

CARING FOR NATURE

THE FORESTS BELONG TO US

If you cut a tree you cut your life

Subhadra Sen Gupta
Illustrations by Tapas Guha



Terrapin

From the Desk of Dr Ajay Mathur

“Industrialization on a mass scale will necessarily lead to passive or active exploitation of the villagers as the problems of competition and marketing come in.” These words by Mahatma Gandhi have unfortunately become an ugly reality today.

Economic development in India is happening at the cost of environmental degradation. This is a conundrum with no short term solution. Our environment is facing monumental challenges today – deforestation, untreated wastes, polluted skies, poisoned rivers, widespread loss of biodiversity, and encroachment of land belonging to tribal and indigenous communities – at an alarming rate. On a global level, the impact of climate change has been massive – growing water scarcity, rising sea levels, extreme weather patterns, increases in vector borne diseases, among many others.

In the past few decades, enormous stress has been imposed on natural resources – air, water, land, forests, and minerals – largely at the grassroots levels, giving rise to social movements and environmental activism. Ecological conflicts between societies and government authorities have been escalating. Dynamic activists have posed questions regarding the deteriorating state of the natural resources, the environmental impact of setting up new projects, such as dams, mines, factories, or highways, and their bearing on the livelihood of the people. These activists have also put forward solutions that aim at economic productivity and human welfare without causing undue environmental stress.

This time the *Caring for Nature* series is aimed at introducing readers to the impact of social movements’ and spirited deeds of such environmental activists. I hope the readers will not only enjoy the books, but also feel inspired by the persistent and significant efforts of the young protagonists mentioned herein to protect and enhance the natural environment.



Ajay Mathur
Director-General, TERI

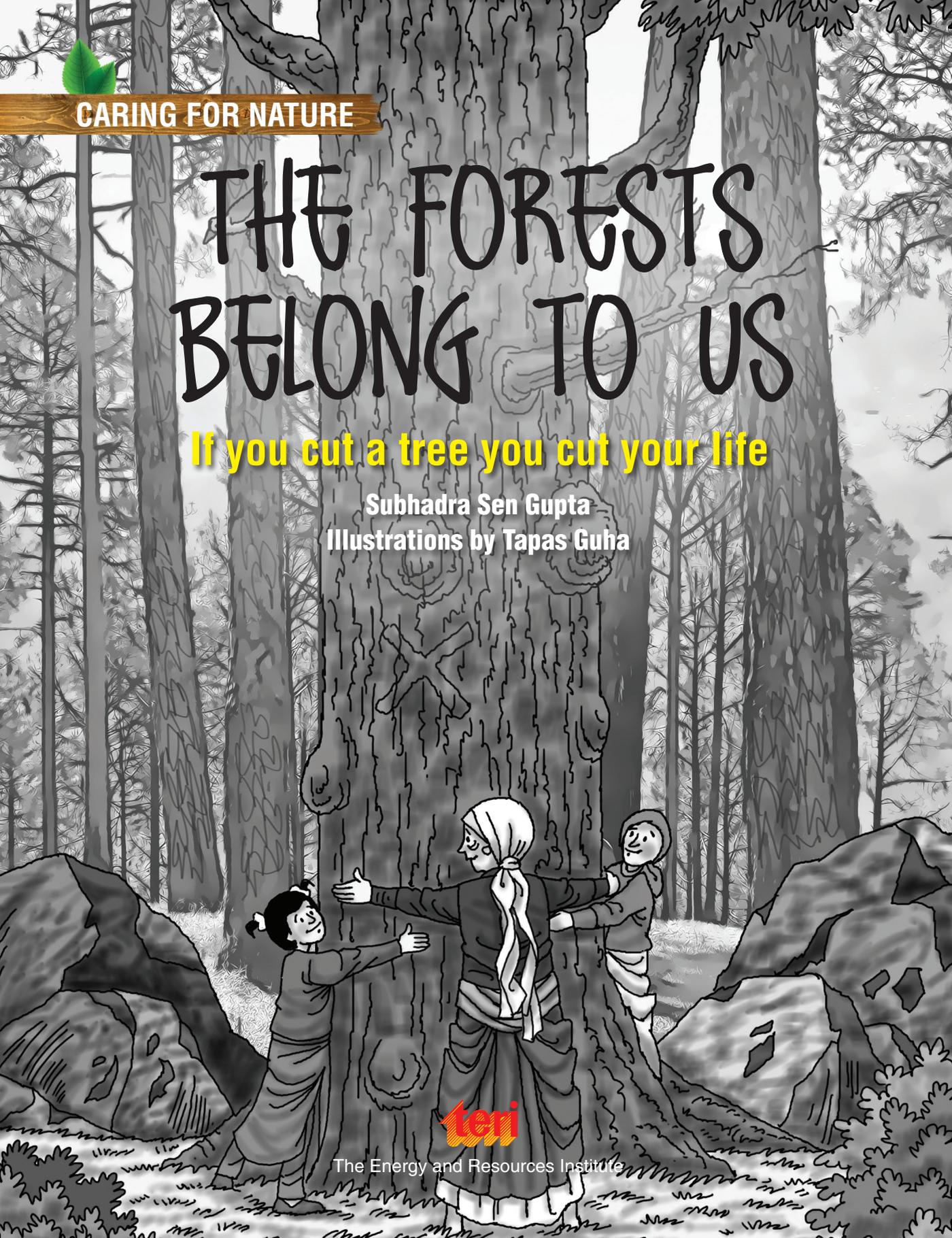


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The Energy and Resources Institute



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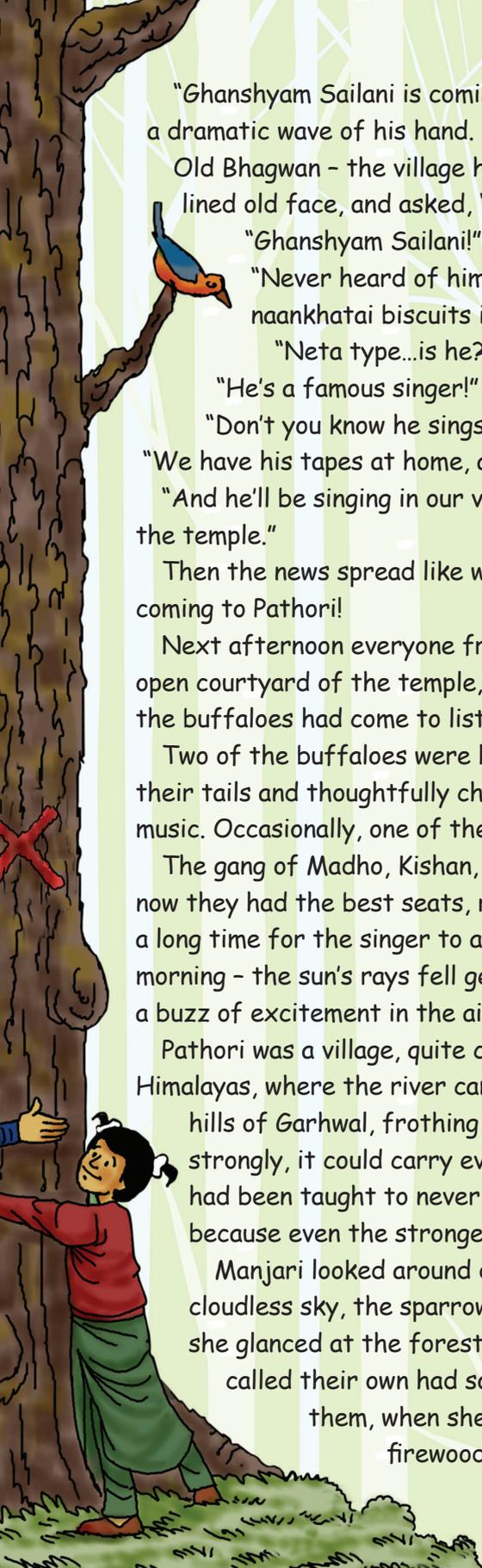
Clad in a white kurta pyjama and peaked green and blue cap, the folk singer raised his voice even higher and sang,
*I am spring. I am rains.
I am with earth and life
I am everything for you
Do not cut me, I have life...*

Twelve-year-old Manjari, sitting in the front row with her friends, swayed happily with the beat of the song and understood the words so well. It was a song in which the poet captured the thoughts of a tree, as it begged men not to cut it down.

Manjari listened carefully to every word, as she loved the forest so much.

The day before a village boy had come running to the tea shop, all breathless with excitement.





"Ghanshyam Sailani is coming! He'll be here tomorrow!" Kishan announced with a dramatic wave of his hand.

Old Bhagwan - the village handy-man - took a sip of tea, blinked, raised his lined old face, and asked, "Who is that?"

"Ghanshyam Sailani!"

"Never heard of him," smiled Dattu - the tea shop owner - while packing naankhatai biscuits into a tall glass jar.

"Neta type...is he?" someone asked.

"He's a famous singer!" said Madho hotly.

"Don't you know he sings about saving the forests?" Kishan glared at them.

"We have his tapes at home, and I know all his songs."

"And he'll be singing in our village!" Madho ended in triumph. "Here...in front of the temple."

Then the news spread like wildfire through the village. Ghanshyam Sailani was coming to Pathori!

Next afternoon everyone from the little village of Pathori was gathered in the open courtyard of the temple, and as Madho commented under his breath, even the buffaloes had come to listen.

Two of the buffaloes were hanging around at the back of the audience, flicking their tails and thoughtfully chewing cud, as if they were ready to dance to some music. Occasionally, one of them would give a happy "Mooooo..."

The gang of Madho, Kishan, and Manjari were among the first to arrive, and now they had the best seats, right in the front row. They would have to wait for a long time for the singer to arrive, but they did not mind. It was a lovely autumn morning - the sun's rays fell gently warm on their upturned faces, and there was a buzz of excitement in the air. And, oh joy! School was closed for Dussehra.

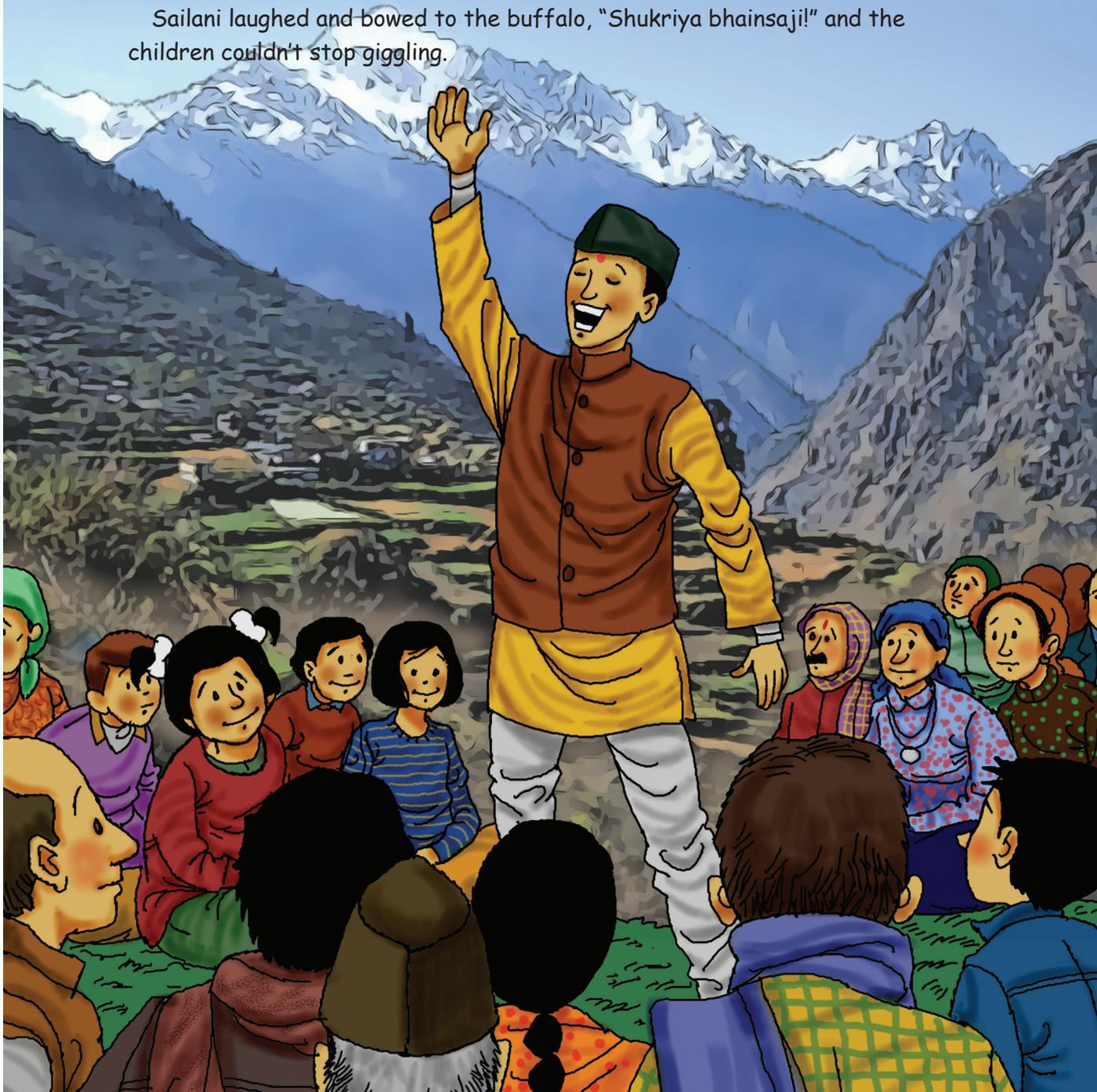
Pathori was a village, quite close to the River Alaknanda, high up in the Himalayas, where the river came tumbling down the rock strewn slopes of the hills of Garhwal, frothing around the white boulders. Its waters flowed so strongly, it could carry everything away - trees, cattle, people. The children had been taught to never venture close to the river or enter the water, because even the strongest swimmer could not fight the mighty Alaknanda.

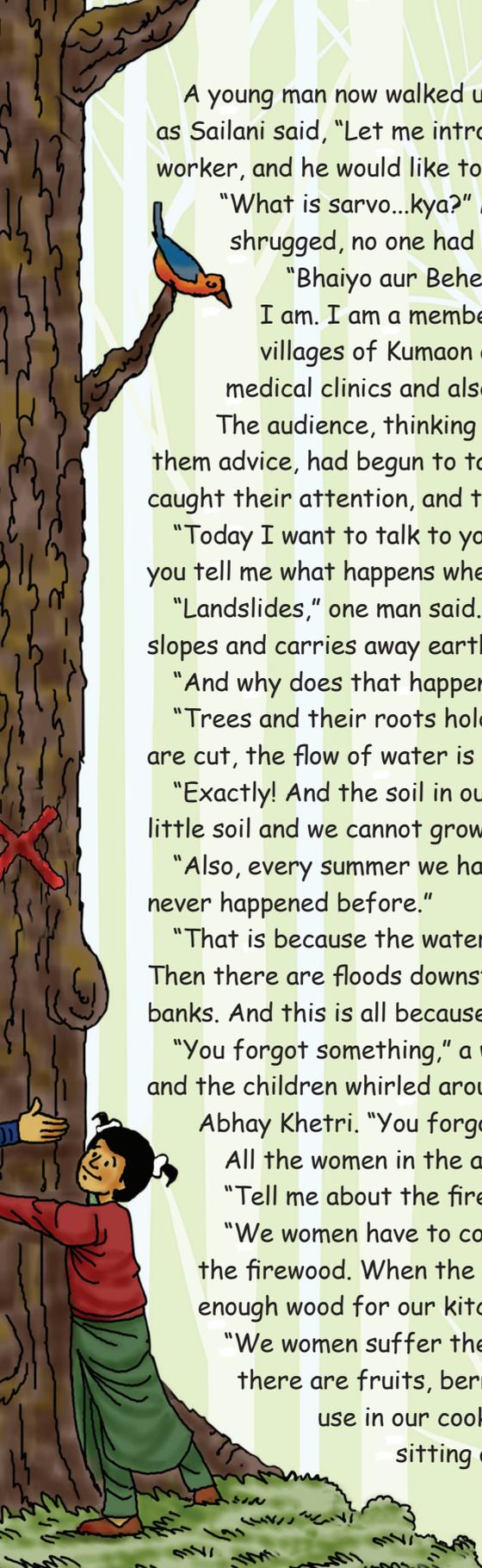
Manjari looked around dreamily at the eagles soaring high on the blue cloudless sky, the sparrows nesting under the roofs of the houses, and then she glanced at the forest that surrounded their village. This forest that they called their own had so many kinds of trees. She had learnt to recognize them, when she went with her grandmother and mother to gather firewood for the kitchen and also pick fruits and berries.

Now she could recognize the pine, deodar, oak, sal, and ash trees, and out of them all, her favourite was a giant oak tree. It was a large, leafy tree that was the home of birds nesting among the branches, the honey bees, and the butterflies. She loved to sit under it, leaning against its broad welcoming trunk, and dream a little.

Ghanshyam Sailani brought his song to a close and bowed, as the courtyard echoed to the applause of the delighted audience. Someone gave a piercing whistle, and then one of the buffaloes mooed behind them.

Sailani laughed and bowed to the buffalo, "Shukriya bhainsaji!" and the children couldn't stop giggling.





A young man now walked up to stand beside Sailani and did a deep namaskar as Sailani said, "Let me introduce you to Abhay Khetri. He is a sarvodaya worker, and he would like to say a few words to you."

"What is sarvo...kya?" Manjari asked in a puzzled whisper. Her two friends shrugged, no one had a clue.

"Bhaiyo aur Beheno!" Abhay Khetri began. "Let me first explain who I am. I am a member of the Sarvodaya Movement and we work in the villages of Kumaon and Garhwal to help people. We run schools and medical clinics and also work to save our forests..."

The audience, thinking it was another political party worker coming to give them advice, had begun to talk. Now the words **schools... clinics... forests...** caught their attention, and they fell silent.

"Today I want to talk to you about the dangers of cutting down forests. Can you tell me what happens when a forest vanishes and we are left with bare hills?"

"Landslides," one man said. "When the rains come, the water flows down the slopes and carries away earth and rocks."

"And why does that happen?" Abhay Khetri asked.

"Trees and their roots hold on to water and keep the soil wet. When the trees are cut, the flow of water is no longer stopped by the forests."

"Exactly! And the soil in our fields is washed away too, leaving our fields with little soil and we cannot grow good crops."

"Also, every summer we have a drinking water problem," a woman said. "It has never happened before."

"That is because the water does not collect in the hill streams and springs. Then there are floods downstream, as the rivers get all swollen and break their banks. And this is all because we keep cutting down our forests."

"You forgot something," a woman's voice said from the back of the crowd, and the children whirled around to see Krishna Bua sitting up and staring at Abhay Khetri. "You forgot about the firewood."

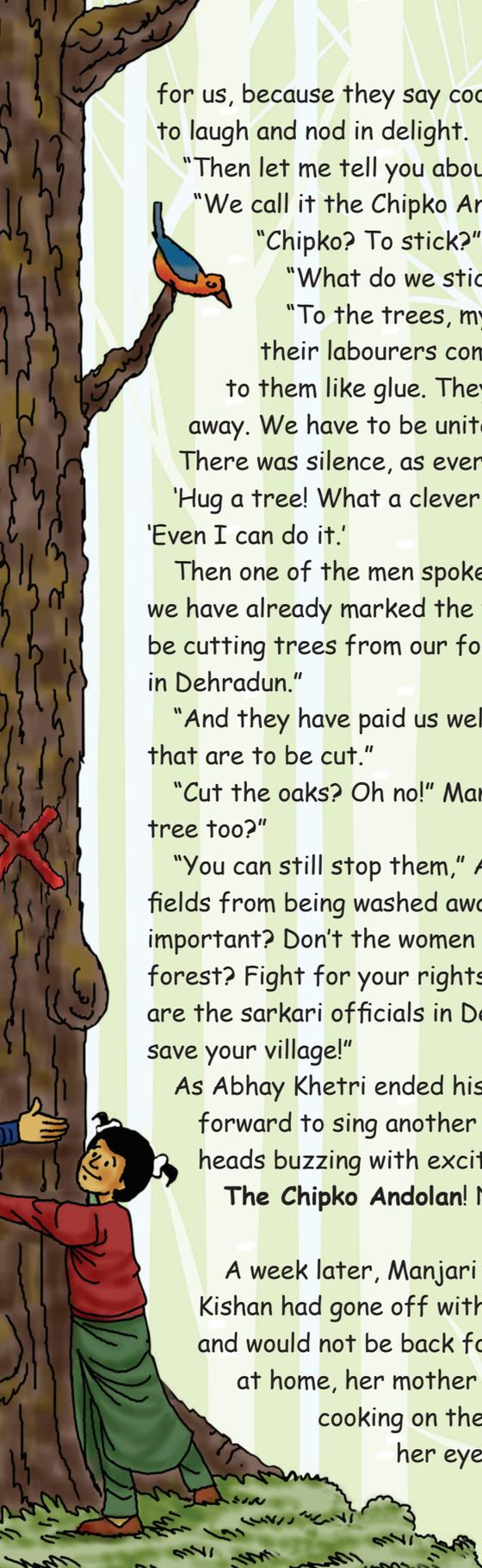
All the women in the audience nodded in agreement.

"Tell me about the firewood, Amma," Abhay said gently.

"We women have to cook everyday, and no one helps us with gathering the firewood. When the trees are cut, we have to walk for hours to collect enough wood for our kitchen fires."

"We women suffer the most, getting drinking water and firewood. Then there are fruits, berries, and leaves that we get from the forest and use in our cooking." Manjari's mother added. "The men may be sitting around playing cards but they won't gather firewood"





for us, because they say cooking is women's work." All the other women began to laugh and nod in delight.

"Then let me tell you about the way to save the trees," Abhay Khetri began.

"We call it the Chipko Andolan."

"Chipko? To stick?" The children began to giggle.

"What do we stick to?" Madho asked loudly.

"To the trees, my friend. Whenever the logging contractors and their labourers come to cut down a forest, you hug the trees and stick to them like glue. They can't cut them without hurting you, so they will go away. We have to be united in our fight! We are the Chipko people!"

There was silence, as everyone thought about this very unusual idea.

'Hug a tree! What a clever thing to do!' Manjari nodded her head in delight. 'Even I can do it.'

Then one of the men spoke up, looking a bit shamefaced, "But Abhayji, we have already marked the trees for the contractor. He and his men will be cutting trees from our forest. They have bought the trees at an auction in Dehradun."

"And they have paid us well to mark the biggest oaks, sals, and pine trees that are to be cut."

"Cut the oaks? Oh no!" Manjari sat up in anguish. "Will they cut my oak tree too?"

"You can still stop them," Abhay Khetri went on. "Don't you want to stop your fields from being washed away in the monsoons? Isn't your life as a farmer more important? Don't the women have a right to the firewood and fruits of the forest? Fight for your rights, my friends. That forest belongs to you all. Who are the sarkari officials in Dehradun to sell them away? Save your forest and save your village!"

As Abhay Khetri ended his passionate speech, Ghanshyam Sailani came forward to sing another song. The children sat there in a daze, their heads buzzing with excitement.

The Chipko Andolan! Now they were going to join it too!

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A week later, Manjari was all alone and feeling very bored. Madho and Kishan had gone off with all the men of the village on a trip to Gopeshwar and would not be back for a couple of days. She knew that if she stayed at home, her mother would make her work in the kitchen and she hated cooking on the chullah that poured out grey smoke, which made her eyes sting and water.

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