of myths and movements

Rewriting *Chipko* into Himalayan History

Haripriya Rangan
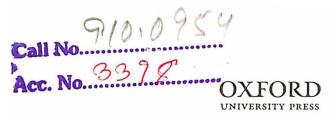
OF MYTHS AND MOVEMENTS

Rewriting Chipko into Himalayan History

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HARIPRIYA RANGAN

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For my family of relatives, friends, critics, and beloved
who encourage and challenge my work

and

in memory of S. Ramaswamy (1921–90),
my uncle and member of CPI, who introduced me to
a carnivalesque understanding of Marx and political economy
in my tender years

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AND FIGURES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It has taken me close to ten years to write this book. This may seem an embarrassing admission in an age when the motto 'publish or perish' directs the fate of academic life in seats of higher learning. But I am happy to admit that these years spent in field research, teaching, and writing articles about regional development, social change, and resource management in the Indian Himalayas have been both necessary and worthwhile in shaping the ideas contained in this book. Ideas, like good wine, require a great deal of rigorous and critical testing to develop character and maturity before being offered for consumption by discerning audiences. The past ten years of testing have been carried out in the process of working on my doctoral degree in urban and regional planning at the University of California–Los Angeles, postdoctoral research at the University of California–Berkeley, and teaching at the University of Kentucky, the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, and Monash University.

cus Lane, Jane Jacobs, Julian Golby, Leonie Sandercock, Jim and Sue Sawaya, Sanjay Seth, Paolo Tombesi, and many others have made Melbourne a wonderfully convivial place for intellectual engagement and everyday life. Vanita Seth has routinely rescued me from the difficult patches in writing, dragging me to cafés for discussions, helping me realise that Melbourne remains the undisputed haven for connoisseurs of fine coffee, introducing me to the versatility of Australian slang, and expanding my knowledge of G.W.F. Hegel, Sir William Jones, and Count Buffon. Francesca Bray, Tony Corbett, Margo Huxley, Kevin O'Connor, and Patrick Wolfe have been enthusiastic and critical supporters, providing comments on style and substance. David Harvey has been a wonderful long-distance (and, at times, exasperated) comrade, arguing, criticising, advising, and encouraging me along the way. I am also grateful to Jane Hindle and Judith Ravenscroft at Verso for offering valuable editorial comments and help in readying the manuscript for publication.

My parents, sister, and brother, maintain a remarkable amount of faith in me and my abilities. I can only hope they will find no reason to question this faith as I continue my career in teaching and research. I have learned a great deal from their experiences and abilities to appreciate the charm and aesthetics of story-telling without losing sight of the rich texture of realities that are integral to any good narrative.

I have drawn on published and about-to-be published articles in a variety of publications. The original sources include "The Political Ecology of Sustainability and Forest Management: Reflections on Contemporary Theories and Material Practices", in F.P. Gale and R.M. M'Gonigle (eds), *Nature, Production, Power: Towards an Ecological Political Economy* (Cheltenham, Glos.: Edward Elgar, forthcoming, June/July 2000); "State Economic Policies and Changing Regional Landscapes in the Uttarakhand Himalaya", in A. Agarwal and K. Sivaramakrishnan (eds), *Agrarian Environments: Negotiating Conflicts over Identities and Resources in India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming, August/September 2000); "Bitter-Sweet Liaisons in a Contentious Democracy: Radical Planning through State

PREFACE

I never fail to be amazed by how Chipko has found a niche in the imaginations and memories of numerous scholars I have encountered in North America, Europe, Australia, or Asia. It appears, without fail, in conversations that centre on sustainability, the Himalayas, deforestation in India, or social movements in poor regions of the world. I wait for that moment when I will inevitably be asked the question, "Do you know of Chipko, the movement to save trees in India?"

Each time someone invokes Chipko as an exemplar within environmental discourse, they are also, consciously or otherwise, making statements, assertions, and assumptions about how humans influence the world around them, the organisation of social life and material practices, the use and management of resources, the nature of government, the relationships between states, markets, and civil societies, the powers of social agency and their discursive strategies for social transformation. This book uses the Chipko movement as the means to explore each of these themes.

Chipko's fame has proved a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it attracts a wide audience of anthropologists, sociologists, ecologists, political economists, environmental scientists, social and environmental historians, geographers, political scientists, social theorists, cultural theorists, postcolonial theorists, activists, planners, foresters, and policy-makers – all of them interested in questions of sustainability in its varied aspects. On the other hand, it makes my task here more difficult because I must speak to the interests and concerns of

each of these disciplines. It requires me to draw on their vocabularies and concepts in ways that recognise the disciplinary conventions and traditions of each, to make my arguments cogent and plausible to not just one, but to all groups comprising this knowable community. It is the complicated experience of speaking to and *translating between* this diverse and interested audience that forms the central task of this book.

I choose the phrase 'translating between' consciously, and use it in two interrelated ways. The word 'translate' is derived from Latin and means 'bearing across'; it carries with it a sense of change. It is possible to think of ideas and people that move from one place to another – migrants, refugees, travellers, metaphors – as translated beings. People often say that something is always lost in translation, but I disagree. I steadfastly share Rushdie's belief that a great deal is gained through the process. The second dimension of translation is, as James Boyd White says,

> the art of facing the impossible, of confronting unbridgeable disconti-
> nuities between texts, between languages, and between people. As
> such it has an ethical as well as an intellectual dimension . . . It requires
> one to discover both the value of the other's language and the limits
> of one's own . . . It is a word for a set of practices by which we learn
> to live with difference, with the fluidity of culture and with the
> instability of the self . . . The activity of translation in fact offers an
> education in what is required for this interactive life, for, as I have
> suggested, to attempt to "translate" is to experience a failure at once
> radical and felicitous: radical, for it throws into question our sense of
> ourselves, our languages, of others; felicitous, for it releases us momen-
> tarily from the prison of our own ways of thinking and being.[1]

Translation of an idea into a coherent narrative within a single disciplinary tradition is a difficult task in itself. It becomes formidable when it is about a variety of narratives – familiar and unfamiliar – of a social movement that holds symbolic meaning for so many people belonging to different disciplines. I have sought to overcome these challenges by focusing the book on certain themes that are of common interest to all and of special interest to some disciplines.

The first chapter uses Chipko as an exemplar to show how history

and myth interact and how historical events are transformed into myth through narratives. The second chapter focuses on narratives, and Chipko narratives in particular, to explore the ways in which they are constructed so as to gain power and authority to influence political processes and change material practices. The third chapter explores the ways in which interactions in the Himalayas between humans and nature are represented through social and ecosystem models, discusses their strengths and limitations, and provides an alternative theoretical approach for understanding and employing the analytical framework of political ecology. The fourth chapter focuses on facets of 'the state' – precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial – in Garhwal and Kumaon Himalaya and argues for the need to examine the historical contexts within which forms of governance, dominant policy phases, and actions of different state agencies are shaped within particular spatial and political configurations. The fifth chapter, focusing on forestry and the activities of the Imperial Forest Service, reexamines concepts of property, access, and control in Garhwal, all of which inform contemporary discourses of sustainability and sustainable management of natural resources. It reinterprets the ways in which differentiated means of institutional control over access to resources shape both the biogeography and economic opportunities for various social classes within the region. The sixth chapter explores the ways in which concepts of development, nationalism, and democracy have been imbued with new meanings in postcolonial India, and how the interactions of these contextually translated concepts reproduce or transform social and economic processes occurring within the existing political and spatial configurations of the region and nation. The seventh chapter, returning to Chipko, discusses the role of social movements – old and new – in reshaping the relations of power and material practices. It provides an alternative understanding of social movements by focusing on the ways in which popular mobilisation occurs through discursive strategies that link the identities of individuals with particular social roles. It shows how successful discursive strategies may, in some fortuitous instances, bring widespread recognition to social movements but simultaneously fail to deliver the material and institutional changes desired

by their participants. The final chapter brings all these themes together to examine the concept of sustainability and sustainable development. It discusses the problems of presenting sustainability as global-local discourse, and argues instead for the need to view sustainability as a regional question that seeks possible ways and means for ensuring accessibility of resources for all social classes within regions. It offers an alternative perspective on sustainable development as a regional process in the continuing present where institutions of state and civil society are coupled in a bitter-sweet liaison that requires constant negotiation, adjustment, and reworking of their mutual commitment to substantive democracy and accessible development.

I have written this book with the hope of showing that diverse disciplines with overlapping interests may need to find new ways of conversing with each other as they work towards a shared sense of purpose, which, in this case, is in or may involve promoting sustainable development in various regions of the world. Interdisciplinary research requires a new orientation towards concerns, experiences, and ideas while constantly testing the limits of existing conventions, skills, and abilities to effectively communicate between people and places. It involves translation, which, as I have pointed out, creates a sense of anxiety about one's abilities, about what might be lost in the process, but simultaneously offers possibilities for producing expanded and richer narratives that provide different understandings of processes and encourage new forms of action. It welcomes strangers into knowable communities of political and academic discourse by creating more room for manoeuvre and making them more accessible to new entrants. I hope this book will enable its readers to transcend disciplinary boundaries and rediscover familiar ideas and unfamiliar possibilities that reinforce their commitment to the long revolution of socially just and ecologically sustainable regional development.

Melbourne, 1999

MYTH AND MARGINALISATION

Chipko was a social movement that emerged nearly twenty-five years ago in the Garhwal Himalaya. Today, transformed by a variety of narratives, it exists as myth. Myths are made from narratives which – in their attempt to reshape human values and material life in particular places and moments – imbue particular social events or practices with meanings that appear to transcend both time and space. That is to say, myths are produced through narratives that render particular social events significant by transporting them from their geographical and historical contexts into the realm of pure nature. Having made the passage, as Roland Barthes says, from history to nature, myth

> does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact . . . In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves.[1]

It is in this sense that this book explores the transformation of Chipko from historical event to myth.

The purpose of writing the book is twofold. First, I want to

illustrate how Chipko as myth, despite its powerful ability to fire the imagination of people in various parts of the world who employ it for their own struggles, has affected social and material life in the Garhwal Himalaya in ways that have been neither benevolent nor innocent. I wish to bring Chipko back from the realm of nature into geographical history to understand how this has happened. Second, in the process of escorting Chipko back to the Garhwal Himalaya, I want to explore new meanings and insights that can be gained from this journey: Chipko as prodigal myth returning home does not have to be imprisoned within its boundaries; it can (and will) still travel, but, it is to be hoped, with a little more geographical and historical baggage. The baggage will, I believe, be absolutely necessary if it is to continue to illuminate and usefully reshape the highly problematised and contested idea of sustainable development.

Why should a social movement like Chipko that emerged as it did from the Garhwal Himalaya – a region routinely characterised as marginal, backward, existing in the remotest margins of a country like India – be imbued with so much symbolic importance? And given that India, as V.S. Naipaul says in his characteristically elegant prose, is the land of a million mutinies – now,[2] why is it that of all the million mutinies constantly erupting in its cities and countryside the Chipko movement has become so deeply symbolic for so many environmental scholars and activists in India and across the world?

Perhaps it is because we live in a world that is rife with debates over impending ecological catastrophes emerging from deforestation, global warming, desertification, and floods that so many people are drawn to the Chipko movement with such faith and hope. Chipko as myth touches on all these problems in some way, it offers the possibility of arriving at solutions which seem, not abstract, but real: that change towards an ecologically sustainable world is possible through grassroots activism and social protest. It provides the symbolic weapons, the small ammunition, that fire the spirits of those who hope to save the earth, and who, perhaps, also nurture the romantic desire to see the meek inherit the earth one day. Indeed, it was the beguiling simplicity of the Chipko movement, as I encoun-

tered it a decade ago, that captured my attention and drew me to study the movement.

The Chipko story, as I then knew it, fascinated me for a variety of reasons, academic and personal. It was a movement that had emerged, not in the past, but relatively recently. It was a story about a movement that had emerged in a region of India that is commonly regarded as primitive and backward, and the people involved in it seemed to be on the margins of Indian society as well. It was mobilised by women, it was non-violent, and its participants argued against rampant economic exploitation of nature's resources. They successfully prevented logging by engaging in the simple act of tree-hugging when lumbermen arrived in the forests. The story spoke of the movement's remarkable success (I had rarely, if ever, come across similarly successful social movements in my limited experience as an academic and as a planner) in persuading the Indian state to completely acquiesce to its demands. It was heralded by its narrators as a movement that showed an alternative pathway to an ecologically sustainable development, which I saw as meaning, in its most positive sense, the reshaping of social and material practices so as to improve the conditions and opportunities of existence for all human and non-human life. I could not find any other movement that offered a similarly compelling vision worthy of deeper study.

There were personal reasons as well. I had spent most of my childhood and teenage years in various parts of the Himalayas; more importantly, I realised that Chipko had emerged during my high-school years in Dehra Dun, the largest town in the foothills of the Garhwal Himalaya. Looking back at that time, I felt a growing sense of excitement in discovering that, unbeknownst to me, Chipko had actually formed part of my personal history! The discovery, however, was also disconcerting, because I could not recollect being aware of the emergence of such a potentially historic social movement in the region. The lack of memory or awareness might, perhaps, have been attributed to the happy ignorance that middle-class teenagers adopt towards all things political, but this was not the case: I remembered most of the political events that had occurred during my high-school years, including the railway strike, the postal workers' strike, and Mrs

Gandhi's imposition of Emergency rule in the country. What confounded me most was that several of my friends at school came from families that owned timber businesses; I had known some of them and their families well enough to be aware of the rhythms of the annual timber-business cycle: their fathers and brothers travelling to inspect the quality of trees in felling sites demarcated by the Forest Department, the auctions that followed, the recruitment of labour for felling, the felling itself, which was carried out during the winter months, the anxieties shared by the households as the timber made its way to their wholesale yards in Dehra Dun, and the subtle changes in household expenditures and consumption as profits or losses were made from timber sales; all of this was familiar. But during those years, between 1973, which in some accounts is when the Chipko movement began, and 1975, the year I left Dehra Dun for college, I could not recollect any of my friends or their family members discussing potential threats to or drastic changes in the routines of the timber business. I thought, perhaps, that the movement had not yet made its way down from the mountains to the foothills. All in all, Chipko intrigued me for a variety of reasons, and I hoped to return to the Garhwal Himalaya to resolve this personal mystery through an academic exploration of events surrounding the social movement and its outcomes.

The Chipko story that I originally shaped from the accounts provided by Indian environmental activists, scholars, and journalists went something like this[3]:

There was once a time when the people of the Garhwal Himalaya – through centuries of isolation and learning from their surroundings – lived in harmonious and peaceful coexistence with nature. They tilled the land to produce what was necessary for life, and took from the dense forests the bounties that nature provided for their need – twigs and deadwood to light fires, timber to build and repair homes, fodder for animals – and fruits and nuts for seasonal enjoyment.

Then, more than thirty years ago, after India's war against China, this peaceful idyll was disrupted. The Indian government no longer wished to lose any more territory in the Himalayas and therefore resolved to bring its border regions firmly under its control. Roads

began to be constructed, mining projects launched, and army bases established. The forests in Garhwal bore the brunt of this activity in pursuit of commercial gain. Timber merchants poured in from outside, bringing labourers with them to clear large forest tracts. Single-minded in their pursuit of profits, they soon left behind degraded and barren landscapes. During every monsoon season that followed, entire mountain slopes, villages, and terraced farmlands were washed away into the turbulent rivers.

Soon the people of Garhwal could bear this destruction no more. They spoke up against cutting down the forests, denounced the short-sighted practices of timber merchants, and urged government officers to act immediately. But their voices fell on indifferent ears. In 1973, they asked the Forest Department to allot them two ash trees for making agricultural implements. The Forest Department refused. It was then that the village people of Garhwal rose in anger and said, "These trees are like our brothers and sisters. We will not let them be harmed for the profits of the Forest Department and greedy timber merchants."

And so, the story goes on, the people got together and devised a plan. Each time the lumbermen were sent out to fell trees in the forest, people from nearby villages ran out to hug the trees and persuaded the labourers to go away. They gathered together at felling sites and chanted the question, "What do forests bear?"; the gathering gave the answering chant, "Soil, water, and pure air." They were successful each time. As news of these small victories spread across the neighbouring hill regions, more and more people from other villages went out to hug trees in nearby forests to prevent them from being felled. Soon this tree-hugging strategy came to be known as *chipko*, which means to stick to, or adhere to, in both Garhwali and Hindi.

Gradually, people from the cities – students, activists, and intellectuals – began hearing of Chipko. They rushed to support the cause, and spread the message of the movement across the country. They joined the leaders of the Chipko movement in their criticism of the Indian government's ecologically destructive forest policies. The government finally yielded to pressure and acknowledged the error

of its ways. It praised the Chipko movement for acting as the conscience of the nation, for renewing the ancient traditions and environmental values of Indian civilisation, and promised Chipko's activists that preservation of the sacred and harmonious Himalayan landscape would henceforth be an honoured national duty: The Indian government issued orders banning timber contractors from exploiting the forests in Garhwal. In the years that followed, it passed several pieces of environmental legislation aimed at protecting forests across the country, particularly those in the Himalayas. Chipko was hailed as India's civilisational response to the ecological crisis and became an inspiration for numerous grassroots and environmental movements in other parts of the country and across the world. Its success had given rise to the proliferation of grassroots activities and the emergence of ecologically sensitive approaches to development in the Garhwal Himalaya.

I went to Dehra Dun in early 1990, anxious and excited, to begin my field research in Garhwal. My nervousness stemmed from a sharpened awareness of the fact that I was returning to the place of my childhood and teenage years, a place I had not visited for fifteen years: the past, as L.P. Hartley observed at the start of his novel *The Go-Between*, "is a foreign country: they do things differently there".[4] Yet there was the excitement too of looking forward to seeing familiar landscapes with a different purpose in mind, of exploring how Chipko had motivated people in Garhwal to nurture, as it were, the new and vigorous seedlings of sustainable development in their villages, towns, and communities. But as I began meeting people in Dehra Dun and travelled to the districts to organise my field research, it became apparent that Chipko rarely provoked the sort of unequivocal enthusiasm expressed by those who wrote about the movement for the world beyond Garhwal. The responses were startling, to say the least. More often than not, my attempt to refer to the movement in conversations evoked a blank stare which was quickly transformed into a small shrug that seemed to cast Chipko into a past teeming with inconsequential events. Those who remembered the movement dismissed it with a few derisive remarks, others

spoke with anger and bitterness of how development in the Garhwal Himalaya had been held hostage by Chipko and its publicists. I was bewildered. I wondered how all those Chipko narratives, new and old — which celebrated the local communities and people of the Garhwal Himalaya as foot-soldiers of ecologically sustainable development at the grassroots — had overlooked, or failed to explain why such responses might emerge in the wake of a successful social movement.

In the eighteen months that followed, I proceeded to find every possible way of understanding the historical and geographical context from which Chipko had emerged, and what had since happened in the region. As I travelled to various parts of Garhwal, interviewing and conversing with forest officers and field staff, district administrators, elected village representatives, migrant labourers, and households, I found myself being enmeshed in a dense web of stories and emotions which added to my overwhelming confusion about the movement and its outcomes. How was I to make sense of all these narratives that spoke of visions of what had been lost or hoped for? How was I going to reproduce them into a structure that reflected thoughtful scholarship and erudition?

Towards the end of those eighteen months, I made one last visit to the northernmost reaches of Dehra Dun district and had the rare opportunity of a long conversation with Kalbali Khan, then 96 years old, who lived in a village within the Chakrata forest division and made his living by collecting firewood and selling it in the small town that also served the military cantonment nearby. He had watched me each time I visited the area, but rarely did I receive more than a nod acknowledging my presence. Perhaps he'd heard this was my last visit, and thus decided to spend a few hours one late afternoon telling me what he thought I needed to know. As we conversed about his life and experiences, I found the courage to ask him about the Chipko movement. What did he think it had achieved for the people of Garhwal? He spent the rest of the afternoon telling me what had gone wrong with Chipko, the problems it had created for people whose livelihoods had depended on selling products of the forests.

"But why, then, *Saheb*," I finally asked, "is the Chipko movement so famous around the world? Why is it claimed as such a success although you say it has failed the people of Garhwal?"

The sun dipped behind the mountain ridge, taking away its warmth with the last glimmer of light through the deodar trees.

"Poor people," he replied, in soft, clear, tones, "harvest the most fabulous myths from barren lands; when people have no food to eat they have no choice but to fill their bellies with myths."

Khan *Saheb*'s allusion to the link between myths and poverty proposed a haunting paradox. Until then, I had never thought of Chipko as a myth, and that was because I regarded myths in two, fairly conventional, ways. One way of viewing myths was to see them as fabulous, entertaining narratives that suffused people's lives but had little to do with everyday realities. They were legends of yore, imagined realms of narrative where humans and gods mingled with ease. Myths were fascinating because they revealed glimpses of the contradictions and absurdities that pervade human life on earth; taken to their functional limits, they might offer humans little insights, small lessons, to help them cope with the complexities of the world.[5]

From another viewpoint, myth, in the everyday usage of the term, implied unreality, a bright falseness that bordered on untruth. This meaning was often to be found in scholarly articles, books, and newspapers that spoke about one myth or other, and then proceeded to contrast it with reality: here is myth, here is reality, make your choice. In this sense, therefore, myths were invisible veils that had to be made visible, then stripped, uncovered, deconstructed, or taken apart, thread by thread, to reveal the nakedness that hid beneath. Truth, or Nature, or Reality – these words are often used inter-changeably – implies nakedness. Myths were the fabrics that humans wove to clothe it for various reasons, ranging from modesty – false or otherwise – deceit, power, basic human survival, fashion, or aesthetic pleasure. But we, as humans, have also routinely felt the need to strip off these clothes, to reveal the truth inherent in nakedness, in that particular state of nature that none of us can fail to

understand in a visceral way. Nakedness may imply vulnerability, beauty, innocence, or savagery; but whatever the qualification, nakedness almost always implies Truth.

From the latter perspective, therefore, uncovering myth is serious business. It requires the right sorts of tools. In recent times the tools commonly employed for such acts of exposure have been called facts. Facts are those tangible minutiae that appear and surround us in various forms, like particles of dust or piles of human-generated litter (journalists and gossip-columnists, popular truth-seekers of our times, refer to much of their work as "getting the dirt"). They are carefully gathered in varying quantities, and then sorted, sifted, classified, and arranged, like surgical instruments in an operating theatre, to be purposefully used for dissection and exposure.

Khan *Saheb*'s reference to Chipko did not fit within these conventional ways of understanding myths. He wasn't implying that the movement had never occurred, because it had; nor was he stating that communities in Garhwal had not participated in acts of tree-hugging, that it was entirely fabricated, because there were plenty of people who freely admitted that they had done so themselves: these were facts. Chipko seemed to comfortably accommodate these facts – any number of available facts – and more, by merely floating, wallowing, even revelling in them: facts could be used to reveal Chipko as a women's movement, a non-violent movement, a peasant movement, an environmental movement. If, even for a fleeting moment, it appeared naked, it was in childlike simplicity, bathed in innocence, purified by facts. Chipko, in its nakedness, in its state of nature, was ultimately revealed as Chipko; it meant something by itself.

Over the years, as I have revisited Garhwal and written about its geographical history of regional development, forestry, and natural-resource management, I have come to recognise other ways of thinking about myth and myth-making. Exploring the scholarly writings on myth has made me realise that the word often seems to mean many things at once, yet escapes precise definition, at least in English. Elizabeth Baeten, for instance, says that myth is "a term used to describe what is 'other', what does not belong to the existential,

intellectual, cultural, and historical position of the person applying the label 'mythical' . . . Myth functions or works to identify and classify aspects of human existence that are foreign to the observer."[6] While such a definition might serve to illustrate how some people use the terms "myth" or "mythical", I find it difficult to understand why – if it indeed represents human experiences that are foreign and exotic to the observer – it is still seen by some as the means through which most people make sense of, familiarise themselves with, or come to terms with the complexities of their worlds.

The closest I have come to understanding what Khan *Saheb* may have implied is to recognise that myth is not merely a reference to fabulous legends, exotic experiences, or patent untruths, but an allusion to a particular type of narrative or form of communication, written, spoken, or visually conveyed through various kinds of image-making. Myth, in this sense, as Roland Barthes points out, is more than an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification,[7] a process of image-making, of imbuing symbolic meaning to particular things, places, material life, and social practices. Myths are not just ancient tales of gods and heroes, of Elysium, Olympus, Arcadia, or the Golden Age, nor is their production an activity confined to "primitive" societies and religious-minded folk. William McNeill describes them as "general statements about the world and its parts, and in particular about nations and other human in-groups, that are believed to be true and then acted on whenever circumstances suggest or require common action."[8]

Myth-making occurs in the present, within rational, secular, and non-exotic worlds, and through contemporary modes of communication. These modes of communication, whatever they might be, employ narratives as the intermediaries, the agents for arranging marriages between particular forms and particular social actions or practices – we can call them functions – and, through this process, invest both form and function *and* their mutual relationship with meaning or significance. For example, a politician may exhort his or her audience to rebuild the "community", a form that is invested with meaning by linking it with descriptions of apparently mundane, "everyday" activities such as children playing football or cricket on

the neighbourhood commons unsupervised by adults, families gathering round the dinner table, people joyously participating in religious or secular festivals. The "community" along with these social actions chosen from "everyday life" become symbols imbued with their own significance within the narrative. The process of linking them together produces a myth of "the community"; a family gathering around at the dinner table, children playing cricket, the neighbourhood commons, become symbolic acts and places that no longer need be linked to any one geographic location, or to actions that occur in a particular period or moment in time. They become timeless, placeless, and, by inference, self-validating.[9]

Myth does not always produce bucolic imagery. Having made the link between particular forms and functions, narratives choose to give distinctive meaning to the relationship itself; it may be a joyous union, on the verge of breakdown, sullen coexistence, pleasant indifference, or sundered by inexorable forces. The politician in the example may, after having described the ideal community, narrate its collapse by invoking images of latchkey children, of barricaded playgrounds and gang-ridden streets. These stark images come to symbolise "anti-community" but in so doing simultaneously reinforce the symbolic meaning of "the community"; the form may be represented as an outcome of selected functions, as in the positive description of "community", or given the negative description, be jeopardised by another set of chosen functions. Myth succeeds in transforming particular forms into symbols whose significance appears to transcend their historical and geographical contexts, time, and space.[10]

From this perspective, then, Chipko *as myth* is produced by narratives that have succeeded in transforming the movement into a symbol, a form that is self-validating, that appears to mean something by itself. Through these narratives, Chipko as myth is able to transcend both its geographical context of the Garhwal Himalaya and the context of its historical evolution. But in their eagerness to prove Chipko's transhistorical and transregional significance, its narratives have stripped the region and its communities of their histories. Geographical history belongs to the temporal and material world; it

is the product of social, political, and economic practices in particular places over time. Places without history are playgrounds of the imagination, barren lands for humans, perhaps, but fertile spaces for myths.[11] People without history become humans who have been stripped, divested, or deprived of their social or political identities.[12] They can be represented, depending on the story-teller or academic scholar, as mythic humans who have no material needs or desires, or as poor creatures whose material practices and aspirations are insignificant or irrelevant. The link between poverty and myth may not be paradoxical at all; it can become an integral part of myth. Whether or not this is what Kalbali Khan implied in our conversation is a matter I leave readers to decide as they explore the narratives in this book.

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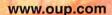RABINDRA N. BHATTACHARYA (editor)
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