A Gandhian in Garhwal

Twenty years ago this June, RAMACHANDRA GUHA began a secular pilgrimage to the Alakananda Valley. His destination was Gopeshwar and his mission was to pay tribute to Chandi Prasad Bhatt, founder of the Chipko Movement. On the occasion of World Environment Day on June 5, in the first of a two-part article, he looks into the life of a pioneering environmentalist, a doer and a thinker, whose aim was to transform the relationship between people and nature.

TWENTY years ago this June, I began a secular pilgrimage deep into the Alakananda valley. My destination was Gopeshwar, a town that clings to a hill somewhat short of Badrinath, and the living deity I wished to pay tribute to was Chandi Prasad Bhatt, founder of the Chipko movement.

From Dehradun, where I lived, I took an early morning bus to Rishikesh and then another to Gopeshwar. The route was redolent with mythology and history, and the landscape diverse: pine forests on one hill, skilfully cut terraces on another, bare and exposed soil on a third. The bus stayed on the left bank of the Ganga until Devprayag, after which we crossed the now divided river to follow the Alakananda. Around noon we reached Srinagar, the ancient capital of Garhwal. This lay in a low valley and was hot and dusty and altogether unappealing (such decent buildings as it ever had disappeared in a flood, in 1894). I had lunch in a bazaar that was home to a million flies, and got back into the bus. Except that it wouldn't start. I go out once more. After a brief subterranean inspection, the driver gave his verdict: the radiator had burst, and the passengers had now better look out for themselves.

With three or four others I got into a white taxi. We passed a series of hamlets sited on the union of sundry lesser rivers with the mighty Alakananda. After one such sangam, at Sonprayag, we turned a corner and saw a shepherd boy approaching us, driving his flock. He wore a tightly buttoned up tunic and had a felt cap on his head. In his right hand was a stick to discipline his sheep. As we passed him he flung out his (previously unengaged) left hand at the taxi and yelled. "H. N. Bahuguna!"

I can still see, as I write this, the boy and his vivid gesture. But at this distance in time I should perhaps explain it. That summer, after decades of self-imposed exile the veteran politician

Hemavati Nandan Bahuguna had returned to his native Garhwal to fight a by-election against his former party, the Congress. He spoke, he said, for the victimised hill folk against the fat cats of the plains. One can't be sure he spoke for himself — Bahuguna was a notorious opportunist who had made his own career in the plains — but he certainly spoke for his constituents, as for instance that little shepherd. For in those pre-liberalisation days a private taxi represented almost the apex of the consumer society. Any one who sat in a taxi was certifiably from the plains. Had the bus not broken down, and had it passed the sheep and its tender, there would have been no hand flung accusingly at us, no invocation by name of a born-again-rebel-politician.

One hopes that the shepherd boy had also heard of Chandi Prasad Bhatt. Here was a man born in the hills who had chosen to stay: stay there, and serve. To him, Garhwal and Garhwalis were not an exploitable resource, to be turned to when one's political career was in the doldrums. Bhatt's life-work had been to make his people self-reliant: self-reliant economically, socially, ecologically. But the relevance of his work was by no means restricted to the Himalayas. The movement he started and the ideas it generated were to exercise a powerful appeal for the people of the Indian plains — indeed, for rural peoples everywhere.

Chandi Prasad Bhatt was born on June 23, 1934, in a family of priests who tended the temple of Rudranath, which nestles in a forest at 13,000 feet. Rudranath is part of the "Panch Kedar", the five Himalayan temples dedicated to Shiva, the most venerated of which is Kedarnath. As a boy, Chandi Prasad went up often to the family shrine, the journey also alerting him to the local traditions of folk ecology. When he walked through the bugiyal, or alpine pasture, he had to take off his shoes, so as not to harm the flowers. In one four kilometre stretch above the Amrit Ganga, there was a ban on spitting and coughing: on anything that might lead to the pollution of the river below. There were taboos on plucking plants before the festival of Nandasthmi, in September: after which the restraint was removed, so that the plucking of the now ripened flowers also released their seeds.

Once, on the walk to Rudranath, Chandi Prasad met a shepherd burning the flowers of the sacred and beautiful brahmakamal. He asked why he was doing this — it was the week of Nandasthmi — and the shepherd answered that he wouldn't have, normally, except that his stomach ached horribly and he knew that the extract of the flower would cure him. But, the offender quickly added, I broke off the plant with my mouth, like a sheep, so that the deity would think that it was nature's natural order, rather than the hand of man at work.

Alongside this informal education in ecology, Chandi Prasad also studied in schools in Rudraprayag and Pauri, but stopped short of taking a degree. To support his mother — his father had died when he was a baby — he taught art to children for a year before joining the Garhwal Motor Owners Union (GMOU) as a booking clerk. With the GMOU he was posted up and down the Alakananda, in large villages with names as lovely as Pipalkoti and Karnaprayag. His years selling bus tickets, he says, alerted him to the social diversity of India, for many of his customers were pilgrims, from different parts of the country, and practicing various trades and professions.

How did an obscure transport clerk become an influential social worker? In Bhatt's telling, the transformation started with his attending a public meeting in Badrinath in 1956. The star speaker here was the great Jayaprakash Narayan; another speaker, the local Sarvodaya leader Man Singh Rawat. The young man was deeply impressed by both. Now, he would seek out news of J.P. or Vinoba and their Sarvodaya movement. When the time came to take his annual holiday, he spent it with the Man Singh Rawat in the interior villages of Uttarakhand. Man Singh's own brother owned three buses of the GMOU. If this (by local standards) rich man can abjure his inheritance for Sarvodaya, thought Chandi Prasad, why not me?

Between 1956 and 1960, Chandi Prasad spent his leave learning about Sarvodaya from Man Singh and his wife Sashi Behn, who had been trained by the legendary Sarla Behn at the Laxmi Ashram in Kausani. There were educative treks with the Rawats and also one, in 1959, with Vinoba Bhave. China was now making menacing moves on the frontier. The other Asian giant's challenge, said J.P. was not merely military, but also ideological. A call for more volunteers was answered by Bhatt, who, in 1960, made his jeevan dan to the Sarvodaya movement. It was a considerable sacrifice for he was now married, and had a child.

With a few friends, Bhatt first ran a labour cooperative that helped repair houses and build roads, its members sharing the work and wages equally. Then, in 1964, was founded the Dashauli Swarajya Seva Sangh, which has justly been called the "mother organisation of the Chipko movement". That movement of course lay a decade in the future. Still, it is worth noticing that the foundation stone of the DGSS was laid by a woman — Sucheta Kripalani, Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh — while the land was donated by another woman, Shyama Devi.

My account of Bhatt's early years and initiation into Sarvodaya comes from an extended interview he recently granted me: the first time, I believe, that this reticent, and consistently

self-effacing, man has chosen to speak to an outsider about such things. With the founding of the DGSS, however, we enter the domain of the public man, the Bhatt rather than the Chandi Prasad. The DGSS's emphasis was on local employment generation: through the promotion of weaving, bee-keeping, herb collection, and cottage industries that would sustainably use forest produce. In 1968, J.P. and his wife Prabhavati visited Gopeshwar: seeing the work of Bhatt and his fellows, they said they were reminded of the spirit of sacrificial heroism that marked Gandhi's own movement.

The activities of the DGSS occasionally brought it into conflict with Government. The clashes were usually minor, and usually resolved, till in 1973 the Forest Department refused to allot it a batch of hornbeam trees from which to make agricultural implements. To their dismay, the same trees were than auctioned off to a sports goods company in distant Allahabad. The DGSS's feelings were echoed more strongly by the residents of Mandal, the village that lay adjacent to the disputed forest. At Bhatt's suggestion, the villagers threatened to hug the trees rather than allow the loggers in. As Chipko's first historian, Anupam Mishra, notes, the term originally used by Bhatt was the Garhwali "angalwaltha", or embrace, a word more resonant of local feelings than the Hindi word "chipko", i.e., to stick.

The protest at Mandal was followed by several such actions against commercial forestry in the villages of the Alakananda valley. One such protest, at Reni in the spring of 1974, was the work wholly of women, led by the remarkable Gaura Devi. Meanwhile, the other great Gandhian of Garhwal, Sunderlal Bahuguna, broke off a trek he was taking through Uttarakhand to be with and celebrate the protesters. What he saw was conveyed in articles he wrote in the respected nationalist weekly of Dehradun, Yugvani. Bahuguna hailed Chandi Prasad Bhatt as the "chief organiser" (mukhya sanchalak) of the Chipko Andolan. This, he added, was not an economic movement that would subside once its demands were met: on the contrary, its main aim was the fostering of love towards trees in the hearts of humans. For Chipko, observed Bahuguna, safeguarding the hill forests was but the first step towards transforming the relationship between humans and nature.

Chipko was born in the Alakananda valley; its midwives Bhatt and his co-workers in the DGSS. Later it moved eastwards, to Kumaun, where the protests against commercial forestry were co-ordinated by left-wing students of the Uttarakhand Sangharsh Vahini; as well as westwards, to the Bhagerathi valley, where the movement was led by Sunderlal Bahuguna and his associates. Within its original home the movement had entered its second phase: that of reconstruction.

Under Bhatt's leadership, the DGSS organised dozens of tree-plantation and protection programmes, motivating the women (especially) to revegetate the barren hillsides that surrounded them. Within a decade this work had begun to show results. A study by S. N. Prasad of the Indian Institute of Science showed that the survival rate of saplings in DGSS plantations was in excess of 70 per cent, whereas the figure for Forest Department plantations lay between 20 per cent and 50 per cent.

In the early 1980s, the DGSS became the DGSM, with "Mandal" replacing "Sangh". By any name it remains an exemplary organisation. Its work has been lovingly described in a booklet written by the journalist Ramesh Pahari and published in 1997 by the Peoples Science Institute in Dehradun. Pahari, who has known Bhatt for three decades, writes of his "simplicity and modesty, but (also his) firmness of ideas and decisions". He quotes a Dalit member of the DGSM committee, Murari Lal, to the effect that "Bhattji has fought bigger battles for removal of social inequities, than for environmental protection". It was in Murari Lal's village that the first tree-plantation programme was organised. This one-time construction worker has been an inseparable associate of Bhatt for 35 years. Their relationship is based on mutual respect, the only irritant being the Gandhian's objection to Murari Lal's love for tobacco.

Chandi Prasad Bhatt has little time for writing, but when he has put pen to paper his words convey both understanding and wisdom. Twenty years ago, in the journal Pahar, he wrote a soberly argued critique of large dams, later published in English under the title "The Future of Large Projects in the Himalaya" (Nainital, 1992). He has also written insightfully on forest conservation, urging a creative synthesis between the "practical knowledge" of peasants and the "latest scientific knowledge" of the State.

Chandi Prasad Bhatt is a great pioneering environmentalist, an actor and thinker of remarkable range and achievement who, by virtue of his own innate modesty and lack of command over English, remains much less known and honoured than is his due. He has no trumpet, nor any trumpeters. One really has to go to Garhwal to know the measure of his work, and that of his colleagues. To me, these words of Ramesh Pahari seem almost exactly right: "a variety of issues being discussed all over the world today — the advancement of women and dalit groups and their participation in decision-making, ecology, environment, traditional rights of people, the indigenous knowledge of people, basing development processes on successful experiences and self-reliant economics — have first been worked on by DGSM 30-odd years ago; and without any fanfare". I think one can repeat that last clause: without any fanfare.