

Hug a Tree, Lose Your Head: The Dark Origins of a Mysterious Peaceful Movement



Image: Google Doodles. Celebrating 45th anniversary of the *Chipko* Movement.

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Hug a tree and lose your head. That's exactly what happened to 363 tribe members of the Khejarli village in Rajasthan when they tried to stop trespassers from slashing down their livelihood. For the Khejarli village, trees weren't outsiders looking in on the human experience— they were maternal figures, feeding them, housing them, and allowing their children to grow. For most people, it's difficult to imagine depending so heavily on trees, besides the small matter of oxygen. Yet, the Bishnoi people of the Khejarli sacrificed their own lives for their trees- putting them on an equal level, if not a higher one than humans. Their sacrifice sowed the seeds of the world's first ecofeminist movement, which sprouted from the soil of battles between colonists and fierce forest guardians. Its legacy is still important and as relevant as ever today.

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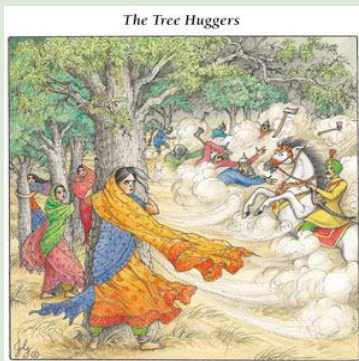


Illustration by Jillian Gilliland

Chipko. You might have heard of it. Then again, there's also a high chance you haven't. The reason for this would be because *Chipko* (meaning ‘to hug’ or ‘to cling’), unlike digital-age organisations, isn't equipped with social media, or even a website. Their online presence is limited, to say the least, and anything you want to learn about them, you need to acquire from the whispers and stories in secondary sources. However, their mysterious presence

pays great homage to their origins and history. The massacre of the Khejarli tribe, which happened 200 years ago, followed the orders of the Maharaja of Jodhpur. A woman named Amrita Devi ran to stop the massacre. Clinging to a tree trunk, she refused the fellers' bribes. Her three daughters watched as their mother was axed down, falling to her death below a sacred tree. Followed by the tribe, Amrita's daughters shielded the trees with their own flesh, before facing the same fate which had awaited their trees. You see, for Amrita and her tribe, these trees were worth the sacrifice of human lives. Amrita has been quoted to say, *"If a tree is saved even at the cost of one's head, it's worth it."*

For modern society, which largely ambles around its social media-fuelled simulation, where trees are little more than background characters, the concept of sacrificing

"Sar santey rukh rahe to bhi sasto jan."

"If a tree is saved even at the cost of one's head, it's worth it." – Amrita Devi, c.18th.

yourself for a tree may seem unfathomable. However, the difference is that like many Indigenous communities, the Bishnoi were as dependent on the trees as we are on corner shops and houses. These trees were their everything- their providers, their family, and their identity. They would have met the same fate of death if the trees had been cut instead.

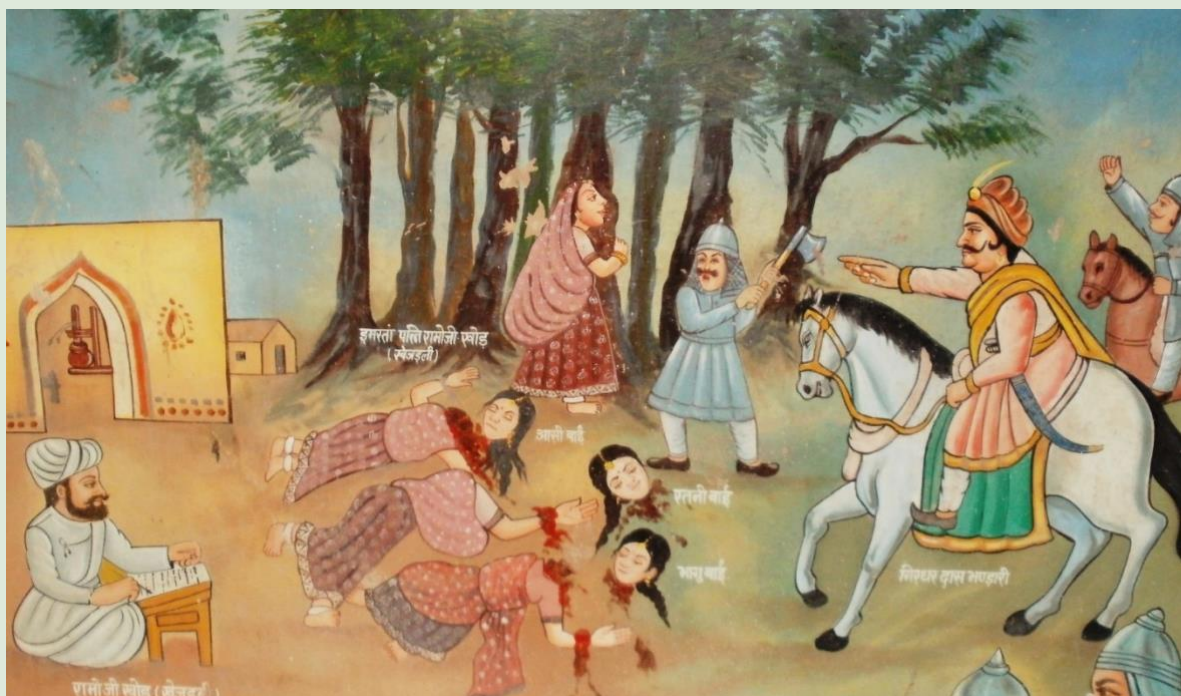


Image: An illustration of Amrita Devi and her daughters as soldiers threaten to take their trees.

Learning of the massacre, the Maharaja of Jodphur banned tree felling in the area. Though tragic and brutal, these peaceful protectors of the trees birthed ecofeminism; inspired the tree-loving movement known as *Chipko* and set a precedent for the future success of the movement with felling bans. Fast forward to the 1970s. A felling contractor was granted the right to fell 3000 trees in another tribal village. Women once again ran to protect and guard the trees with their bodies. This time they were threatened with guns, axes and insults. They didn't back down, and their resistance and defiance meant the fellers departed and the contractor withdrew. This peaceful safeguarding of the trees once again saved them. *Chipko* was officially born.



Image: An early Google image sketch created to celebrate the 45th anniversary of *Chipko*.

Catastrophic Consequences

Turbulence in the 1970s saw the destruction of multiple small villages in the Alaknanda Valley: they were faced with a disastrous duo of ferocious floods and landslides. Surrounded by the ruins of their old lives, villagers queried the origins of these natural disasters. However, it turned out they weren't all that 'natural'. 'Colonialist disasters' would be far more appropriate. Gandhian environmentalist Chandi Prasad Bhatt echoed this when he reported his findings after visiting devastated areas. They found that the floods had the most impact in felled regions. Residential awareness raised by this observation heightened the hype for *Chipko* along with efforts to protect

“The impact of deforestation should cause concern for all of us.”

themselves and their forests from future ecological disasters.

The disasters produced by felling trees are just one of the harms colonialism poses to Indigenous peoples. Bhatt's observation was supported by naturalist and professor Virendra Kumar's report which stressed deep regional ecological degradation due to deforestation of local trees and plants. However, the impact should cause concern for all of us. Deforestation causes erosion and can devastate soil conditions. This can

cause water sources to dissipate, resulting in malnutrition and an inability to breed livestock.

Small Steps, Big Progress

Following his findings, Bhatt unified at-risk communities to fight deforestation. He and environmentalist Bahuguna marched alongside hundreds of women who understood that this was a fight for survival: their access to food and resources had been threatened by commercialist felling. They protected trees by creating human chains because they knew life depended on them- a fact we forget today. *Chipko* made waves and found success in their peaceful protests. Their resilience led to a government ban on felling regional trees for 15 years. They had given their forests the gift of a chance to restore, and themselves a chance to live without fear of their homes being taken by floods, and the fear of their lives being taken by starvation.

Where is Chipko now?

Chipko continues to inspire Indigenous communities today: unfortunately, many still face the ongoing threat of having their food and homes endangered. They are challenged by restrictions on resources and ongoing deforestation. Former *WEA South Asia* Program Director, Rucha Chitnis, had the chance to meet a group of Adivasi women in the Jharkhand state. Rooted in their ecofeminist history, they follow *Chipko*'s footsteps, unifying communities and leading Jharkhand's *Save the Forest Movement (SFM)*. Rucha talked with Suryamani Bhagat, a passionate advocate of the *SFM* in her state. Suryamani stressed the intricate and co-dependent connection between humans and trees. "Our life is bound with Nature. You can learn from that." she said, following

"Forest is our mother. Our life sustains on her and our spirituality is tied to the trees."

Suman Munda, *Save the Forest Movement* activist and member of the Adivasi.

her observation that birds and animals have returned to the area and forests have regenerated since the *Save the Forest Movement* began. Suman Munda, another forest activist said "Forest is our mother. Our life sustains on her and our spirituality is tied to the trees."

However, bearing close resemblance to *Chipko*'s harrowing origins, *SFM*'s progress is not all plain sailing, and their achievements have come with sacrifices. Access to resources their ancestors have lived upon for millennia was denied by repressive

colonial forest laws. In traditional colonial fashion, the forest department assumed possession of the forests the Adivasis' had called home generations. Suryamani recalls members of her tribe being violently assaulted for using forest produce they had survived on for years. Some were jailed, and some were even beaten. These atrocities weren't the only hardships the forest department placed on the Adivasis. It threatened starvation by promoting monoculturism and varieties the Adivasis couldn't live on or create medicine with. Again, the fight for life and survival led to environmentalism- environmentalism that historian Ramachandra Guha calls 'empty-belly environmentalism' due to the starvation that threatened women and girls.

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From Amrita Devi's sacrifice to the *Chipko* movement and now the *Save the Forest Movement* in Jharkhand- two things remain. Firstly, the relentlessness and inhumane consistency of colonialism, which persists in the deforestation of Indigenous homes today, and secondly; the determination of Indigenous tribes to protect what is dear to them. We can be thankful for the latter. The strife faced by the Bishnois, Alaknanda

people, the Adivasi, and countless other tribes persists and isn't going away. These real-life stories stress the harrowing and unprovoked injustices faced by Indigenous people. Their natural way of life, their culture and identity, and their ancestry are being lost to the merciless hands of an ever-hungry and ever-remorseless colonialist world. Alarmingly, the people clinging onto trees make up part of the small 6.2% of people currently responsible for maintaining the planet's life. Yes, that's right- a small 6.2% are looking after 80% of biodiversity and with it the future of the human race. They are battling for their own lives, as well as ours and the future of the planet.



(Above) Adivasi women from Jharkhand's *Save the Forest Movement*

Lessons from Chipko

Amrita Devi's sacrifice may have been 200 years ago, but it demonstrates as poignantly as ever the importance of trees for livelihood, particularly in Indigenous communities; stressing a relationship which strives even today between trees and Indigenous people.



An archival *Chipko* photograph.

These stories of sacrifice may implore readers to pause and think about our branched companions. We have shared a harmonious relationship with trees since the first of our kind, and the Indigenous instinct to protect them is a reminder of our origins as humans. *Chipko* teaches us to cling to these origins, our ancestors and the trees: our forgotten life force and life-support. Though the majority of the population may seldom pause to consider the importance of their presence, Indigenous tribes continue to cohabit alongside them.

Chipko's story is one of violence, hardship and mothers fearing their children's futures. However, it is also a story of guardians, human origins, and important things we take for

granted. Among many triumphs and tribulations, *Chipko*'s success largely stresses how small movements and individuals can create change. Currently, a large portion of society is dependent on a system that can't sustain itself, but respecting and learning the ways of this 6.2% is a good first step towards a better world. Respecting nature and natural resources, reusing and recycling cast-away materials is an Indigenous instinct and has been for far longer than the rest of society.

“*Chipko* reminds us to cling to our origins, our ancestors and the trees.”

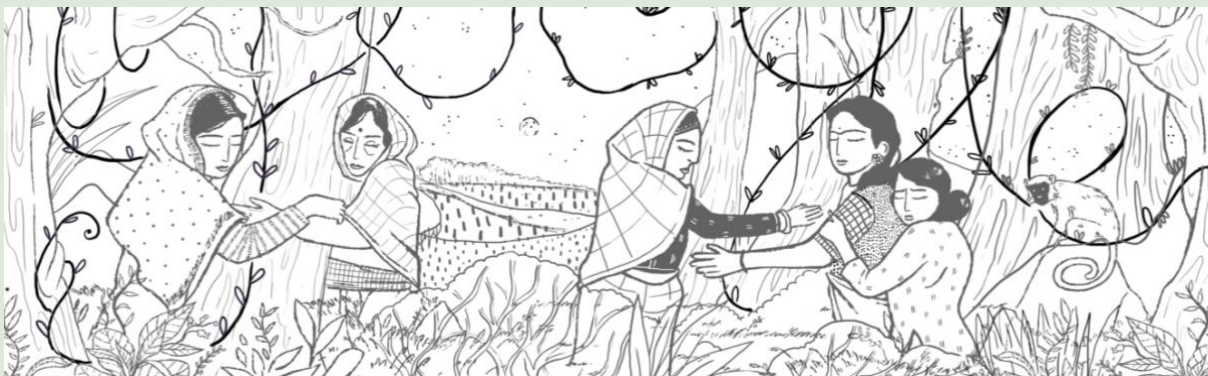


Image: An early Google image created to celebrate the 45th anniversary of *Chipko*.

Contemporary Tree-Hugging Consequences

Luckily, trying to protect trees today won't get your head chopped off, and there are multiple ways to do it. *Chipko* proves that small movements can make big changes, ripples can make waves, and everyone has the power to change a situation and protect

what they hold dear. Indigenous tribes held power and won against colonialism, so what can you do? Short answer: more than you realise. Below are some suggestions.

Learn and learn and learn again. You've already started by reading this article. However, the best way we can learn is by respecting and learning from Indigenous communities. Suryamani Bhagat said it best: 'Our life is bound with Nature. You can learn from that'.

Support Indigenous and forest communities by helping to get their voices heard. You can actively do this by following *Survival International's* 'Indigenous Voices' campaign.

Shop for sustainably sourced items. Try to lessen your purchases of single-use items and find long-term solutions instead. This is a simple step that helps support a deforestation-free future.

You can help
Indigenous people
by sending one
simple email.

Send an email. That's right. You can help by sending one simple email. *Survival International* allows you to send emails directly to CEOs and politicians so you can actively change the lives of Indigenous groups who are facing homelessness and abuse. Every email makes a difference. The QR code and web address to send your email are at the end of this article.

Eat a little less meat. Reducing how much meat you eat helps protect forests and nature.

Grow your own support network. If you're passionate about deforestation and climate change, take inspiration from *Chipko's* humble beginnings, and draw on their power. Bring together friends, family, and your local community. You could craft with recycled items or take forest walks.

Harness awareness. Tell friends, family, or even the world. If you wanted, you could do the latter by creating your own social media page.

And most importantly...

Start. Just by taking an interest and starting, you are helping Indigenous communities like the Adivasi and reducing deforestation. Making one or two changes in daily life can change countless lives of the 6.2% of the population currently saving ours.

If you would like to learn more about deforestation or the troubles facing Indigenous communities, there are multiple resources waiting for you. Scan the QR codes below or look up the website on your computer.

For more information on **deforestation** and **solutions**, visit
<https://www.greenpeace.org/usa/forests/solutions-to-deforestation/>



To send an **email** in order to **help Indigenous tribes**, including the Adivasi, visit
<https://www.survivalinternational.org/getinvolved/emails>



For more ways to help **Indigenous tribes** get their **voices heard**, go to <https://www.survivalinternational.org/getinvolved>

