

## The story of the Chipko movement

Have you ever heard of “tree-huggers”? This is the name people sometimes call those whose love of nature seems over-exaggerated. Such environmentalists or nature-lovers supposedly go around and hug trees. There is a reason for this nickname, however. Tree-hugging began in the 1970s in India, with a movement called “Chipko”, whose members actually hugged trees.

Why would anyone do that?



The inspiration came from an 18th century legend about a woman called Amrita Devi. In 1730, the Maharaja (king) of Jodhpur wanted to build a new palace. He sent soldiers to cut down Khejri trees in a nearby village. When Amrita Devi saw that their trees would be felled down, she hugged one of the trees to stop the men with axes. First her family, and then other villagers, joined her when they heard what was going on. They told the Maharaja’s soldiers it was an insult to their faith to cut down green trees. They were prepared to die so that trees would be saved. The soldiers laughed at this, and killed both Amrita Devi and over 350 other people who had joined her. When the Maharaja heard about it, he stopped the massacre and ordered that no trees could ever again be cut in that part of his kingdom.

Almost 250 years later, large forests in the Himalayas were threatened. Industries wanted to cut them down, but local people remembered the legend of Amrita Devi and decided to stop deforestation. They knew that without those forests, there would be no food, no source of heating for their homes, and no protection from floods when heavy rains come in the winter. Most of the activists were women, who stayed at home looking after children and the village while their husbands worked.



They came up with the slogan “What do the forests bear? Soil, water and pure air.” Then they stood around trees, holding their hands, so that the machinery and axes could not come near the forest. Despite their strong beliefs, they were never violent in their protests. Some of the people fasted (did not eat) for months to get the attention of the media. Others walked for thousands of kilometers, to tell their story to other communities in the Himalayas, who then joined them and helped save many more forests.

The Chipko movement in the Himalayas saved thousands of trees and influenced the natural resource policy in India. In 1987, the Chipko Movement received the Right Livelihood Award (the “alternative Nobel”), for “dedication to the conservation, restoration, and ecologically responsible use of India’s natural resources.” It turned out to be one of the many successful attempts to stop the destruction of nature.

**True or false?**

- 1) The Chipko Movement began in the 18th century.
- 2) A Maharaja who wanted a palace ordered the killing of the people in Jodhpur.
- 3) In the 20th century, Amrita Devi stopped the industries that wanted to chop down trees.
- 4) Most members of the Chipko Movement were women.
- 5) Protesters who hugged trees did not use any form of violence.
- 6) Only one Himalayan village accepted the Chipko Movement.
- 7) Trees were important to people because they supported their livelihood in many ways.
- 8) The importance of Chipko Movement was recognized.

**Research:**

Chipko is just one among many indigenous movements started by women, which are aimed at preserving nature. Find out more about one of the similar stories such as:

- 1) Indigenous Women's Network and its founder, Native American activist Winona LaDuke (Anishinabe)
- 2) Friends of the Earth, a Hong Kong based organization, and its former director Mei Ng
- 3) Wangari Maathai, the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize, and her Green Belt
- 4) Jane Goodall and the Institute for Wildlife Research, Education, and Conservation