

Ecological Nonviolent Resistance from Khejarli to Climate Justice

Today, as we gather to remember Mahatma Gandhi on his birthday, I would like to begin not with Gandhi himself, but with a tree.

A tree in the village of Khejarli, in Rajasthan.

In 1730, almost two centuries before the birth of Gandhi, a woman named **Amrita Devi** stood in front of a tree that soldiers had come to cut down.

She and other members of the Bishnoi community resisted the felling of the trees.

According to historical accounts preserved by the Indian government and Rajasthan sources, the confrontation resulted in the deaths of hundreds of Bishnoi villagers. The episode has become known as the Khejarli sacrifice and is remembered as an important part of India's environmental history.

Why begin with this story on Gandhi's birthday?

Because it reminds us of something important:

The history of ecological resistance is older than modern environmentalism—and it is older than Gandhi.

Gandhi did not invent the idea that human beings have a moral responsibility toward the natural world.

What Gandhi did was to develop an extraordinarily influential philosophy of **truth, nonviolence, self-discipline, and resistance to injustice.**

And in the decades after his death, those principles became intertwined with ecological struggles in India and elsewhere.

So today I want to explore a simple question:

What can the history of ecological nonviolent resistance teach us about Satyagraha—and what can Satyagraha teach us about the climate crisis of the twenty-first century?

1. Khejarli: When Protecting Nature Became an Act of Resistance

Let us return to Khejarli.

The Bishnoi community had developed a distinctive ethical relationship with the natural world.

Their religious and cultural traditions placed strong emphasis on protecting living beings and trees.

In 1730, soldiers associated with the ruler of Jodhpur came to the village to cut Khejri trees.

Amrita Devi resisted.

According to accounts preserved by the Government of India, she and other Bishnoi villagers gave their lives while attempting to prevent the trees from being felled. The commonly cited figure is **363 people**.

There is something extraordinary about this story.

The protesters did not possess modern environmental legislation.

They did not have international organizations.

They did not have social media.

They did not have climate science.

They had something else:

a moral relationship with nature.

The tree was not simply timber.

It was part of a living community.

And therefore, protecting the tree became an ethical obligation.

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This is an important starting point for thinking about ecological Satyagraha.

Before we ask:

"How do we stop climate change?"

we might ask a more fundamental question:

"What kind of relationship do we believe human beings should have with the natural world?"

If nature is regarded merely as a collection of resources, then forests become timber, rivers become water supplies, and land becomes property.

But if nature is regarded as something to which we have ethical obligations, then environmental destruction becomes more than an economic transaction.

It becomes a moral question.

2. From Khejarli to Chipko

More than two centuries later, another group of people in India would place their bodies between trees and axes.

This time, in the Himalayan region.

The movement became known as **Chipko**.

The Hindi word *chipko* means approximately "to cling" or "to embrace."

The movement developed in the early 1970s in what is now Uttarakhand.

Local communities were increasingly concerned about commercial logging and the degradation of forests on which their livelihoods depended.

The early Chipko actions included villagers physically preventing trees from being felled. The movement's organizers drew on traditions of nonviolence associated with Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave.

Then came one of the most famous episodes.

In 1974, in the village of Reni, **Gaura Devi** and a group of women confronted men who had come to cut trees.

The women placed themselves between the trees and the axes.

They embraced the trees.

They refused to move.

And their action became one of the defining images of environmental resistance in the twentieth century.

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Think about the simplicity of the tactic.

There was no weapon.

There was no sophisticated technology.

There was simply the human body.

A woman standing between a tree and an axe.

That physical act communicated an extraordinarily complicated argument:

This forest is not merely your commercial resource.

This forest is our livelihood.

This forest protects our water and soil.

This forest belongs within a living community.

And perhaps most importantly:

You cannot destroy what sustains us without confronting us.

3. The Women of Chipko

Chipko also forces us to rethink who is an environmental activist.

The movement became particularly associated with women.

This was not accidental.

Women in Himalayan villages were often deeply dependent upon forests for fuel, fodder, water, food, and other necessities.

When forests degraded, the consequences were not abstract.

Women had to walk farther for firewood.

Water became harder to obtain.

Soil erosion and landslides affected agricultural livelihoods.

Floods could destroy homes and fields.

The Food and Agriculture Organization's historical account of Chipko describes how the movement grew from concerns about local livelihoods, forest policy, employment, erosion, floods, and community rights. It also documents the increasingly important role of women in the movement.

This gives us another important lesson.

Environmental injustice is often experienced first as a social injustice.

For someone living in a city, the disappearance of a forest may appear as a distant environmental problem.

For a woman whose daily life depends upon that forest, it is an immediate question of survival.

This is why climate justice today must pay attention to the lived experiences of communities.

Climate change is measured in degrees Celsius.

But vulnerability is experienced in:

- lost homes,
- failed harvests,
- disappearing water,
- declining livelihoods,
- rising food costs,

- displacement,
- and sometimes the loss of entire ways of life.

Chipko teaches us to connect the ecological with the social.

4. Was Chipko Satyagraha?

Here we need to be historically careful.

It would be too easy to say:

"Chipko was simply Gandhi's Satyagraha applied to trees."

The history is more complicated.

Chipko contained several strands and influences.

Chandi Prasad Bhatt and his colleagues developed a community-oriented approach to forests and rural livelihoods.

Sunderlal Bahuguna explicitly drew upon Gandhian ideas of nonviolence and Satyagraha.

Women developed their own forms of ecological resistance.

And different participants had different understandings of development, forests, livelihoods, and justice.

Scholars therefore describe Chipko as a complex movement rather than a single, uniform ideology.

But there is nevertheless a profound Gandhian connection.

The protesters did not attempt to destroy the loggers.

They did not respond to the axe with another weapon.

They used **their own bodies as instruments of resistance**.

This is very close to the ethical logic of Satyagraha:

I will resist you, but I will not become violent toward you.

The tree becomes the centre of the conflict.

And the body becomes the shield.

5. From Forests to Rivers: Narmada

The story does not end with trees.

In the 1980s and 1990s, another major environmental movement emerged around the **Narmada River** and the construction of large dams.

The **Narmada Bachao Andolan**, or Save the Narmada Movement, brought together concerns about the river, forests, land, displacement, livelihoods, and the rights of communities affected by large development projects.

Its central question was not simply:

"Should we build a dam?"

It was:

"What does development mean, and who pays its price?"

This is a crucial transition.

Environmental movements were increasingly asking whether economic development could legitimately destroy the homes and livelihoods of communities in the name of benefits that would be distributed elsewhere.

The movement became one of the best-known environmental struggles in modern India and used a variety of nonviolent forms of mobilization. Scholars have examined it specifically in relation to environmental justice, human rights, displacement, and nonviolent action.

The slogan associated with the movement—

"Narmada Bachao, Manav Bachao"

—"Save the Narmada, Save Humanity"—

captures an important philosophical point.

Protecting the environment is not necessarily about putting nature against human beings.

It can be about recognizing that **human well-being depends upon ecological systems**.

The river and the people are not separate.

6. From India to Kenya: Wangari Maathai

Now let us leave India.

Because ecological nonviolent resistance is not an exclusively Indian story.

In Kenya, **Wangari Maathai** founded the Green Belt Movement in 1977.

Its origins were remarkably practical.

Rural women reported that streams were drying up, food security was declining, and they had to travel farther to obtain firewood.

Maathai responded by encouraging communities to plant trees.

What began as environmental restoration developed into a much broader movement connecting **environmental protection, women's empowerment, democratic participation, human rights, and peace.**

This is important.

The Green Belt Movement did not treat environmental degradation as an isolated technical problem.

Maathai understood that environmental degradation could be connected to poverty, disempowerment, political exclusion, and the loss of community control over natural resources.

The movement therefore combined practical ecological work with civic education and political advocacy.

In 2004, Maathai received the Nobel Peace Prize.

The Nobel Committee recognized her contribution to sustainable development, democracy, and peace, emphasizing the connection between environmental protection and broader questions of human rights and social justice.

Maathai herself explained that the work was not simply about planting trees.

It was about enabling people to take responsibility for their environment, their communities, their political systems, and their future.

This is very close to one of the deepest insights we can draw from Satyagraha:

Resistance is not only about saying no.

It is also about creating the conditions for people to say **yes** to another way of living.

7. Three Different Forms of Ecological Resistance

If we place these historical examples next to one another, something interesting appears.

Khejarli.

Chipko.

Narmada.

The Green Belt Movement.

They are not identical.

They emerge from different cultures, histories, religions, political circumstances, and ecological problems.

But they share certain characteristics.

First: ecological resistance is often rooted in livelihood.

The forest is not an abstract "environment."

It is food.

Water.

Fuel.

Shelter.

Employment.

Culture.

Identity.

Second: ecological resistance is often local.

Large environmental problems are frequently experienced first at the level of a village, a river, a forest, a farm, or a household.

Third: ecological resistance can become political.

A struggle that begins with a tree can become a question about government policy.

A struggle over a river can become a debate about development.

A struggle over firewood can become a struggle over democracy.

And fourth:

ecological resistance can become a struggle for dignity.

8. What Makes These Movements Nonviolent?

We should also be precise about the meaning of "nonviolent."

Nonviolent resistance does not mean that there is no conflict.

There is often intense conflict.

There may be arrests.

There may be threats.

There may be hunger strikes.

There may be civil disobedience.

There may be confrontation with authorities.

Nonviolence means that the movement deliberately seeks to avoid physically harming opponents.

This is why the body becomes so important.

The body can become a form of political communication.

The woman standing before the tree says:

"I am willing to put myself at risk to prevent this destruction."

The hunger striker says:

"I will use my own body rather than violence against yours."

The community that refuses to leave its land says:

"You cannot make us invisible."

This is where ecological resistance meets Satyagraha.

The power does not come from possessing greater physical force.

It comes from **moral courage, collective organization, public visibility, and the willingness to accept consequences.**

9. What Can the Past Teach the Climate Movement?

Now we arrive at the twenty-first century.

The climate crisis is different from the environmental struggles of the past.

The scale is planetary.

Greenhouse gases circulate through a global atmosphere.

Energy systems cross borders.

Supply chains cross continents.

Climate impacts accumulate across generations.

And yet the historical movements we have considered provide important lessons.

The first is:

Start with lived experience.

Climate change is often presented through graphs and models.

Those are indispensable.

But movements become meaningful when climate change is connected to people's actual lives.

Water.

Food.

Land.

Health.

Housing.

Work.

Dignity.

The second lesson is:

Connect ecological and social justice.

The people most affected by environmental degradation are not always those who have contributed most to it.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has repeatedly emphasized the importance of inequality, vulnerability, participation, and equity in understanding climate impacts and responding to them.

The third lesson is:

Nonviolence does not mean political passivity.

Khejarli was resistance.

Chipko was resistance.

Narmada was resistance.

The Green Belt Movement was resistance.

But resistance took different forms.

Sometimes it meant physically protecting a tree.

Sometimes organizing communities.

Sometimes refusing to accept a development project as inevitable.

Sometimes planting millions of trees.

10. From the Tree to the Planet

There is something symbolically powerful about the history we have traced.

It begins with a tree.

Then another tree.

Then a forest.

Then a river.

Then an entire landscape.

And eventually we arrive at the planet.

[PAUSE]

Perhaps this is how ecological consciousness develops.

We begin by protecting something that is close to us.

A tree.

A river.

A field.

A community.

And then we begin to understand that these things are connected.

The forest is connected to the river.

The river is connected to agriculture.

Agriculture is connected to food.

Food is connected to livelihoods.

Livelihoods are connected to dignity.

And all of them are connected to the climate system.

The climate crisis makes these connections impossible to ignore.

11. What Would Ecological Satyagraha Mean Today?

So let us return to Gandhi.

What would Satyagraha mean if we applied its principles to ecological crisis today?

Perhaps it would begin with **truth**.

We must be willing to acknowledge the scientific reality of climate change and the unequal distribution of its impacts.

It would involve **nonviolence**.

We must resist environmental destruction without turning political opponents into objects of hatred.

It would require **self-discipline**.

A sustainable society cannot be built entirely on unlimited consumption.

It would require **solidarity**.

Those most vulnerable to climate change cannot be left to carry the burden alone.

And it would require **courage**.

Because transforming systems that generate wealth and power is never easy.

But there is one more lesson from the historical movements.

Ecological resistance must also be constructive.

The Bishnoi protected.

Chipko protected.

Narmada defended communities and river systems.

Wangari Maathai planted.

They did not only say:

"No."

They also expressed a vision of what should be protected and what kind of future should be possible.

12. A Critical Lesson

But we should not romanticize these histories.

Not every environmental movement succeeded completely.

Not every demand was accepted.

Not every form of protest produced the intended result.

And communities themselves can have different interests.

Conservation can sometimes conflict with livelihoods.

Development can bring genuine benefits as well as genuine costs.

Renewable-energy projects can have environmental and social consequences of their own.

Therefore, ecological Satyagraha cannot mean assuming that one side always possesses the whole truth.

It must involve **listening**.

It must involve democratic participation.

It must recognize uncertainty and competing interests.

And it must continually ask:

Who is included?

Who is excluded?

Who decides?

This is particularly important in the twenty-first century, because climate action itself will reshape economies and societies.

A just transition cannot simply replace one form of inequality with another.

Conclusion: From Khejarli to Climate Justice

Let me return to where we began.

A woman named Amrita Devi stands before a tree in Khejarli in 1730.

More than two hundred years later, Gaura Devi and other women in the Himalayas stand before trees.

Then communities stand with the Narmada.

Then women in Kenya plant trees and organize their communities.

Different places.

Different histories.

Different cultures.

Different struggles.

But a common question emerges:

What are we willing to defend?

And perhaps an even deeper question:

How are we willing to defend it?

That is where these histories meet Gandhi.

Not because every ecological movement was Gandhian.

It was not.

The Bishnoi tradition existed long before Gandhi.

Chipko had multiple intellectual and social roots.

The Narmada movement had its own complex history.

Wangari Maathai developed a distinct African vision of environmental democracy and empowerment.

But across these movements we can see something that resonates strongly with Satyagraha:

the refusal to accept destruction as inevitable.

The refusal to believe that power must always determine what is right.

The belief that ordinary people can become agents of historical change.

And the conviction that resistance does not necessarily require violence.

[LONG PAUSE]

Today, the climate crisis asks us to expand this history.

The tree has become the forest.

The forest has become the river basin.

The river basin has become the ecosystem.

And the ecosystem has become the planet.

The scale has changed.

But perhaps the fundamental moral question has not.

Can we protect what sustains life without destroying one another in the process?

That is the challenge of ecological resistance.

That is the challenge of climate justice.

And, in a very contemporary sense, that may also be the challenge of Satyagraha in the twenty-first century.

On Gandhi's birthday, perhaps we should therefore remember not only the man who taught the world about nonviolent resistance.

Let us also remember the people who stood before trees, defended rivers, planted forests, protected their communities, and refused to accept that economic or political power gave anyone the right to destroy what others needed to live.

Their histories remind us that ecological justice does not begin with a global conference.

Sometimes it begins with one person standing beside one tree and saying:

This cannot be destroyed without resistance.

- **Khejarli / Bishnoi, Rajasthan, 1730** — a pre-Gandhian example of community-based ecological ethics and resistance. Indian government sources record the deaths of 363 Bishnoi people in the confrontation associated with Amrita Devi and the protection of Khejri trees.
- **Chipko, Himalayas, 1970s** — women such as Gaura Devi became central figures in physically protecting forests.
- **Narmada Bachao Andolan, 1980s onward** — useful for moving from forest protection to questions of rivers, displacement, development, and environmental justice.
- **Green Belt Movement, Kenya, 1977 onward** — Wangari Maathai connected ecological restoration with women's empowerment, democracy, human rights, and peace. She received the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize.
- **Appiko, Western Ghats, 1983** — a later Indian forest movement inspired by Chipko and using nonviolent direct action against forest exploitation.

Let us **call Khejarli a remarkable early example of community-based ecological resistance and environmental ethics.** Let us describe Chipko as a **movement with a significant Gandhian/Satyagraha strand.**
