

Women of Uttarakhand, I did not know your names

For years. No, decades. The child I was came across just the word
Chipko. To hug. No, something more. Say: to cling. To cleave to. Yes. Yes,
cleave. Like flesh to skin. Like, say, bark to sapwood. Like root to earth, warm,
wet, rich. *Chipko Andolan. Andolan*. Andolan, child-me would later learn, means crusade,
revolution. Then, it rang as distant drumbeat in my ears, surging, surging in two
tongues: *dol, dolan, dolanam*. Those words. And, once in a sudden while, a spurt of
brown-grey, dark, figures on friable celluloid: a legion of eyes and arms jumpstarting
newsreels in ramshackle military cinema halls, the only ones Achan and Amma trusted. That
was how I knew you were heroes, soldiers, never mind the lack of rank, station, armament: the
just-as-wrinkly voice of those newsreels hailed you thus, even as it lauded the leaders, all men
(Chandi Prasad Bhatt, Sundarlal Bahuguna...) – brave men, good men, yet (*let us say this*
with no rancour) inevitably men – alone by name. The same voice sputtered more facts & several
figures, a few of which were retrievable from crevices of far-flung, older – other – memories:
a border/ a war: short, vicious/ hamlets in the Himalayas\new mantras: development & security\
then, early 1970s/ industrial logging, state-sanctioned\ monsoon floods\landslides\death\
death/ death/ twice three-digit deaths/ April, 1973\ the first protests\ Mandal in Alaknanda
Valley/ then, 1974/and the village of Reni/where 2000-odd trees stood marked for massacre\
the men lured away to nearby Chamoli/ with the age-old, unfailing mantra *compensation, swaha*\
the contractor from big-town Rishikesh moving in with his brigade of saws and axes\
The lore/ the little girl who sighted them storming the slopes \ her race to inform you\
women/ women rushing/ women rising as tree-warriors\ This much, the voice said.
Amma, yes, scrubbed the story clearer. Think: in my head your spines
arched into swords, sole weapons you would ever have or wield
against axes and sticks and spit of loggers, the threat of bullets
and bulldozers from contractors' goons. Think: necks forged
into hilts, arms and breasts orbiting tree trunks, living armour
held between bark and blade. (I did not know their names,
of those evergreens leaning skywards, bosky hands: neither
clenched fists nor outspread palms but something some-
where in between, something scrubbing the skies clean of
lies, reclaiming the life that is theirs.) Think: your bodies
between the forest you called Mother, and erasure. Beings
belting an unrehearsed anthem, Amma said, *Our Bodies Before Our Trees*.
Your child Chipko and I, Amma said, born mere months apart: *skelf that*
snagged in a ventricle of infant memory, making the crusade seem *what?*
a peer? Today, they write, the words Chipko Andolan rise, firm and *high, firm*
and high as those famous peaks in the Himalayas you also deemed kin. *The two words*
that prompted a prime minister – more volcano than mountain – to ban for *fifteen years* the
commercial logging of trees in your land. But, they cannot *agree, those that write, were you*
twenty-one or twenty-seven or forty, women and children of Reni? I find some names, here and
there. Bati Devi. Mahadevi. Bhusi Devi. Nratya Devi. Rukka Devi. Lilamati. Uma Devi. Harki
Devi. Baali Devi. Pasa Devi. Roopsa Devi. Tiladi Devi. Indra Devi. And Gaura Devi, head of
the Mahila Mangal Dal – council of distaff deities – of Reni, village she had chosen as home
and stayed hearth till her last breath. Gaura Devi, who had blazed the war-cry that day and
led the women and children into andolan. Neither Google, for all its Doodles, nor essays &
other newsreels would tell me more. But, those missing names, I hear, do stand inscribed
on a gate, marble-covered, greeting strangers to Reni. Those still in the village say there
is little left, after the avalanche from a glacier collapse in Chamoli further up, neither
youth nor hope, not dam nor development, not much beside debris and the gateway.