

# Raksha Sutra Carries Forward Tree Conservation Legacy

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Green message: Raksha Sutra Andolan members take out an awareness rally

As the world re-affirms its commitment to conservation on World Environment Day tomorrow, Uttarakhand Garhwal hills are yet again carrying forward the pro-conservation legacy of their forefathers in the form of the Raksha Sutra Andolan.

Starting 1994, the Raksha Sutra Andolan, as the name suggests, involves people tying sacred thread across the trunks of trees, thus pledging to safeguard them, guided by sentiments as on the festival of Raksha Bandhan.

The Raksha Sutra Andolan came at a time when felling of trees became rampant at an altitude of 1,000 metres, severely affecting green cover in the hills. Chaurangikhal, Harsil, Haruntha, Adala and Mukhem areas on the Uttarkashi-Tehri stretch of Garhwal hills were the ones worst affected by the felling.

Led by social activist Suresh Bhai, villagers in Uttarkashi-Tehri area of Garhwal hills started the Raksha Sutra Andolan by tying the sacred thread — Rakhis, around tree trunks, pledging to safeguard these trees. The villagers stood up against the state forest authorities and stoutly opposed felling of trees by the government.

Understanding the importance of trees in higher hills towards ensuring water in the catchment area of streams and rivers, Raksha Sutra activists did not hesitate to confront local village heads who they found to be conniving with forest authorities to get trees felled. The movement helped safeguard indigenous tree species such as Mauro, Kail, Buransh and Muranda.

The Raksha Sutra Andolan was thus instrumental in spreading much-needed awareness in the Garhwal hills, particularly in the Tehri Uttarkashi region. It was also due to the mounting pressure of this movement that even a large number of forest officials who backed felling, citing lame excuses, had to face dire consequences. The Raksha Sutra Andolan even played an important role in the recent people's movement in the Chabra village of Dehradun, where villagers strongly opposed setting up of a Coca Cola plant in a green forested area. The beverage company had to finally give in to people uniting for the cause of conservation.

While the political leadership in the state has confined itself to doing lip-service for conservation, limiting its concern to seeking Green Bonus from the Centre in lieu of forest conservation, it has been the people on the ground who, through their tree conservation campaigns such as Raksha Sutra Andolan, have worked to preserve the greenery of the region.

*The Tribune 04-June-2015*