

COMMENT

## BACK TO BASICS

Chipko lives on—thriving and pulsating, challenging and sustaining. The men and women who once hugged trees to save them from commercial felling, continue their struggle to save nature and its children, local diversity and culture.

*“What do forests bear:*

*water, soil and air;*

*these are the basis for life”*

The slogan, that reverberated in the valleys of Garhwal Himalayas for the world to take notice in the 1970s, is still echoing 30 years on, in the Hewalghati valley of Tehri Garhwal. This time in the form of the *Beej Bachao Andolan* (Save the Seeds Movement).

After the so-called success of the green revolution, High Yielding Variety (HYV) seeds were being introduced all over the country and cash-crop driven agriculture was destroying traditional farming.

Crop yields of the HYV started becoming less in Garhwal, while soil fertility was declining and dependence on toxic chemicals was increasing. The ecosystem was also severely damaged. As a result, Chipko activist and a local farmer, Vijay Jardhari, and other activists from Jardhargaon and nearby areas of Tehri Garhwal, formed the *Beej Bachao Abhiyan*, later re-named as *Beej Bachao Andolan* (BBA), to revive traditional farming methods and rejuvenate agriculture diversity. The aim was to create awareness about ‘modern but destructive’ agricultural practices, search and conserve indigenous seeds and promote traditional and sustainable farming.

In the beginning, like others, former Chipko activists from Hewalghati also used high yielding seeds in the eighties. Having reaped bumper crops in the beginning, they soon realised that productivity was declining and more and more chemicals and fertilisers were needed to sustain the yield.

The shocking realisation was followed by long arduous treks or food marches to distant villages to look for local, traditional, and diverse seeds. To the far-flung Garhwal areas where HYV seeds were yet to reach, the activists collected different kinds of seeds. They also asked people to conserve rare seeds. These *yatras* also became occasions for cultural re-assertion, reciting folk stories, re-thinking oral traditions, poems, songs and reviving collective wisdom.

Now BBA, a non-formal collective of farmers and activists, is spread all over Uttaranchal.

The movement has also promoted the use of traditional farming method called ‘baranaja’ whereby 12 crops are grown simultaneously in the same field. This unique method provides a security against drought and crop failure. The practice ensures supply of food round the year as different crops are harvested at different times.

A humble initiative like BBA, which is not a part of the multi-billion dollar NGO industry, has proved that even without funds and resources, those on the fringes of society can take on the onslaught of globalisation. □□□