

Hugging Trees: The Story Behind the Story, and Beyond

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Bedbugs made me do it.

You see, I had just come out of the foothills of the Indian Himalayas, where this story takes place, and where my wife and I had helped build stone walls to prevent the little mountain cows – smaller than many goats – from getting to our newly planted trees. I was on an overnight train from New Delhi to Mumbai (Bombay for those of you still equipped with old gazetteers.) I always travel second class because that's here you see the *real* India, complete with children hanging from luggage racks, betelnut shells covering the floors, and barefoot railway wallahs hawking “toMAAToSooop” from portable metal samovars. But the only berths available were in first class, with sleeping mattresses six inches wider and compartment doors that almost actually closed, only not really.

I might have gotten a good night's sleep, this June 13th, 1981, but the bedbugs (perhaps they only travel first class?) had other ideas. They goaded me into composing *Gaura Devi Saves the Trees*, the first “children's story” I ever wrote. There was to be no sleeping that evening – the bedbugs who, I believe, must have had some communication with their brethren to the north, made sure of that -- and by morning, when the train pulled into Victoria Station (the largest train station in the world), with the hawkers shouting “pinAYpuLLATE, pinAYpuLLate” (pineapple plate) at the top of their lungs, *Gaura Devi* had made it to paper.

I was totally exhausted by the time I got to the home of my friends, two social workers, who worked among the slum-dwellers living directly in the flight path of the airport. I quickly found out that I was a promised attraction and away we went into the 110-degree urban oven of flimsy tent-like overhangs made of burlap and cardboard shacks. After a round of introductions and songs from the children, they all turned to me, as they wanted to know something about America. I agreed, but only if they'd listen to my tale of their northern neighbors whom I had traveled more than ten thousand miles to visit! I think the tale went over fine, but I didn't speak enough Hindi or Gujarati or Marathi to be able to find out.

Gaura Devi Saves the Trees is based on an actual event which took place in the village of Reni in India near the Tibetan border on March 26, 1974 (the one change being that Gaura Devi was the name of the little girl's mother – I was never able to track down the name of the little girl.) It is part of a much larger story of the Chipko (“Hugging Trees”) Movement in the mountainous region of Uttarakhand in northern India, of village men, women, and children stopping big lumber companies from clearcutting mountain slopes by issuing a call to “hug the trees”. The Movement grew as people began to collectively realize that deforestation was instrumental in causing devastating floods and landslides, as well as destroying the trees that people depended on for the material of their daily lives: fodder, fruit, and fuel; flowers and medicinal plants, even water and soil.

Stories become history, and history becomes folk history, and sometimes it is difficult to unravel the threads. By 1980, although anthropologists universally disagree, the people of the Chipko Movement had adopted a group of villagers from Rajasthan, 800 or so miles to the southwest, as their literal ancestors, because they had become aware of another story.

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September 12, 1731: Maharajah Ajit Singh of Jodhpur, a princely kingdom in what is now Rajasthan, the westernmost state of modern India, decided to build a new palace. His ministers sent an army of men into the desert reaches to bring back wood for burning lime, necessary for construction.

Included in the Maharajah's domain was Khejare, a small village among several in the desert, surrounded by a small forest. The villagers, members of a reform Hindu sect known as the Bishnois, included in the 29 tenets of their faith the protection of trees and wildlife, and thus had been able to nurture the forest for generations. The Bishnois consider the black buck antelope and the chinkara (Indian gazelle) sacred, and the latter to this day is generally found around Bishnoi settlements. Community-accepted legend has it that Bishnoi women would suckle the young of a chinkara if its mother deserted it or was killed.

When the Maharajah's men approached, an elderly woman named Amrita Devi (not to be confused with Gaura Devi who lived 250 years later) pleaded with him that the felling of trees was not only against the Bishnoi faith, but that trees provided the village with food and fodder and were the protectors of the villagers' water supply, vital to their desert existence. Seeing the axeman unmoved, Amrita Devi grabbed the tree in her outstretched arms and hugged it. The axeman threw her to the ground. She got up and hugged the tree once more, begging the axeman to chop her down first before destroying the tree. The axeman hacked through her body, only to have Amrita Devi's three daughters come forward to hug the tree and meet the same fate. On September 12, 1731, 363 people went to their death hugging trees.

After hearing of the incident, the Maharajah, seeking to make amends, declared a permanent injunction against the felling of trees or the killing of wildlife in the area, and permanently exempted the villages from all land taxes. To the day the villages around Amrita Devi's home remain a green and wildlife-filled preserve amidst the sandy isolation of the Rajasthan desert, and Amrita Devi's village itself has now been declared India's first national environmental memorial.

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On my first visit with participants in the Chipko Movement in 1977, I collected folksongs by a (then) young folksinger named Ghyanshyam Sailani. It was a laborious process, as the songs had to be translated first from Garhwali into Hindi, and then from Hindi into English. Well before publishing them, I circulated the songs to friends involved in budding ecological movements in the U.S. They were picked up a young folksinger and

storyteller in New England named Sarah Pirtle who (without any knowledge on my part) set them to music. When Sunderlal Bahugana, a leader of the Chipko Movement, visited the United States for the first time, he was greeted at his presentation at the University of Massachusetts with a song setting of Ghyanshyam's words (the music can be found in the book *Spinning Tales: Weaving Hope: Stories of Peace, Justice, and Environment*, edited by Ed Brody, et al, New Society Publishers, 2002):

Where will we go if the green trees fall?
What will we eat? What will we wear?
Where will we go if the green trees fall?
Where will the poor go then?

(chorus)

Come with me now and embrace the trees,
Feel their heart beat next to yours,
Come with me now and embrace the trees,
Feel their heart beat next to yours.

Where will we go if all India is flood?
Where will we walk? Where will we live?
Where will we go if all India is flood?
Where will the poor go then?

(chorus)

I later found out that Bahugana, greatly moved, took the song and words back with him to the Uttarakhand, song and story now having completed an around-the-world journey.

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June 5, 1981: From the tiny hamlet of Bemru, 5,600 feet high and only 100 very treacherous miles from the Tibetan border, it is easy to see why the Chipko Movement has to be a women's movement. During the week I spent with the 39 families of Bemru, where I helped prepare the ground for the planting of young mulberry and walnut saplings, I met exactly one male villager between the ages of 16 and 35.

"They're all down on the plains or in the military," said the village headwoman, proudly surveying her small terraced vegetable garden below her sturdily built stone and slate house. "They pull rickshaws or wash dishes or haul rocks or do whatever they get paid for. There's no work for them here." And it was indeed clear that the fate of their families, culture, traditions, domestic economy, and natural environment were totally in the hands of these rugged and beautiful women.

Living five miles from the nearest road and from the mighty Alaknanda River (all, the memory in my legs and lungs reminds me, uphill!), their lot is a hard one. Each square yard of terraced farmland represents the work of generations, and had to be lovingly preserved and cultivated. Young children scramble about on the dangerous rock-strewn slopes, looked after by barely older children removed from school for that purpose and

also to tend the miniature mountain cattle. The nearest medical station is a tough three-and-a-half hour journey away.

Bemru is lucky: it is one of the villages in the sub-district closest to the only road, and has a school to which young children trek from more than five miles away. The women of Bemru are fortunate in another way. They have to spend only four or five hours daily scouring the woods for fuel for cooking, fodder for the cattle, for the little heat which helps take the edge off the chill brought by the stiff Himalayan winds. In some areas to the south and west, women are not so fortunate. Fuel and fodder is so scarce on the mountain slopes that women travel for two whole days, sleeping out in the open on the intervening night, in order to collect wood and fodder to sustain the family for the next three days. This pattern of two days of foraging followed by one day at home cooking, farming, and caring for the children, the elderly, and the animals, wreaks havoc on what is left of a culture once built around a strong family life, but already virtually bereft of able-bodied men.

The women of Bemru are also more fortunate than their counterparts to the east. There the forest springs have dried up as the earth, depleted of humus, refuses to hold water anymore. Nightly, the women leave their families and journey to places where underground springs once gushed up through the earth in order to catch the few trickles of water that collect before morning.

The songs of the women of Bemru, which I collected, are evocative and bittersweet. In one song, they plead with their fathers to marry them to men from the plains so that they can leave behind the back-breaking tasks that has been allotted to them. In the next song, they will beg to be married to men from the neighboring village so as not to lose touch with the wisdom that comes from a life lived precariously amidst the wild grandeur of the mountains -- living beings, human and animal, locked in an harmonious natural balance with the earth.

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*Sisters! Join this crusade to protect our forests.
We have to embrace the earth, full of life!*

-- Ghyanshyam Sailani

February 1, 1978: Five hundred people, mostly women, gathered at the foot of the Advani forest, Tehri District, Uttar Pradesh. As the dawn sun rose and three police jeeps and two trucks approached, the slogan-shouting became more intense:

The Himalayas will awake today,
The cruel axe will be chased away!

By the side of the road, their axes and saws piled on the ground, squatted two dozen contract laborers brought from far away by a labor contractor. The labor contractor, in turn, had been hired by a timber company which had purchased 640 trees from the state forest department.

The forest department had marked the trees to be felled, but every time the contractor and his men approached the forests with axes, the local people ran up to hug the trees, forcing them to return empty-handed. Weeks earlier, the women had marched on the same forest, singing, pulling out the iron blades used by the forest department in resin tapping. They bandaged the wounded pines, and tied “sacred threads” around the trees. These sacred threads marked the trees as their children, and signified the women’s pledge to save the trees even, if need be, at the cost of their own lives. This time, district officials agreed to send an armed constabulary force to assist in the felling. A hundred men, armed with rifles and bayonets, arrived a day in advance and paraded publicly up and down the road leading to the forest, hoping to instill fear in the women.

After consultations with the police, the contractor beckoned to the laborers to begin their operations. As they moved toward the forest, so did the villagers, now formed into groups of three or four and including young children. They encircled each marked tree as the laborers approached, chanting, “If the axe falls on the trees, it will fall on our bodies first. As the laborers moved on, so did the tree huggers. The police could not possibly arrest the villagers; there was no place to put them, no way to transport them, and method short of physical violence to separate the villages from the trees they embraced. After several hours of fruitlessly seeking an unprotected marked tree, the contractor laborers, and police gave up, the contractor complaining about the growing undependability of doing business with the state government.

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Prior to the first publication of *Gaura Devi Saves the Trees*, I published the story of the then-young Chipko Movement in a small magazine. A friend of mine gave a copy to his friend, an Indian-born, American-trained engineer named Ravi Chopra, whom I had never met, but whose American wife Jo I had known some years earlier. Only 18 years later did I learn of its impact. Chopra, headed back to India, but with no clear direction regarding what he was to do next, apparently read my article while on the plane. Soon he moved his family, to the foothills of Himalayas in a town named Dehradun, where he formed the People’s Science Institute (PSI). Chopra became keenly aware that the future of the area was dependent on the development of small-scale agriculture and industry. This would free people from dependence on production of timber for the cities on the plains, and make it possible for men who left their families for months or even years at a time seeking employment in the overcrowded urban areas to remain in their ancestral homes.

Chopra also understood that all the development schemes of the government were geared toward large infrastructure projects, improperly built roads that scarred the mountainsides and brought rocks and silt down upon the rivers below, huge dams that displaced tens of thousands of people to produce electricity for the cities, water projects for the plains, timber for, among other things, the manufacture of tennis rackets! And so Chopra and others that he recruited to PSI set to work, building small solid waste management businesses, teaching people how to dig and maintain their own wells and irrigation projects without any government support, supporting community-based forestry, and, perhaps most critically, training people how to retrofit their homes, using local materials

and traditional methods, to make them earthquake-proof. This proved critical, as a large earthquake hit the region in 1999, destroying more than 10,000 homes, but proving the efficacy of PSI's methods. Following the earthquake that struck Gujarat to the southwest the next year, PSI found itself in a position to train international relief agency workers in these approaches. And at the same time as Ravi was building PSI, Jo set up what is probably India's most progressive school for children with mental disabilities.

I think the bedbugs must have been biting them, too.

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By 1981, after untold numbers of scientific studies and surveys, the Chipko Movement had won a complete ban on commercial felling of trees on hills above 1,000 meters high or with slopes with gradients greater than 30°, with only dead, dying, and diseased trees being removed, and only after meeting local demands for timber and fuel. The villagers also were guaranteed the plantation of the "5F" trees – food, fodder, fuel, fertilizer, and fodder – up to a distance of three kilometers from every village. Plantation, protection, and upkeep of these areas, even if they fell within the boundaries of reserve forests, were entrusted to the village communities themselves.

Still, the victories of the Chipko Movement remained fragile. The demand for electrical power, water, and timber in the major urban areas of the plains continued unabated, the lure of possible employment remained, and political power was still concentrated in the major cities.

When I returned to India in the fall of 1998 with my family, I had hoped to visit my friends in the Chipko Movement, but my way was blocked by landslides caused by recent heavy rains that washed out roads and bridges all the way up to the Tibetan frontier. But, instead, having been introduced as the man who (unwittingly) brought Ravi Chopra to the north, I got to sit in at a meeting of a "shadow" environmental cabinet in Dehradun, examining new bioregional forms of planning. ("Bioregionalism" is a way of thinking about a regional "commons" in which political units and decision-making are oriented around the natural carrying capacity of a biologically regenerative community – say, a watershed -- in which human beings are only one part. For an excellent introduction to the idea, see *Home! A Bioregional Reader*, edited by Van Andruss et al., New Society Publishers, 1990.)

On November 9, 2000, after 20 years of ecological and political strife, the flag of the new Indian state of Uttaranchal was raised over Dev Bhoomi (the land of the Gods), presided over by the 25,000-foot-high Nanda Devi and the other Himalayan peaks, its rivers – the headwaters of the Ganges – swelling with pride. With an interim capital at Dehradun and a population of more than 7,000,000 people (Ravi Chopra, last I spoke with him, was trying to figure out an accurate way to count the mountain cows in order to calculate the value of potential milk production against the carrying capacity of the land), Uttaranchal may be the first large political entity in history to be formed as a result of environment struggle.

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I almost forgot. On a more modest scale, these two volumes of *The Healing Heart* would not have existed except for those bedbugs. You see, my co-editor Allison Cox contacted me for the first time for permission to use “Gaura Devi Saves the Trees” in her swan-song of a public health project (see “Once Upon a Time There Was and There Was Not...” in the first volume of this set *The Healing Heart~Families: Storytelling to Encourage Caring and Healthy Families*). Little did she know that I lived only 40 miles away, worked for the state board of health, and would play a role in convincing the local health department to hire her to do health promotion through storytelling; would end up “overseeing” her graduate school practicum (in collecting the material for these volumes); or that the bedbugs would have me sign on as co-editor.

But once you’ve been bitten....

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Gaura Devi’s legacy lives on. Following a visit to environmental sanctuaries north of Dehradun, my then 11-year-old daughter Aliyah Shanti (which means “Pilgrimage of Peace”) wrote the following poem:

The tree speak,
But their language is hidden deep inside their bark,
They must trust us,
Before they reveal it.

The wind speaks,
But in so many different languages
That it is hard to pick one out.

The stars speak,
But their fiery flares
Make us afraid to know what they say.

All things in the universe have a language.
It is not they who must learn to speak,
It is we who must learn to listen.

I think the bedbugs should be very proud. And the trees are still smiling.