



A Conversation with Chandi Prasad Bhatt

Author(s): Pushpesh Pant and Chandi Prasad Bhatt

Source: *India International Centre Quarterly*, AUTUMN 2011, Vol. 38, No. 2 (AUTUMN 2011), pp. 108-121

Published by: India International Centre

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41804006>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

India International Centre is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *India International Centre Quarterly*

A Conversation with Chandi Prasad Bhatt

Pushpesh Pant: *Let us begin with your childhood. Who inspired you to take up the struggle against injustice and fight for the right of the people? What were the formative influences – individuals and ideas – that shaped you?*

Chandi Prasad Bhatt: My father passed away when I was just one year old. He left behind my mother and an elder sister (who was a child widow) besides me. All of us had to suffer great deprivations and pain. Mother taught me that it is important to preserve one's self-respect even in abject poverty.

When I was admitted to the primary school, the fee was just two paise. Yet, at times, even this was difficult for my mother to arrange. I studied up to the third class in this primary school. Then a Sanskrit *Pathsaala* was started in our village where students were charged no fees. I was enrolled there. My teachers in the primary school were very fond of me. They did not like this. However, I continued in the Sanskrit *Paathsaala* and passed the *Prathama* examination after failing once or twice.

By **Pushpesh Pant**

Then a high school was started in our village. There was a teacher there whose son studied with me. He was also our *jajman* (I was born in a *Saraula* Brahmin family who are considered very high class in the hills and enjoyed in the past the exclusive right to cook for the royal family of Garhwal).

Soon after I shifted to this school, I faced an embarrassing problem. I had painstakingly collected one *anna* coins to pay my fees. The teacher who was collecting the fees rebuked me and said, 'I don't accept small change.' In tears, I took the change to a shopkeeper and exchanged the coins for a currency note. Unfortunately, this note was dirty and grimy and the teacher declined to accept it. I did not know what to do. I was walking around, bewildered, when the village postmaster saw me and asked what the problem was. By that time the post-bag had arrived so the postmaster opened it and gave me a crisp new note in exchange of my coins. Later, a kind teacher ensured that I be granted half-fee concession.

I appeared for my high school examination and passed. However, even though I was very keen to continue my studies I had no resources to do so. I filled up the forms for the twelfth

class but could not appear in the board examination as I could not afford to purchase the books. I knew very little English at that time. I could just write my own name and Gopeshwar but the funny thing is when I finally appeared for the twelfth, I passed in English but failed in Sanskrit! The teacher who was invigilating in the examination hall had told us that we could use books if needed. He would warn us if an external invigilator was sighted by getting up from his seat. However, I was repulsed by this idea. I thought I was a very good student of Sanskrit. Other students could not benefit either for they kept opening and hiding the books as our teacher kept getting up and going out to visit the toilet or to have a cup of tea. Everyone was confused and disturbed!

All this while, I also used to work with my mother at home and in the fields or cut grass, fetch water and get the grains ground at the *gharat*. I lived my life like any other young boy in my village sharing all the hardships of life in the hill villages more than six decades back. Yet, somehow, I managed to complete my education.

PP: *Long before a youngster in the hills finishes school he is confronted by the problem of earning his bread.*

In many cases he is the sole breadwinner in the family. You have told us your family was facing many hardships, so what had you thought about your future?

CPB: I started my career with the GMOU (Garhwal Motor Owners' Union) in 1955. This was my first job. Nowadays there are many private operators in the transport business but at that time there was just one company that provided this service – the GMOU in Garhwal or the KMOU in Kumaon. The *yatra* season in the summers used to be a period of great rush, hustle and bustle. I worked very hard and soon became quite popular. This was due to the fact that I worked strictly according to rules and didn't favour anyone. Even before the ticket window opened, long lines used to form as there was a shortage of buses plying on these routes. Often, people with 'approach' secured tickets and preferred seats through their contacts. I followed the priority of the queue. First come first served. No one, however high and mighty, could short-circuit this system. People appreciated this. I recall once there was an SDM and at another time an eminent lawyer whom I turned down and sent back to the last place in

the queue. Long after I left the GMOU, people asked where had the new lad gone?

It was around this time that the headmaster in the Gopeshwar High School invited me to join as a teacher for the seventh-class students. This is how I became a teacher! The school was run on contributions from the local people. Salaries were meagre and we were paid Rs. 50 or Rs. 60 per month from the fees collection. Even those who were qualified and trained received a salary of just Rs. 120 per month. After a year there was an inspection by the DIOS (District Inspector of Schools). The inspector came to my class and sat silently in the last row. I stopped teaching immediately. I knew I wasn't properly trained and not entitled to teach. I couldn't be made permanent. I gave up this job and rejoined the GMOU.

I had many interesting experiences during my employment there. I often encountered interesting persons – such as the famous Hindi writer Jainendra Kumar who was touring the hills, or Gandhian or socialist activists. In 1956, Jai Prakash Narayan made a visit to Badrinath. The year before this, Birlaji (G.D. Birla) had made this pilgrimage. He had used a helicopter but Jai

Prakash Narayan was undertaking the journey on foot. His *sarvodaya* movement was at its peak then and he ruled the hearts of the young. It was but natural that I was full of excitement and curiosity about his trip and very eager to meet him. Some respectable persons in Peepalkoti made plans for a civic reception. Among them were a prosperous businessman, Sahji, and Man Singh Rawatji. The Rawats were dedicated *sarvodaya* workers. Man Singh Rawat belonged to an affluent and illustrious family in our area and his family owned many buses in GMOU. He was very highly educated. He had acquired an MSW (Master of Social Work) degree from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in those early days and had resigned his government job as assistant labour officer to join the *sarvodaya* movement. People respected him greatly for his idealism and sacrifice. His wife had been trained at Sarala Behn's ashram at Kausani. I was, no doubt, influenced by Jai Prakashji but to tell the truth I was primarily drawn towards *sarvodaya* by the example of the Rawats. The speeches he delivered on this occasion (while preparations were on to welcome J.P.) moved me. He spoke from the heart about the

basic tenets of *sarvodaya* – how everyone had the same rights – to enjoy unfettered the sunlight, fresh air and unpolluted water; how the land and the forests belonged not to any individual but to the entire community. When donations were raised I stepped forward and gave all I had in my pocket – some Rs. 25 or Rs. 30. Mansinghji accepted my contribution made before the public but later returned most of it stating that I had family responsibilities and couldn't neglect or overlook these. He kept just Rs. 10 rupees, as far as I remember.

Torrential rains hit the hills in October 1956 at the time of J.P.'s trip to Badrinath. I was assigned the task of carrying his mail. I came in closer contact with Man Singhji during this period and became quite intimate with him.

Next year, I took leave without pay for six months to travel and try to understand society better. I reached Garur via Ghat and Tharali. There I met Diwan Singhji, a respected worker of the Praja Socialist Party, whose brother's daughter was married to Man Singhji. I spent some time at Sarala Behn's ashram and ended up in Kotdwar. I also visited Moradabad and saw a train for the first time. Slowly, my political consciousness was

aroused. Later, we toured almost sixty villages in the hills. I was accompanied by friends like Bishtji who was not highly educated but a very energetic social worker. He was the one who attracted us towards *sarvodaya*.

The managers at GMOU were upset by my activities but I wasn't deterred. I met Kapil bhaiya, a *sarvodaya* worker in Peepalkoti in the course of my work and told him that I wanted to join Vinoba's *yatra* that was then under way in Jammu and Kashmir. I am talking of 1958. The region had suffered greatly due to floods. Vinobaji allowed me to join his march for 15 days. Others in his group included, among other veterans, Nirmala Deshpande and Dada Dharmadhikari. I went to Kathua and Samba. The march used to begin before the crack of dawn – at 2:30 or 3:00 am with a lantern holder leading us through the darkness. This was an exhilarating experience for me. It was during this trip that I decided to live the rest of my life as a *sarvodaya* worker. I resolved that I shall not serve any one but the people, just like Man Singhji and others like him whom I had met during this march.

I had got married by this time. The greatest problem was to break this news to my mother.

I didn't wish to hurt her at all, so I tried different arguments. I asked her what she would have done had I died accidentally or renounced the world to become a *jogi*. I talked similarly to my wife. It wasn't easy but, in the end, both relented. They realized that I would not be happy otherwise. And I gave up my job in 1960.

I felt that I must leave Gopeshwar for some time, otherwise people would talk about me as they used to do about Man Singhji. How he had lost his mental balance and joined *sarvodaya*. I spent the next six months at Rajghat in Benaras. This was like an informal school where Dada Dharmadhikari and others took classes. Nirmala Deshpande talked to us about the Upanishads like the *Ishavasyaopnishad* and Vimala Thakkar provided a stimulating commentary on international developments. This was a time of enlightenment for me. Narayan Desai organized a *chhatra-sena*. He assigned us the task of mapping the tension spots in the city. The area near the Vishwanath temple, for instance, was notorious for communal tension that burst out in periodic violence. There were other areas in the city's congested streets. I learned a lot during my short stay at Rajghat.

: Pushpesh Pant

When I returned home after six months I was amused by the rumours that were rife about me. Some said I had indeed become a *jogi* while others maintained that I had surely married again. My mother and wife were understandably hurt by all this and suffered silently. My homecoming gave them much joy but it was some time before they could be reassured and got rid of all apprehensions! At first, they remained cold. Relatives were bristling with curiosity and wanted to find out the 'truth' behind my absence; however, they couldn't muster courage to ask me straight questions. As far as I was concerned, my conscience was clear and I went about my daily routine without bothering about any of this. There were other changes – my eldest son, Bhuwan, was born and the motor road reached Chamoli.

PP: *By this time, when you appear to have reached a turning point in your life, the nation too was poised at a critical juncture. Relations between India and China had touched an unprecedented low and a short war was fought between the two in 1962. This rendered the entire Himalayan region extremely sensitive. Strategic considerations pushed everything back and patriotic fervour rallied round the gov-*

ernment. Large-scale construction began in the newly formed border districts in our hills. How did all this impinge on what you were doing?

CPB: It is true that 1962 changed life in many ways. New districts were carved out and construction work was unleashed on a war footing without any thought about the adverse impact it could have on a fragile environment, but much before all this we had started organizing people agitated by livelihood issues.

A labour cooperative – inspired and organized by the ideals of *sarvodaya* – had started functioning. All members were treated alike. They worked and ate together and no barriers of caste or literacy were recognized. Our work often led to situations of confrontation with the PWD and contractors. We also organized a number of programmes to make people aware of social ills, such as Untouchability.

Yes, it is true, that we were viewed with suspicion at times due to our association with Sarala Behn who was a foreigner. However, this ill-informed distrust was a passing phase. At that time there was an apex body of NGOs at the national level called Border Area Development Coordination Committee that was later converted into

Himalaya Seva Sangh and eminent public men like the Gandhian U.N. Dhebhar and Jai Prakash Narayan were associated with it. *Adim Jati Seva Sangh* was also an associate. Due to all this support, the government didn't obstruct our voluntary social work. When Nirmalaji dramatically reached Bomdila during the days of crisis, she endeared herself to Smt. Indira Gandhi. This was, I think, the beginning of their friendship. She was, after all, a *sarvodaya* worker and she was with us. This was a great help.

I was the coordinator for *sarvodaya* in Uttarakhand Circle. Along with other workers, I visited the homes of soldiers who had made the supreme sacrifice in this war. Sixteen soldiers had lost their lives in our region and many more were missing in action. The cries of the widows and bereaved parents still echo in my ears. There wasn't much we could do but to hold their hands for a brief while.

By 1967-68, our cooperative organization had registered steady and substantial progress. This was the time when my understanding of the problems of the hills deepened. I was familiar with the hardship of village life but now I was far more aware of issues related to forest produce and people's rights. We started

thinking about generating self-employment not only through *khadi* but based on forests as well. Many friends begin asking uncomfortable questions – how long are we going to toil like this for others? This is how *Dashauli Gram Swaraj Mandal* was formed.

Shekhar Pathak: *If you could tell us a little about what else was happening in the hills at that time and share with us some recollections of your interaction with other individuals and organizations it would greatly help our understanding those turbulent, exciting times.*

CPB: The name of Ghanshyam Sailaniji in Uttarkashi springs to my mind. In Beninag there was Sadan Bhai. I have already talked about Diwan Singhji in Garur. Kunjwalji was working in Jianti. There was one Surendra Bhai who worked with great enthusiasm in the beginning but couldn't sustain the work.

PP: *It seems that this sort of constructive work couldn't strike roots.*

CPB: This is not true at all! Everyone worked smoothly. We had ourselves decided to conclude some of the activities at some point of time. Nine organizations were providing

: Pushpesh Pant

respectable self-employment. Dasholi alone provided on-site opportunities to train in and practise different trades, such as ironmongery, carpentry, use of medicinal herbs, etc. We didn't encourage unnecessary dependence on any one organization, nor did we like our associates to hanker after subsidies.

When the *Chipko* movement started, one of the main demands was that the contract system in medicinal herbs should be abolished. This business should be handed over to cooperative societies. We had seen that the traditional rights of the people were routinely violated. It was difficult to keep quiet. However, it was flash floods in Alaknanda that precipitated the crisis.

PP: *I am sorry to interrupt you but I would like to ask you when did you decide to treat the environment as your core concerns and gave it the top-most priority in your struggles?*

CPD: Anupamji had written about this in *Dinman* as early as 1972. Hugging the trees and all that happened much later. In 1974, Anupam Mishra had written very clearly that the footsteps of a powerful moment in Uttarakhand can be clearly heard. No contrac-

tor can stop it now. This is a fire that can't be extinguished by any fire-brigade.

Everyone knew what the issues were. However, there was no clarity about the action. There was no one standing in front of us who could be identified as the enemy. Then, one day, when I was in my village, some people came to me and informed me that two shady outsiders had been spotted. I went out and made enquiries. I found out that these men were sent by Symonds Company to cut trees in our forest.

On 1 April 1973 we called a meeting of *sarvodaya* workers. *Gram Pradhans* were also invited to decide the future course of action. The resolution adopted was signed by everyone. Among them were people representing all shades of opinion: some were Congressmen, others Socialists or Communists. Different kinds of action were suggested. Some said snatch their axes, others said lie down before the trucks. We wanted to have a consensus so that no one could say later that Chandi Prasad Bhatt has decided everything and is forcing it on others. Durga Prasad Arya was then the District Magistrate. I sent to him my resignation from the *State Khadi Board*. We were called for a discussion. Prakash

Kishan ICS, Commissioner Kumaon-Garhwal, was present at this meeting. He kept blowing cigar smoke in my direction throughout this meeting. The talks did not succeed and the Chipko movement was launched. Later, it gathered momentum in Phata Rampur and other places.

PP: *When you were going through the labour pains of the Chipko movement, the hills in Uttarakhand were on the boil. A new generation in student politics had emerged. Most of them were not Gandhian but were drawn towards Marx and violent revolution. How did they respond to you and you to them?*

CPB: Please let me finish what I was talking about. The floods in the Alaknanda caused great havoc. People suffered as there was no system of relief and rehabilitation.

I had raised this question in a note written in 1973 – is this flood simply the wrath of nature or an accident caused by human negligence? During our tours in the hills, we had seen that dangerous soil erosion takes place wherever trees are felled. This activity also obstructs the natural drainage of rainwater. Dr. K.L. Rao was the Union Minister for Water Resources

at that time. He formed a committee to consider this.

One day, I received some disturbing news through Hayat Singhji whose in-laws lived in Raini village. He said, 'Panditji, please come with me, our forest is being cut.' This was a tribal area and the village head there was a Communist. He considered *sarvodaya* workers as enemy number one. The task to win over these people was difficult. We started a foot march in Tapovan and marched on to Raini. Nowhere did we say that we have come to save the trees. We praised the young village headman and only asked question about the rains and the damage caused by it. Slowly, the people themselves began to talk about the felling of trees by the contractors. As political consciousness increased, they devised their own strategy. Women were in the forefront. They reached Joshimath with bugles and drums in April. Some journalist suddenly appeared on the scene and the movement was covered by the media. *Shanti Sangathan*, a dynamic local NGO, joined us. The DM was told that if the felling of trees is not stopped the floods in future will be devastating. He did not give any assurance but told us

: Pushpesh Pant

that he had sent a wireless message. Then news reached Raini that the students of Gopeshwar Degree College have come out in our support. This greatly boosted our morale.

On 26 March 1974, I was told by some forests official that the conservator of forests was here on a tour. They were worried that some unpleasant incident may be caused by the agitating students. I advised them to take a different route. Gaura Devi was leading all the women. There were heavy rains. There was no regular motor service at that time. We knew only the menfolk in this village.

It was wonderful meeting Gaura Devi for the first time. When she called me *beta*, I felt that we must have had this relationship from the beginning of time. Demonstrations continued for 15 days. Contractors had brought labourers from Himachal Pradesh to cut the trees. They had also stored many sacks of rice to feed them. The greatest challenge was to maintain peace. We were *sarvodaya* workers who had taken the pledge of non-violence. It was a matter of a great satisfaction for us that not a single word of abuse was hurled by hot-headed college students at the adversaries. Nor did a single person lose his temper.

PP: *How did the declaration of the Emergency affect your Satyagraha?*

CPB: Before this I must tell you about an incident that took place in Chaudhari Dhaar. A crowd of 10,000 people gathered there on their own. They were full of enthusiasm. This was a time when Shekhar and his friends had embarked on their march from Askot to Arakot. My son Bhuvan, too, had joined them. I did not know much about these people then but felt that this was not the time for taking out a *Padayatras*.

Things had changed greatly by 1977. There was far greater awareness now about the environment. Many forest officers who had earlier opposed us now were with us and there were sensitive officers, such as N.K. Joshi. When the time came to form a committee, we told the Chief Conservator that no forest officers should chair it. Finally Dr. Virendra Kumar was nominated. But that is another story.

In 1972, I had met Dr. M.S. Swaminathan and he patted my back. He was half a scientist and half a bureaucrat. I was also introduced to Anil Agrawal at about the same time. Soon after this, Anil visited us in the hills and saw what we were doing.

His support proved valuable in the years to come.

PP: I want to ask you now how did the public debate on the environment that raged from 1972 to the death of Smt. Gandhi influence you? Many things were happening in the country and abroad. There was also a lot of confusion. At times there were allegations that you were helping the government and obstructing the economic development in the hills in the name of environment protection. Some people also pointed out the differences between you and Bahugunaji, mocking that when two sarvodaya workers could not follow the same path how did they expect that people will rally round their call? It seemed that the government was using you to blunt the sharp edge of the movement. Is this true?

CPB: These allegations did not bother me. We continued with our work. We planted trees, broke rocks and laboured like other villagers. One day, a snake came out from under a rock but nobody was scared. They saluted the Nagraj and continued working. We realized that there is nothing wrong in cooperating with the government when it is responsive to people's demand. From the beginning, our approach in sarvodaya was most constructive.

PP: You have advised the government for years. You have been a member of many committees and served as an independent consultant. How satisfactory has this experience been? Have you felt frustrated at times?

CPB: It is obvious that when you deal with a person who is responsible and sensitive it is a pleasure to work with him and things get done easily. But mostly there is resistance. Subordinate officers work under great pressure. At times, they are unwilling and follow the orders of superiors. But by this time (1980s) the pressure had greatly increased. The government was forced to enact people-oriented laws.

PP: But this trend seems to have been reversed in recent days. We can see this in Uttarakhand, where the environment is once again in great peril. Powerful vested interests dominate electoral politics. There are dozens of mafias – land mafia, sand mafia, forest mafia, mining mafia – that render the tasks of environmental conservation difficult. Do you think that a Gandhian movement like yours can have an effective role in this changed context? It seems that the youth power that you had galvanized has dissipated. Some people have joined political parties while

: Pushpesh Pant

others have made compromises and are busy elsewhere looking after their own interest. Idealism has withered away.

CPB: I don't think so. The people who were associated with us then during that movement are all doing something or the other. They may have become an educationist or may be doing something else. We had never wanted that they should carry the label of *Chipko* all their lives.

If different people do different things according to their choice I can't find fault with this trend. This is happening not just in our Uttarakhand but everywhere in the country. Somewhere people are working for water while elsewhere land is the issue. When there is success, a lot of people step out to take credit: this is but natural. We should not worry about new leaders and new people.

During the movement for Uttarakhand, when Girda picked up his *hudka* and came on the streets, hundreds of people followed him without asking questions. No one was bothered about party politics then. All that mattered was that the common man wanted to fight injustice.

PP: *One last question. Your entire life has been dedicated to public*

causes and the family, it seems, has suffered neglect. I have seen myself how you are treated as a visiting guest in your own house! Do you ever regret the loss of a normal family life? Does the thought ever cross your mind that the Gandhian philosophy that set you on this path has become feeble and people talk derisively about it? That Gandhigri of a filmy type has replaced Gandhian thought and practice? How do you feel when you look back?

CPB: I have a sense of great contentment and no regrets. My sons may have complaints with me for they have had to suffer hardships. I can't blame them. When I step out of my house I leave all the domestic problems behind. I forget everything... there are many experiences of all kinds ... but they don't matter. I try to leave all that or by pass whatever obstructs my path.

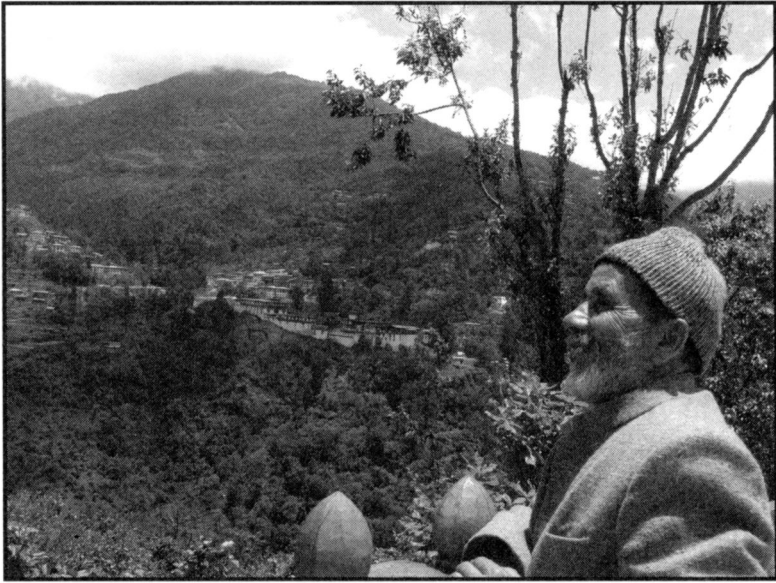
I am very optimistic about the future. We must remember that our environment cannot be saved only by government legislations, prohibitions and prescriptions. It is imperative that we remain rooted in our tradition. In the past, nature was considered sacred and no one dared to enter the *bugyals* (Himalayan alpine meadows) with shoes on or pluck those sacred flowers.

INTERVIEW

A similar consecration of land is the people's way of protecting nature. I believe that only state like Mizoram, for instance, a strong commitment on the part of the people can save Mother Earth.

•

: Pushpesh Pant



Chandi Prasad Bhatt

Photo: Shekhar Pathak/Pahar Collection