



# Global Nonviolent Action Database

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## Bishnoi villagers sacrifice lives to save trees, 1730

*Time period notes: Campaign lasted approximately 5 days*

(1730)

1700's

to: (1730)

1700's

**Country:** India

**Location City/State/Province:** Khejarli, Marwar region, Rajasthan state

**Goals:**

Save sacred trees from being cut down by the king's soldiers for a new palace

### Methods

**Methods in 1st segment:**

- 001. Public speeches
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 171. Nonviolent interjection

**Methods in 2nd segment:**

- 001. Public speeches
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 171. Nonviolent interjection

**Methods in 3rd segment:**

- 020. Prayer and worship
- 171. Nonviolent interjection

**Methods in 4th segment:**

- 020. Prayer and worship
- 171. Nonviolent interjection

**Methods in 5th segment:**

- 020. Prayer and worship
- 171. Nonviolent interjection

**Methods in 6th segment:**

- 020. Prayer and worship
- 171. Nonviolent interjection

## Classifications

**Classification:**

Defense

**Cluster:**

Environment

National/Ethnic Identity

**Group characterization:**

- Bishnoi villagers

## Leaders, partners, allies, elites

**Leaders:**

Amrita Devi

**Partners:**

Bishnoi villagers in Khejrli and surrounding villages

**External allies:**

Not known

**Involvement of social elites:**

Not known

## Joining/exiting order of social groups

**Groups in 1st Segment:**

**Groups in 2nd Segment:**

**Groups in 3rd Segment:**

**Groups in 4th Segment:**

**Groups in 5th Segment:**

**Groups in 6th Segment:**

**Additional notes on joining/exiting order:**

Joining order not known

**Segment Length:** *Approximately 20 hours*

## Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

**Opponents:**

Maharajah of Jodhpur and his soldiers

**Nonviolent responses of opponent:**

Not known

**Campaigner violence:**

Not known

**Repressive Violence:**

363 Bishnoi villagers were beheaded after they refused to let go of the trees they were hugging.

## Success Outcome

### Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

### Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

### Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

### Notes on outcomes:

The Bishnois successfully protected their village's sacred khejri grove, even ensuring its protection by state law.

The Bishnois continue to practice their religion in the Marwar region.

The campaign grew from a few alarmed villagers to 363 people willing to risk death.

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The Bishnoi faith is a religious offshoot of Hinduism founded on 29 principles, most of which promote environmental stewardship. Bishnois strictly forbid the harming of trees and animals. The religion was founded by Guru Maharaj Jambaji in 1485 AD in the Marwar (Jodhpur) desert region of western Rajasthan, India. Jambaji witnessed the incessant clear-cutting of trees during times of drought to feed animals, only to see them die eventually as the drought continued. He also recognized the importance of trees within his local ecosystem (keeping animals alive) and banned cutting down green trees and killing birds or animals. Jambaji's spiritual reverence for nature led to a tradition of harmony with the local ecology: in the middle of an arid desert region, the Bishnois are famous for cultivating lush vegetation, caring for animals, and collecting drinkable water.

In 1730, almost 300 years after Guru Jambaji's 29 principles were recorded, the maharajah (king) of Jodhpur wanted to build a new palace. He sent soldiers to gather wood from the forest region near the village of Khejarli, where Bishnoi villagers had helped foster an abundance of khejri (acacia) trees. When the king's men began to harm the trees, the Bishnois protested in anguish but were ignored by the soldiers, who were under royal orders.

Amrita Devi was a female villager who could not bear to witness the destruction of both her faith and the village's sacred trees. She decided to literally hug the trees, and encouraged others to do so too, proclaiming: "A chopped head is cheaper than a felled tree." Bishnois from Khejri and nearby villages came to the forest and embraced the trees one by one to protect them from being cut down. As each villager hugged a tree, refusing to let go, they were beheaded by the soldiers. This voluntary martyrdom continued until 363 Bishnoi villagers were killed in the name of the sacred Khejarli forest.

Once word got back to the King about this activity he rushed to the village and apologized, ordering the soldiers to cease logging operations. Soon afterwards, the maharajah designated the Bishnoi state as a protected area, forbidding harm to trees and animals. This legislation still exists today in the region.

In memory of the 363 Bishnois, who died protecting their dear trees, a number of khejri trees are planted around the area, which is still notably lush and rich with animal life. The Bishnoi sacrifices became the inspiration for a much larger Chipko movement that is still growing today, in which villagers physically embrace trees to save them from logging.

## Research Notes

### Influences:

The Bishnoi tree martyrs were influenced by the teachings of Guru Maharaj Jambaji, who founded the Bishnoi faith in 1485 and set forth principles forbidding harm to trees and animals. (1)

The Bishnoi sacrifices became the inspiration for a much larger Chipko movement that is still growing today, in which villagers physically embrace trees to save them from logging. (2)

**Sources:**

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**Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:**

Blaine O'Neill, 12/12/2010

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