

Hugging the Trees for Life: Implicating Bitzer in the Non-violent Rhetorical Situation of the Chipko Movement

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the non-violent rhetorical situation of the Chipko movement in India. According to Kirkscey (2007), Lucas (2006) and Gorsevski (2004), efforts to understand non-Western movements and non-violent rhetoric have long been sidelined in comparison to understanding movements in the West and those that are more aggressive in manner. This study hopes to fill in the gap in scholarship by highlighting the non-violent approach employed by the Chipko movement using Bitzer's (1968) rhetorical situation as a theoretical framework. The essay looks into the rhetorical situation of the movement, focussing on its exigency, audience and constraints. Later, an assessment of the Chipko movement's response as rhetor is offered. How *Satyagraha* (Gandhi's non-violent form of protest) influenced the movement's method will also be considered. The analysis suggests that the Chipko movement's non-violent tactics of saving the trees proves to be fitting and effective.

Keywords: Non-violent rhetoric, rhetorical criticism, social change, social movements

INTRODUCTION

As the maharajah's axemen approached the first tree marked for felling in the heavily wooded district of Rajasthan, in India's Himalayan foothills, Amrita Devi wrapped herself around its trunk. The inhabitants, adherents of the

Bishnois religious sect, held trees as sacred. Each child, for example, had a special tree to talk to and hug. But the maharajah of Jodhpur, wishing to build himself a new palace, had dispatched a crew to chop down trees to fire his lime kiln. The axemen ignored Amrita Devi's pleas to spare the forest. As she clung to the tree, crying "A chopped head is cheaper than a felled tree!"

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the axe came down. After she had crumpled to the ground, her three daughters each in turn took her place defending the trees. All were killed. Then, persons from forty-nine surrounding communities responded to the villagers' call for help. Facing a major confrontation, the axemen warned the villagers that resistance would mean death for them also. They continued to hug the trees, refusing to yield. By day's end over three hundred and fifty women and men had been slaughtered. The maharajah, on learning why the tree cutting had been progressing so slowly, had a change of heart. He abandoned the palace building project, ordered a halt to the cutting of trees, and went to the scene of the violence to apologize to the villagers. He promised that never again would their trees be cut. (Breton, 1998, pp.3-4)

INTRODUCTION TO THE CHIPKO MOVEMENT

The above narrative relates the first recorded protest of the Chipko movement that took place in 1730 in a Bishnoi (or "Vishnoi") village near Jodhpur. According to the narrative, a group of 362 (some reports mention 350) men, women and children were led by a woman by the name of Amrita Devi to protect the trees in their village from being felled for the Maharaja's new palace (Breton, 1998; Linkenbach 2007). The

loggers did not spare the men and women; nevertheless, the story of Amrita Devi and her followers has been kept alive among and by those in the movement.

What is the Chipko Movement? What is its significance?

The Chipko movement is also known as the "Hug the Trees" movement. Primarily made up of peasant women who believed in Gandhi's non-violent philosophy, the movement employed, among others, the protest tactic of tree-hugging as a form of passive resistance to save their forest from irresponsible logging (Mellor, 1997). *Chipko* means "hug" or "embrace" in Hindi. The movement's belief in non-violence as a means of protesting was very appealing to the masses, as evident by the spread of the movement in different areas in India (Mallick, 2002). The movement does not hold only historical significance; it serves as an example of how a movement can be effective without involving violent actions. Due to its long history, the Chipko movement is said to be "one of the most celebrated environmental movements in the world" (Bandyopadhyay, 1999, p. 881). Yet, despite its historical significance, few studies have looked at the Chipko movement as a rhetorical text. Unsurprisingly, scholars such as Lucas (2006) and Kirkscey (2007) have long noted the lack of literature on non-Western social movements. This is unfortunate because unless we make an effort to understand non-Western movements, our understanding of social movement rhetoric will remain partial. Concurrently,

Gorsevski (2004) is of the opinion that the topic of non-violent rhetoric is understudied mainly because using peaceful means to protest is often undervalued due to some misconceptions such as equating non-violence to signs of weakness, naivety and idealism¹. This essay² hopes to fill the gap in literature by highlighting the non-violent rhetoric of the Chipko movement in the dialogue on environmental movements. To assess the effectiveness of their non-violent methods and to determine whether their responses were fitting, I utilise Bitzer's (1968) rhetorical situation. Based on my analysis, the Chipko movement's response to exigency may be seen as rhetorically fitting or appropriate if assessed using Bitzer's theoretical framework. Also, in keeping with Alcoff's (1991) caution about speaking for/about Others and the Standpoint Theory (Kinefuchi & Orbe, 2008; Swigonski, 1993), I include narratives that originate from members of the movement. This, I hope, will

¹In my dissertation, I contend that non-violent rhetoric is not just a technique/tactic. Rather, it is also the manifestation of a philosophy that aims to not only address exigencies, but also to amend the role of the adversary to that of ally. Non-violent rhetoric does not only address the material conditions of a situation; it also incorporates the spiritual and/or religious as a mode of address. Incorporating the spiritual, or recognising that one is accountable for Others (whether human or non-human) helps solidify a person's commitment to non-violence.

²This paper was part of my dissertation, completed at the University of Denver (Summer, 2012) with Dr. Christina R. Foust as Dissertation Director. I would like to thank Dr. Foust for her endless support during my studies at the University of Denver.

help in my efforts to amplify the non-violent voices of the Chipko protesters.

I begin my analysis with a brief outline of the geographical and historical context of the Chipko movement. This will be followed by details of the movement's rhetorical situation according to Bitzer's (1968) theoretical framework. The use of Bitzer in this essay is appropriate because Bitzer's theory relating to people's exigencies (hardship), audiences (friends/rivals) and constraints (challenges) adds an element of humanness to the analysis. Features such as exigence, audience and constraints are elements that can be found in almost all situations regardless of cultural context. In other words, the use of Bitzer may be seen as appropriate to study both Western as well as non-Western situations or social movements. Furthermore, Bitzer's focus on what constitutes a "fitting response" in a rhetorical situation will help us assess the movement's rhetorical tactics (i.e. were the movement's tactics appropriate/effective or otherwise). Lastly, I will consider how *Satyagraha* (Gandhi's non-violent form of protest) influenced the movement's method in response to the people's situation.

BACKGROUND TO AND HISTORY OF THE CHIPKO MOVEMENT

Since ancient civilisation, the forests in India have been a great resource for human survival (Linkenbach, 2007). The peoples' livelihood depended on food, fuel, fodder and water from the forest. However, colonial rule changed the people's lifestyle dramatically. Under colonial rule and in the

name of “development,” the forests became a mere commodity to cater to the needs of the colonising foreigners while sidelining those of the local people. Of course, colonialism alone cannot be blamed for the exploitation of natural resources as this continued even after India gained independence in 1947. As Linkenbach maintains, the forests of India are not only of value economically. More importantly, they are of great value in terms of spiritual/religious and social life. Most Indians are spiritual in nature. Every person is considered a “moving temple” in which the light of God is said to dwell, and servicing others is considered servicing God (Chidananda, 1987). The people’s deep connection to their natural surroundings was one of the main conditions that led to the exigency faced by the Chipko movement.

METHOD: RHETORICAL CRITICISM

Humans use symbols to communicate (Kuypers, 2009; Foss, 2004; Griffin, 1969). Some examples of these symbols, or representations of other things, include spoken and written words, art, dance, clothing and the body. In rhetorical criticism, scholars assume that words, visuals and actions are used as symbols to communicate and/or persuade. Additionally, “When we critique instances of rhetoric...we are allowing ourselves to take a closer, critical look at how rhetoric operates to persuade and influence us...it is a *humanizing* activity...it explores and highlights qualities that make us human” (Kuypers, 2009, p.13). Because of its human dimension, rhetorical criticism

may be considered an art. By “art,” I mean that criticism does not follow a scientific method to generate knowledge. It is not concerned with how a critic distances him/herself from the object of analysis. The critic is permitted—even encouraged—to include his/her own political convictions throughout the process of criticism.

At the same time, good criticism is not just about flaunting one’s personal opinion. Certain norms are to be followed to create knowledge that is relevant or applicable for others to understand. What are highly sought after are supportive arguments and appropriate justification. In other words, there is a systematic way of evaluating a text (a “text” can be in spoken, written and visual form). Foss (2004) believes that rhetorical criticism “enables us to become more sophisticated and discriminating in explaining, investigating, and understanding symbols and our responses to them” (p. 7). More importantly, it is important for the critic to highlight to the reader things that are not “obvious” in a rhetorical text (Black, 2009). Black contends that good criticism is dependent on the critic (political convictions included). Criticism as a method is important not only because it brings to light issues that would otherwise be unnoticed; criticism as a method also forces a critic to be thorough or knowledgeable and responsible in his/her writings. Critics who practise rhetorical criticism help add to or build on rhetorical theories (Foss, 2004). These theories in turn help improve existing research and “improve our practice of communication” (Foss, 2004, p. 8).

For Parrish (2005), rhetoric is not limited to the study of instrumental effects. The focus is more on the *quality* of a rhetorical act. The quality of a work of criticism is naturally dependent upon the critic him/herself. It is not enough to know speeches or artifacts. Preferably, a critic must have good general knowledge in “history, politics, literature, and all the liberal studies” since the speeches one studies “may range through all the fields of human knowledge, they may be rich in allusions to persons and events, at the critic must be able to follow all the workings of the orator’s mind” (Parrish, 2005, p. 39). Critiquing a text must include a deep understanding of the *situation* in which the rhetorical act took place. This leads me to my next point relating to Bitzer’s Rhetorical Situation.

BITZER’S RHETORICAL SITUATION

Lloyd Bitzer’s (1968) theory on what constitutes a Rhetorical Situation is used as the main theoretical framework in this study. In his essay, Bitzer describes the rhetorical situation as the condition where the characteristics around a rhetorical text help rhetoricians determine whether the text is forceful or inadequate. Bitzer’s theory consists of three components – *exigence*, *audience* and *constraints*. *Exigence*, according to Bitzer is a state of imperfection that must be addressed urgently via discourse. Discourse introduced into the situation would modify the exigence either partially or completely. Modification or change must be positive. Situations in which change via discourse is not possible

(e.g. death), are not considered exigent. An example of exigence would be the rapid pace of climate change that affects all people regardless of race, class and region. This situation requires urgent attention where discourse may play a role in changing the mindset of individuals and/or policy makers.

Audience, according to Bitzer (1968), consists of individuals who are not only free to be influenced by discourse, but also those who are capable of playing the role of moderator or change. Here, Bitzer makes a distinction between a rhetorical audience and a scientific or poetic audience. For Bitzer, although scientific and poetic works engage the mind of an audience, these works do not necessarily fashion their audiences as agents of change.

The third component of a rhetorical situation is known as *constraints*, which refers to “persons, events, objects, and relations which are parts of the situation because they have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence. (S)ources of constraint include beliefs, attitudes [...] motives and the like” (Bitzer, 1968, p. 8). Occasionally, an orator’s own personal characteristics and style may serve as a constraint. Borrowing from Aristotle, Bitzer classifies the constraints into two categories: 1) “artistic proofs” (originating from the rhetor); and 2) “inartistic proofs” (originating from the situation and/or the audience). An example of “artistic proofs” would be an orator who comes from a position of privilege and finds it a challenge to relate to an audience made up from a marginalised population. An

example of “inartistic proofs” would be an audience that refuses to cooperate or listen to the orator.

Bitzer claims that for a situation to qualify as a rhetorical act, three conditions need to exist (*exigence, audience and constraints*). By placing emphasis on the situation, the rhetor and the rhetorical activity become secondary. In other words, the situation is the precondition of a given rhetorical activity. Discourse only becomes rhetorical if or when it responds to a situation. Bitzer (1968) contends:

It is clear that situations are not always accompanied by discourse. Nor should we assume that a rhetorical address gives existence to the situation; on the contrary, it is the situation which calls the discourse into existence (p.2).

An example of a situation leading to a rhetorical activity would be the recent Arab Spring, which began in Tunisia as a response to an oppressive government. In this particular situation, an oppressed society may be considered the *exigency*, the people of the nation may be considered the *audience* and abusive authority or a government that is not willing to cooperate with its people may be seen as the main *constraint*.

EXIGENCE

In the case of the Chipko movement, we will see later how the participants not only addressed their exigency via

verbal discourse, but also via non-verbal symbols such as the act of marching and tree-hugging. As I mentioned earlier, in the Chipko movement, the people’s view of their natural resources goes beyond the material. The forest is in fact viewed as sacred or holy—so sacred that it is worthy of worship and held in high esteem. As stated by Baker (1987), the preservation of trees and wildlife is considered one of the 29 tenets of the Vishnoi (or “Bishnoi”) faith. Trees or nature are not only divine, they are considered “family” (brothers and sisters). It is no wonder then, that the people of the region feel that it is their responsibility to care for those who are a part of their family. Given this cultural and religious backdrop, the Chipko movement’s philosophy revolved around three main beliefs, namely: 1) There is life in *all* creation, whether it be human beings, animals, plants, rivers or mountains; 2) All life is a testimony of a higher power. All life deserves respect; and 3) Austerity is held in high regard since a desire for excessive materialism interferes with one’s path to self-realisation and true happiness (Bahuguna, 1987, p. 9). It was the people’s realisation of the forests’ significance in spiritual value as well as its role as source of livelihood that sparked their vigour to stand as shields for the trees. It was also Amrita Devi’s protest in 1730 that first signalled an important milestone for the people who relied heavily on their forest for their livelihood.

According to Weber (1989), the story of Amrita Devi has been retold countless times to gain support from villagers. It is used

as evidence that even “simple” villagers can make a difference. The history of the movement may have begun as early as the 1700s, but it is the modern turn in the Chipko movement that is most widely written about. Linkenbach (2007) reported the first (modern) Chipko activities that occurred between April to May 1973 as a response to the government’s (Forest Department) unjust treatment of the villagers of Mandal, an area near Gopeshwar. The villagers were denied a small number of ash trees for agricultural use; yet at the same time, a large number of trees were granted to a sporting goods company (the Simon Company). An activist by the name of Chandi Prasad Bhatt helped gather the villagers to act against the company (Fredell, 1996). The villagers decided to act by hugging the trees to prevent them from being felled. The protest was seen as monumental because the loggers eventually chose to withdraw. Though the company was allocated a different section of the forest, the villagers continued their act of protest, forcing the loggers to withdraw.

After the first modern Chipko protest, the movement continued to grow in nearby areas. In Tehri, another activist by the name of Sunderlal Bahuguna (along with other villagers) continued the protest against forest exploitation by hugging trees (Fredell, 1996). One of the most well-known protests took place in March 1974, in the Raini (or “Reni”) forest (Linkenbach, 2007). While the village men were absent and occupied with other matters relating to forest management and officials, the loggers took the opportunity to head for the forest where

they were spotted and reported to Gaura Devi—the head of a women’s organisation in the village. Without delay, Gaura Devi marched with the other women of the village to oppose the loggers. In Gaura Devi’s words,

Brothers, this forest is our maika (mother’s house). We get medical plants and vegetables from it. Do not cut the forest! If you cut the forest this hill will plunge on our village, the flood will come and the winter fields will be washed away... (Linkenbach, 2007, p. 58).

Addressing her opponents as “brothers” and referring to the forest as her *maika* or “mother’s house” illustrates Gaura Devi’s attempt at recreating or maintaining a relationship between her fellow humans and non-human living beings. This aligns with the Chipko’s principle that life in all creations is of value. Gaura Devi’s appeal to the loggers also further emphasised the exigency they were experiencing and the dependence of the village folk on the forest resources.

The Chipko’s exigency was a result of forest exploitation and excessive development. Prior to the 1970s and before road-building began, Himalayan forests were not easily accessible to commercial loggers (Breton, 1998). However, not long after roads were built on the hillsides, logging became widespread. Insensitivity to the area’s ecosystem and the local population’s needs soon led to excessive logging practices and, eventually, to

environmental disaster. Disasters in the region included massive landslides and floods that became common. It was the frequent floods in the mid 1970s and the landslides that led to the realisation of the state of exigency (Weber, 1989).

It can be said that, thus far, the problems of the Chipko movement were primarily a result of development. First, it was to “develop” the Maharaja’s palace. Later, it was to develop the country, whether it was via outside (colonial) or local (Indian government) influence. Development may appear beneficial at face value. Unfortunately, development is not always favoured. Not surprisingly, the Chipko movement was criticised and labelled as anti-development. Since the Industrial Revolution in Europe, development has come to be defined in terms of material wealth. Changes in people’s mentality also meant that nature is seen as 1) “(A) commodity over which human beings have a birth right of exploitation”, and 2) “Society is only for human beings” (Bahuguna, 1987, p.15). This further resulted in male migration from the hills to the plains in search of better job opportunities, leaving the women in charge of households (Jain, 1984). The women tended to the family while conducting agricultural activities and turned to the forest for supplementary resources such as food, fodder, water and medicinal plants.

From Bahuguna’s (1987) perspective, in less affluent nations, ever since foreign exchange became more important than God, people have not been reluctant to risk

the fertility of their land to gain material mileage. This, in turn, contributed to the fast-paced destruction of the forest. When asked about the state of the local forest, Bahuguna claimed,

We have to preserve [the] natural forest first. Wherever clear felling has been done, they should re-stock [the forest] with the indigenous species. Otherwise they will plant those areas with eucalyptus or teak and the area will be turned into a timber mine. A forest is something else. It’s a community of living things in which big trees, small ones, bushes, birds, insects, wild animals etc. are present. Unfortunately, by turning forests into timber mines, the balance has been lost [...] Forests are the mothers of rivers [...] For oxygen, soil and water, you have to maintain the forests (quoted in Padre, 1992, pp. 11-12).

Bahuguna’s appeal demonstrated the irreplaceable value of the forests. While material goods may be replaced once used, natural resources cannot necessarily be restored to their original state once destroyed. From the women’s standpoint, development was detrimental not only to the environment, but also to the people. In Jain (1984), one woman (whose name was not mentioned) spoke of the construction of roads negatively. In the woman’s words,

Now outsiders are coming to sell their fancy ware to us who had never used these bright things before. The people in hill areas are now being exploited by outsiders and many people are being displaced from their land by outsiders...Come with me to the local market and see for yourself that it is monopolised by outsiders who sell things which we have no use for except making us lazy and good for nothing (Jain, 1984, p.1790).

Because of the felling of trees, the daily activities and issue of survival became complicated for the women. They had to walk long distances over steep slopes with heavy loads on their backs to obtain their needs. This caused some to fall to their death. Unfortunately for the women, development in hill areas failed at improving their quality of life. Not only did commercial felling add to the burden of their daily duties in requiring them to walk further to gather food, fodder and firewood, irresponsible logging also weakened the soil, and this endangered their homes and source of water. As seen in the Jain (1984) quote above, development also contributed to the displacement of local ways of life where outside goods were monopolising the market, making the locals detached from their local ways. Moreover, some of the people's attachment to new material "things" was leading them to undesirable behaviour and attitudes.

The development of communication and roads also made it easier for the village men to leave the hills for the plains (Weber, 1989). This too, was another source of exigency since the women were not given a choice to do the same. Instead, they were forced to stay in the hills to care for the children while burdened at the same time with back-breaking work and household management. Weber (1989) relates how the women struggled with their increasing workload while the men worked in the plains. Their overwhelming workload meant very little time was left to perform domestic chores such as cooking and cleaning and caring for their young children. It was reported that some mothers had to resort to locking their children in rooms or tying the children to cots when they left their house for work far from their village. The situation was dire. Weber mentioned an instance where a child was burnt to death in the family's hearth due to neglect, and another case where a group of seven village women resorted to mass suicide by jumping into a river because "they could no longer bear the misery of their lives" (p. 99).

AUDIENCE

In the Chipko situation, there were multiple groups of audience that had the capacity to make a positive change. The primary audiences were the women villagers, followed by the men, contractors and government agencies. The villagers in the situation needed to realise that although they were simple peasants, they had the capacity

to rise and defend their forests—their source of livelihood and spiritual connections. At the same time, while development is desired, it should not be at the risk of their natural resources and way of life. For the men in the movement, it was important that they saw the dire living conditions and were not blinded by excessive development or growth that was only concerned with economic gains. For the contractors and government agencies, there was a need to understand the needs of the local population and to see that exploitation of forest reserves had negative consequences for the country's natural environment and the direct link it had to the people's homes and survival. It was also important for government agencies to not give in to the notion of "development" as defined in the West. In essence, the Chipko's Gandhian influence saw development in terms of a better quality of life that did not necessarily include material wealth. Gandhi believed that there ought to be a limit to luxury where "plain living" should be encouraged to enable "high thinking" (Weber, 1989).

CONSTRAINTS AND WOMEN'S CULTURAL STATUS

Before their success, the Chipko movement did not escape constraints. Their constraints fell under "artistic proofs" (from the rhetor) as well as "inartistic proofs" (from the audience) (Bitzer 1968). In other words, the constraints can be said to originate from inside the Chipko movement; the women's cultural status and some of the men's attitudes were constraints in the

situation. Outside of the Chipko movement, the government/forest agencies and the contractors' actions/attitudes were the constraints. In relation to the constraints, Weber (1989) claims that two thirds of the 3.2 million hectares planted between the years of 1951 and 1980 were for industrial use and not for the supply of firewood, a pressing need of the locals.

Bandyopadhyay (1999) clarifies that the Chipko movement was rooted in economic injustice and the fight for survival. The issue of gender came into the picture by chance. The women's involvement largely was a result of the men's absence from the villages as they had left to seek employment in urban areas due to the shortage of permanent jobs in the villages. The women did not have much choice but to rise up and protect the trees. Sunderlal Bahuguna³, a leading Chipko activist/messenger, confirmed this when he explained:

In our area, women are the backbone of our social and economic life. [...] If you see family life, it is women or our mothers who sacrifice more. They wake up early in the morning

³ According to Breton (1998), the Chipko movement did not have a formal organisational structure or headquarters. Therefore, it did not have an elected leader or official members. The movement operated mainly by word of mouth and was connected "horizontally", not "vertically" (p. 6). Though it operated without any formal structures, a few names such as Sunderlal Bahuguna, Chandi Prasad Bhatt and Gaura Devi often arise when one locates material on the movement. Still, Bahuguna sees himself more as a messenger, and not so much as a leader.

at 4 and go to bed at 10 or 11. Sacrifice is the first qualification for a soldier of the non-violent movement (in Padre, 1992, pp. 6-7).

Bahuguna's comment was an affirmation of the significance of the women's role in the Chipko movement. The women's role in the community was not limited to their day-to-day activities as caretakers of their homes and families. Instead, the women also served as frontliners of the struggle. With no intent of essentialising, Bahuguna confirmed the women's position as managers of their families. Bahuguna looked upon the women's role with respect, not disregard. Although Bahuguna may have looked upon the womenfolk with high regard, the same cannot be said about society in general. In Jain (1984), the women's role in the Chipko movement was said to be mostly domestic. Matters relating to leadership, authority and government were considered men's domain. Jain noted that the men who were more involved in village councils or village bodies tended to regard government officials with high opinion and apprehension. On the other hand, for the women, no such concern presented itself since their interactions with government officials were very rare, if any. The women simply knew that the felling of trees had a negative impact on their family's well-being. On the contrary, the men were certain that the government was powerful and was not to be questioned. Essentially, the culture and environment at the time encouraged women to focus on livelihood and family life while the men focussed on public power/governance and authority.

Though it may have been a constraint with negative implications, the women's social status and their domestic burden may have also contributed to their drive, which motivated them to protest. Restricted involvement in village bodies and limited exposure to government officials also meant the women were fearless. The women's involvement in the movement did not just help to maintain the community's survival; it also helped shed new light on the women's social status as their roles as members of society grew beyond the domestic domain. Though not totally free from traditional constraints, at the very least, the women's involvement marked a period in which their voices or sense of agency was more visible in the community.

SATYAGRAHA AND NON-VIOLENT RESPONSE

Bahuguna (1987) believed that for sustainable development to be realised a fusion between the "mysticism of the East and Science and technology of the West" should be sought (p.18). Bahuguna mentioned one tenet of the movement's philosophy known as *ayajyan* (noble objective), which requires the "working of the head" (knowledge) to be in sync with one's hands (action) and heart (devotion) (p.18-19). It was not enough for humans to be advanced in scientific knowledge. Instead, this strength should be accompanied with the awareness of others' needs. Bahuguna (1987) insists, "(T)here is no dearth of dedicated people, who are working in this direction; but their energies are being wasted in theoretical work, mostly

in establishing and managing institutions... Chipko did nothing of these... they reached to (people's) hearts through footmarches" (p.19).

The Chipko movement reached a significant milestone in 1980 when a government ban (under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi) was placed on the felling of trees in all parts of Uttarakhand (the area most affected). In the documentary *As Women See It* (Dhanraj, 1983), early scenes show a group of women singing while they walk through the forest to collect firewood and fodder. It is obvious from the scenes that, while the women were highly committed to the welfare of their families, they were also tired and frustrated with the quality of their life. They seemed resentful of the fact that the men were not more involved in their daily tasks. Singing while working seemed to be a common practice among the women. It was the manifestation of the solidarity among the women. Apparently, singing among the villagers also served as a method of activism. In Weber (1989), for example, folksongs are said to be one of the most effective method for educating the masses. Chipko activist, Ghanshyam Sailani, wrote one of the well-known folksongs. It speaks of the relationship between humans and nature:

*I have been standing for ages,
I wish to live for you.
Do not chop me, I am yours.
I wish to give you something in
future.
I am milk and water for you.*

*I am thick shade and showers.
I manufacture soil and manure.
I wish to give you foodgrains.
Some of my kind bear fruits.
They ripen for you.
I wish to ripen with sweetness.
I wish to bow down for you.
I am the pleasant season.
I am spring, I am rains.
I am with Earth and life.
I am everything for you.
Do not cut me, I have life.
I feel pain, so my name is tree.
Rolling of logs will create
landslides.
Remember. I stand on slopes and
below is the village Where we
were destroyed.
Dust is flying there.
The hill tops have become barren.
All the water sources have been
dried up.
Do not cut us, save us.
Plant us, decorate the Earth.
What is ours, everything is ours.
Leave something for posterity.
Such is the Chipko movement.*

(in Weber, 1989, pp. 80)

What makes the above folksong compelling is its standpoint; it was written in such a way as to illustrate how or what a tree may say if it had the ability to speak. The human-nature connection the folksong expresses further enhances the belief that the Chipko movement is ecological in origin,

and not just economical. The folksong may have begun as an appeal citing how the tree serves as a provider. However, towards the end, it seems more of a warning that destruction will follow if the tree's life is brought to an end. In some ways, this positionalising also aligns with that of the women participants of the Chipko movement. On one hand, the women may be seen as care-givers of their family. Yet, if treated wrongly or if threatened, the women can also rise up as protesters against the government and loggers. Villagers in the 1974 protest reportedly moved to the forest while they played drums, shouted slogans and sang songs such as the one below written by the women in Lata:

Hey, didi [elder sister], hey bhulli [younger sister], let us all unite and with our own efforts let us save our jungle.

The maldars [rich people] and thekedars [contractors] want to make money.

Our cows and our cattle, they go to the jungle

And with them our young people.

Hey, Rishi Maharaj [a local form of address to a god or supreme being], come and

show yourself with your real power.

Chase far away the 600 trucks heavily loaded, and along with them drive back the strangers.

Hey, Lata Bhagvati [addressing

the goddess of Lata, Nanda Devi], come and show yourself with your real power;

chase far away the maldars [rich people] and thekedars [contractors].

When our jungle is saved, only then will we return [to our villages].

(in Linkenbach, 2007, p. 65).

The above song seems particularly striking because of its reference to the god Rishi Maharaj and the goddess Nanda Devi. While the previous folksong can be read as arising from the standpoint of a non-human being, this folksong appears to call out to or summon a non-human being or a divine entity, to be more specific. The line, "Hey, didi [elder sister], hey bhulli [younger sister], let us all unite and with our own efforts let us save our jungle." specifically calls out to the women to display solidarity, encouraging them to stand up as agents of change. Calling out to a goddess also extends the notion of sisterhood and a strong bond with nature. Again, this illustrates the movement's focus on relations and care, whether it is between humans or with non-humans.

In the movement's protests, songs did not exist on their own. Instead, music was often accompanied by marches or processions as evident in one of the scenes in *As Women See It*. In one particular scene, villagers were shown marching and singing to express their outrage against the contractors. These protesters did not use

only their own bodies as instruments of protest. They also constructed an effigy of the contractors they wished to cast out of the forest, and threw it over a bridge. In the words of one of the activists,

Whenever someone in the village is possessed by a bad spirit, we exorcise him by beating the bad spirit out of him. The contractors have possessed our forests so we made an effigy of them and chased them away.

What makes the above action interesting is the protesters' choice to avoid physical violence (unto the loggers) by creating an effigy to communicate their fury. The reference to "bad spirits" and "exorcism" implies the people's dependence on divine intervention to solve their misfortune. At the same time, however, the villagers did not depend on prayers alone. Instead, the choice to stage a protest also served as evidence of the people's collective agency.

Besides music and marches or processions, it is evident from literature on the Chipko that *padayatras* (journey by foot, especially one that is long in distance) were common in the Chipko movement. According to Weber (1989) *padayatras* helped deliver the Chipko movement to remote areas. Weber claims, "the aim (of *padayatras*) is to communicate with the villagers in the villages visited and more so to raise the political awareness in the country" (p. 87). Further, *padayatras* not only served as a means of communicating face to face with the people; it was also a

means of recruiting new members.

Tree-hugging, singing, the use of effigies, processions and *padayatras* are non-violent forms of protest. These methods align with *satyagraha*, a Gandhian concept that is supported by members of the Chipko movement. By *satyagraha*, Gandhi meant "holding onto Truth," "firmness in Truth," a "relentless search for Truth" and "Truth force" (King, 1999; Gandhi 2001). Gandhi's *satyagraha* combined principled non-violence with shrewd techniques of resistance to subjugation (p. 15). Gandhi's attention to "truth" aligns with Bitzer's views on the rhetorical situation because what is viewed as Truth exists independently of human perception (i.e. just because one is not aware of a given situation does not mean that the situation does not exist or is not "true"). One of the aims of *satyagraha* (according to Weber, 1989) is to convert the opponent into a friend. It is an approach that must be used *with* someone, instead of *against* someone. For example, Weber reports that in many instances, the activists not only managed to put a stop to tree felling, they also took the time and initiative to explain to the contractors the reasoning behind the protest. The protesters informed the contractors of the importance of the trees for survival and "remind[ed] them that they too were (generally) mountain people who would experience the same problems...if they did not protect the forests" (Weber, 1989, p. 80). Essentially, *satyagraha* places the importance of the interrelationship between "faith in the goodness of [people], truth, non-violence,

self-suffering, the relationship of the means to the end, a rejection of coercion, and fearlessness..." (Weber, 1989, p. 83). *Satyagraha* also influenced the Chipko members' acts of fasting and negotiating in addition to the singing, processions, *padayatras* and hugging of trees.⁴ According to Gandhi, belief in God or a "higher being" is a prerequisite to *satyagraha*. How one defines God is not relevant. What is more important is that one believes in a Supreme Power. Gandhi insists, "To bear all kinds of tortures without a murmur of resentment is impossible for a human being without the strength that comes from God" (p. 364).

DISCUSSION / CONCLUSION

In the Chipko movement, the protesters' state of spirituality was clearly obtained via their focus on non-violent means. The protesters' inclusion of songs, poetry and *padayatras* etc. was a conscious effort to increase their spiritual commitment/connections to both humans and non-humans (nature). Efforts shown by the activists in this study serve as evidence that those at the grassroots level, no matter how marginalised, are

⁴ Although some would understandably equate *satyagraha* with civil disobedience, Gandhi (2001) maintains that civil disobedience and non-cooperation are *branches of satyagraha*. King (1999) defines *civil disobedience* as "deliberate, peaceful and open violations of statutes, laws, orders, decrees, or military or police directives, accompanied by willingness to accept all of the penalties" (p. 527). While civil disobedience relates to the refusal to obey human/state law (Gandhi, 2001), the concept of *satyagraha* relates to a deeper, spiritual meaning.

capable of overcoming environmental and political exigencies without relying on violent means of protest. On the contrary, by using non-violent ways, the people exhibit a measure of direct action that is just as powerful (if not more powerful) to defeat their adversaries. Studying the rhetoric of non-violent movements not only helps us to understand their strengths and possible limitations. At the same time, it will also help to further advance this type of rhetoric as a leading mode of rhetoric, and not just as an alternative. In other words, non-violent rhetoric *can* be an effective method for activism. Non-violent rhetoric is *not* a tool for the weak.

The Chipko movement began as a result of conflicts over forest resources. Although colonial impact played a role in the inception of the movement, the people's growing needs and the government's ignorance of the population's conditions resulted in conflict and struggles. Despite, or due to, perhaps, their non-violent approach and strong spiritual principles, the women of the Chipko along with the men and children, managed to overcome their hardship. The movement's *fitting response* to the situation serves as a fine example for other activists or movements struggling for the same justice.

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