoda, Pahado ka chora bhanda majoda*, were some remarkable steps that popularized Chipko. Using a *tape-recorder* was an innovative method where Sailani's songs were recorded and played during the movement. Children were fascinated by using a tape recorder at that time. Chipko's message not only communed but was also widely reached in this manner. *Whisting* was used by women particularly to alert fellow inhabitants

Table 1. Role of various movements in preparing ground for Chipko as the movement

Year	Name of the Movement	Main features
1913-1943	Dola Palki/ Shilpkar Andolan	Part of national freedom struggle Fight for social justice and discrimination Mobilized by the local strata of the society with the help of nationalist leaders Boycott
1916-1921	Kuli Begar Movement	Resentment against social issues A mass movement Involvement of nationalist leaders
1930s	Tilari Movement	A consequence of Forest Act (denial of traditional rights of local people over forests) Origin of Sarvodaya Mandal 'Azad Panchayat' with the philosophy it was people's right to use forests property
1972-1973	University Movement	Focused on building University (Kumaoun-Garhwal) in the State Students, intellectuals, social workers and everyone supported the movement
1981-1984	Anti-Liquor Movement	Indefinite fast, 'gherao' and 'bandh', leaflet distribution Theme was 'Nasha Nahi Rozgaar Do' Bottle culture touched the mountain dwellers Right from Gokhale to Gandhi, contributed, accelerated by SL Bahuguna and Vimla Bahuguna 'Postcard' movement, dharna, hunger fast, Padyatra surveys, meetings, street plays, gherao under mass demonstration with drums and trumpets

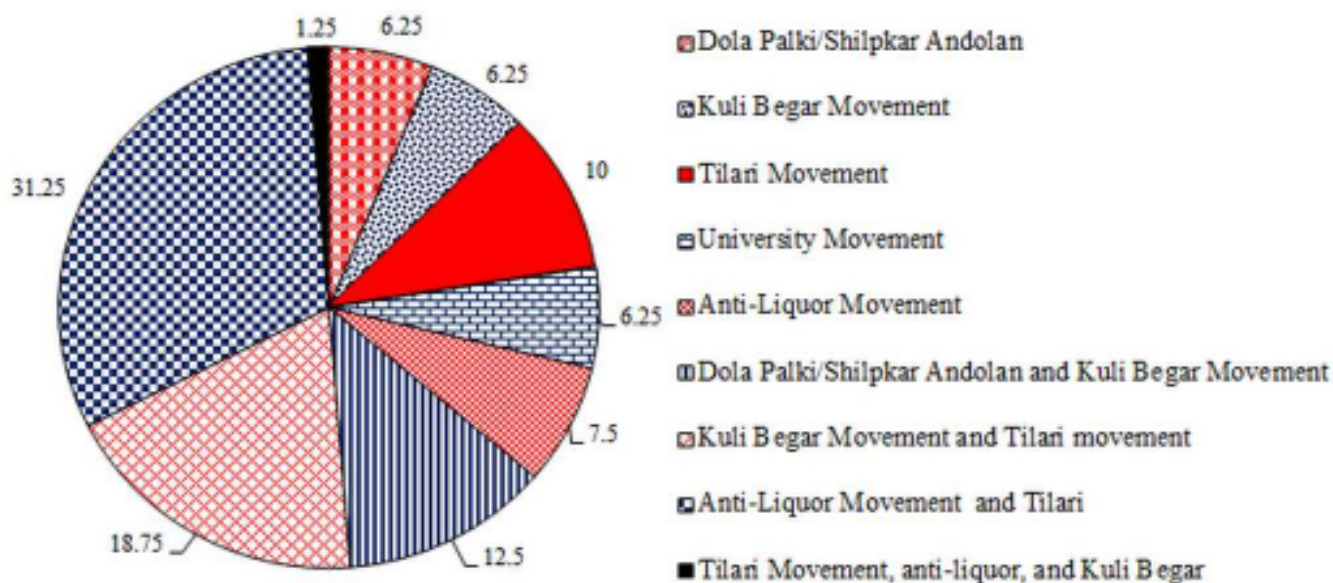


Figure 2. Population distribution for reporting response to past movements influencing Chipko

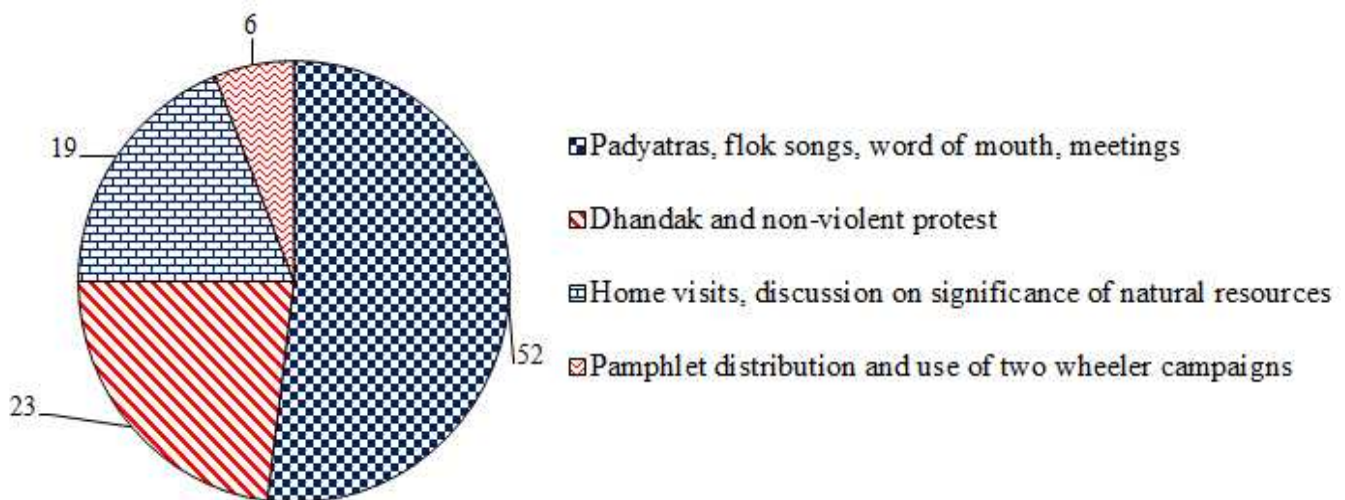


Figure 3. Population distribution for reporting responses for using communication strategies at the earlier stages of Chipko

whereas *gossiping* was yet another method to spread forest conservation updates. It was handwritten pamphlets which were significant at that time as writing for newspapers was confined to a few good writers and noted leaders. However, print and electronic media entered the region in the late eighties. Another exceptional method of communication was by *Sarvodaya* leaders asking kids to bring *one-chapatti* from their homes so that they can fill their stomachs. Instead of sending one chapatti more often they were invited for dinner at several houses. It was a part of the indigenous strategies of these workers to connect common people over dinner and talk about the mission and spirit of Chipko. Instead of entering collectively to a single house, Sarvodaya workers dispersed in several houses as it not only minimized the burden of the host but Chipko message communicated to numerous houses simultaneously. It was an innovative way to encourage people to talk about natural resources and convince the local community to join their mission (Fig. 4 and Table 2).

Salet village in Henval valley was the first place where “Bhaale Kulahari chamkenge, Ham paedo par chipkenge; Lathi goli khayenge, apne paed bachayenge” was recited that demonstrated embracing trees gesture as their deep concern and dependency. Sailani’s song “Khada utha bhai bando sab katha hola, sarkari neeti se jangulu bacholla; Chipka paedo par ab na katen da, pahado ki sampatti ab na lutend da” not only represented their protest

against the government’s forest policies but hugging trees as a gesture out of their deep fear of losing forests. Tying *rakhis* around the tree trunks and fixing broken trunks via *marham-patti* were some innovative ways. Although hugging or embracing trees was popularized as a symbolic act that underlies the deep cultural and social ethos of the hill people who led them to respond in such a way to the crisis but it was a way to protest against outsiders rather than an attempt to protect trees (Hutchings, 2005). It was the people’s realization of the significance of the forests in a spiritual sense and source of livelihood that sparked their vigor to stand as shields for the trees (Nayan 2013). Chipko was initiated as an issue of survival, dependence, and control of people over their resources but sustained by such innovative strategies. All in all, Chipko was a self-motivated and nonviolent movement and used strategies were an attempt to generate consciousness among the masses about their forests.

DISCUSSION

Chipko activists were inspired by Gandhian thought and the cultural setup of ‘Pahar’ promoted peaceful protests. Most of the nation-wide campaigns and protests practiced Satyagraha like Sarvodaya (1950) and Bhoodan (1970) movements, Total Revolution campaign of Jayaprakash Narayan (1970), Narmada Bachao Andolan (1980) followed Satyagraha. Nonviolent resistance methods gained more success

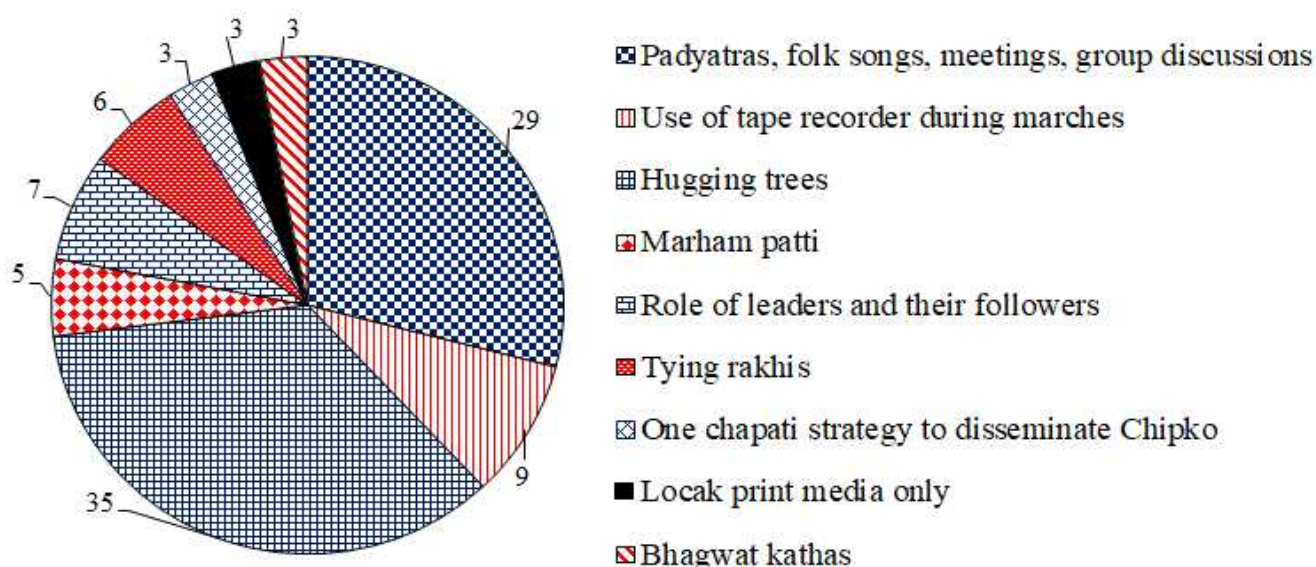


Figure 4. Population distribution for reporting responses for using communication strategies at the later stages of Chipko

Table 2. Nonviolent methods of communication

Individual	Group	Masses
Home Visits	Meetings	Pamphlets
Personal letters	Padyatras	Newspapers
Self-learning	Group discussion	Slogans
Prayers	Demonstrations	Booklets
Rumors	Processions	Banners
Hunger strike	Protest	Folk songs
Fasting	Bhagwat Katha	Role of pioneer leaders and followers
Word of mouth	Hugging trees	
Hugging trees	Dhandak	
Marham Patti	Environmental camps	
Silence	Rakhi (sacred thread) tying	
	One Chapati strategy	

worldwide than violent methods (Stephan and Chenoweth 2008). Nonviolent tactics aligned with spiritual and moral and spiritual values too. People have had a spiritual connection with their natural surroundings and they considered it as a divine connection.

The use of communication strategies and cultural codes shows that local communities followed a multilevel strategy to achieve self-empowerment. Among activists mainly were the poets and singers who performed at a public platform to inspire participation in the movement. Broadly, various strands of communication pulled in a moral, physical and spiritual way. Sailani’s voice echoed in the hills to protect forests. Folk songs connected residents to their past glory crafting an urge from within to remain alert and protect forests (Shiva and Bandyopadhyay 1986). Besides, ‘*Bhagwat Katha*’ imparted a strong feeling of the religious and spiritual basis for forest activism. These *kathas* acted as a way to keep one awake during forests vigil. Shri Bhagavatam was a medium to raise spiritual and ecological cognizance among the mass. Prayer enriches us with inner strength whereas fasting has religious connectedness (Iyer 1973). Fasting was also used as an act of protest in the region as it is through fasting that one surrenders to God whereas the hunger strike has been a forceful attempt to pressurize humans (Bahuguna 2015). Chipko movement was highlighted through symbolic protests such as prayers, fasting, and padayatras (ritual marches) (Shah 2008). These beautiful spiritual exercises stirred the conscience of people during Chipko. Bahuguna gained more popularity for his spiritual approach to ecology and

his padayatra(s) from Kashmir to Kohima in the 1980s (Nayan 2013) validated steps like processions, door-to-door contacting people, walking-talking for awareness (Saidullah 1993). Public speeches, letters, signature campaigns, slogans and symbols, banners, posters, newspaper pamphlets, leaflets as well as symbolic public acts like prayers, tying rakhis (ribbons), songs and music, processions, marches, assemblies, meetings, walkouts, silence, nonviolent psychological intervention like symbolic fasts, physical intervention like sit-in dharnas did become the main tools to fight for forest rights.

Dhandak was an endeavor to remove existing immoral practices in the administration. Guha argued that Dhandak was a precursor of Chipko (Guha 2013). Initially, Dhandak was successful but when the forest policy grew trickier, conflict of interests brought participatory communication strategies (Linkenbach 1992) like social mobilization, dharnas, and the sit-down strike to the forum. Chipko movement emphasized local knowledge, local resources, the local language, and locally relevant methods of communication (Shah 2008). In attempting to sustain their livelihood in the region, local communities engaged in protest by hugging trees that were marked for felling in state-owned commercial forests (Heaslip 2005). Chipko invoking images of poor peasant women hugging trees to prevent their felling have become global icons of popular political and above all indigenous mobilization and resistance to unjust and unattainable economic development (Sinha et al., 2008). While Bahuguna recites *Kya hai jungle kay upkaar, Mitti, paani aur bayar; Miti, pani aur bayar, Jinda rehne kay adhaar* (What are the blessings of a forest? Soil, water, and air. The very foundations of life) his wife Smt. Vimla Bahuguna agrees “Chipko did change people’s approach towards trees and forests. Gathering people on the site was the main idea behind Conducting *Bhagwat Katha* in the areas where tree-felling was suspected” (Bahuguna 2015).

CONCLUSIONS

Most of the movements and conflicts that occurred in Uttarakhand (before and after Independence) had a non-violent approach due to their peaceful lifestyle and also the universal appeal of the Gandhian principle of non-violence. Chipko was neither the

men nor of the women but a movement of local peasants, movement of circumstances, and movement of moments. Concerns about the environment brought like-minded together leading to a movement that sought measures for sustainable development. Indigenous communication strategies converted a grassroots movement to a global movement.

As the Chipko connotation sound ‘to stick’ or ‘to hug’ so it was perceived as it is a hugging way for the protection of the trees but primarily it was not a defined strategy that was used as an indigenous communication strategy during the movement. It was a romanticized interpretation that later was exercised to attract and connect people with the movement. At the later stages of the movement, however, it was even practiced by the renowned leaders to justify peoples’ perception so that more people get attached to the movement and propagate it around. Consequently, this perception has sustained the movement till today. However, undoubtedly Chipko highlights the origin of unique indigenous strategies that narrates their struggle to conserve forests.

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