

Work and Status of Women in Himalayas: A Study of Garhwal District

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Introduction

Studies based on the women role in various fronts in the society have gained impetus among the global academia. But it is not exemplified in the methods of study as well as in the explanations of role and behavior of women and society. There is often overconfidence among social scientists in understanding cultural groups. But very often the different cultural units reveal distinct traditional practices and system of existence that is hardly prevalent in any other part of the globe. From an evolutionary and cultural point of view such behavior cannot prosper in a population over a long period. It must have survival value. Besides that there are studies, which indicate a deprived status of women in such societies, which is again not true as women is abiding these social system in harmony since long time. The paper has explored four Himalayan villages of Uttarakhand in India to understand the work participation of women in various capacities and perhaps justifying their strong status in the hill society.

In almost all types of Himalayan societies, women play an important role in sustaining the agriculture-animal-forest-domestic based interactive subsystems of the society. Though agriculture is the backbone of the economy which is mainly governed by traditional work norms, women's participation in all other fields of life in these societies is no different, but rather important in understanding the socio-economic setup. They have not only played a crucial role in the preservation of traditional knowledge links but also have been conserving the available resource base and resource use practices since centuries. Women's role as food producer, water fetcher, fuel collector, farm performer, child bearer, cattle rearer have impelled them to be the most significant part of Himalayan societies. Besides of varying geographical, and geo-climatic conditions, and concomitant set of environmental

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uncertainties life of women in general is tougher. Still women constitute the backbone of the Himalayan economic system as the hill agriculture is absolutely dependent on them.

Himalaya is about 1.7 percent of the India's land area and nearly 12 percent of its landmass, 90 percent people in villages derived their livelihood from subsistence animal-farm-forest-based resources. Women performs various activities in different capacities in these societies has been inheriting since generations. The distinct nature of allocation of activities of women has evolved locally for productive and functional usages. However, the position of women in the Himalayas is, by and large, equal to men and it is evident that women in the hills put more than fifteen hours a day in works. This hard work is perceived as imperatives against economic security or social status. In such circumstances, the people have developed dynamic ways of living in these societies. During the process of transformation and development, people have mainly concerned with productive interactions with nature that surrounds him to ensure a comfortable co-existence. In this process, men and women have acquired expertise in different fields for a variety of works. For instance, it is often said that women traditionally have been more skilled in domestic chores and sedentary activities while men have usually got more expertise to engage strenuous work. The present paper seeks to highlight the arena of women's domain in these societies which is much higher and stronger than what has been established by various studies, yet, the information regarding the role of women in this part of Himalayas is lacking in terms of functioning at different subsystems levels. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to analyze the work participation and functional attributes of the women in these communities. It also aims at explaining an age wise systematic demographic status of women's work participation in the agriculture-animal-forest-domestic based interactive subsystems of Himalayas.

Study Area

District Garhwal is a part of Western Himalayas falls in the Uttarakhand state of India. The district is entirely mountainous. It is located between 500 meters to 3000 meters of height comprising about 3000 villages and 6 urban centers. It extends along the Alakananda and Ganga River in the north. In the west and east the district is bounded by Bijnor, Haridwar, Dehradun, Tehri Garhwal, Rudrapur, Chamoli, Almora and Nainital districts. According to 2001 Census of India reports population of Garhwal district is 697078 with a density of 131 persons per square kilometer and 1106 females per 1000 males as a sex ratio. Among 13 districts of the state Garhwal district ranked 3 in literacy rate of 77.5 percent with 65.7 percent of female literacy. On the economic front the district is purely of subsistence agricultural based money order supported nature with forests, barren & unculturable land, permanent pastures and grazing land as main land uses beside agriculture. Due to mountainous region agriculture occupies more than eleven per cent

of the total land use, while forest land occupies almost sixty per cent of the land in this region.

Method

The present study has been conducted in Garhwal district of Uttarakhand state in Himalayan region of India. After reconnaissance visit to the Garhwal district, five villages namely Nawan Malla, Dadogi, Kui, Dhound and Souli located at different elevations and geophysical conditions were selected on the bases of random purposive sampling method for the primary survey with regards to the various aspects related to the study. The villages were selected purely on their nature of rural characteristics i. e. primary occupation, infrastructure facilities available, livestock and agriculture-animal-forest-domestic base livelihood system.

Equal representation was given to each village in conducting primary survey by staying two to three days in a village to meet the purpose of the study. Almost 90 percent of the families were interacted and interviewed randomly during the course of stay in the villages. A participatory appraisal approach was used to collect information and data. A field book was designed to collect the information and data was prepared after discussions with the local individuals and groups. All information pertaining to the socio- economic, livelihood structure and the involvement of men and women for varieties of function and activities performed in agriculture-animal-forest-domestic system prevailed in the villages were collected through the interaction during the month of May- June of the year 2008 and 2009. These functions and activities were categorized as different subsystems interacting and complementing each other as a system. Functional attributes of men and women related to these subsystems were recorded broadly to assess the women's work participation. There are various studies on gender disparity. But the women in Garhwal district are above this deprivation and subordination. Women participation in day to day work in all communities is of great value and status and hardly recognized in socio-economic studies. To analyse the work participation and social status of women in Himalaya, the study has been carried out to find out the range of functional activities that women are involved in the rural areas and to determine the status of women by assessing their work participation in all activities.

Functional Attributes of Villages

In the rural communities of Himalayas people have been playing an integrated role in terms of ecosystem functioning. Nonetheless, women have been playing a key role in the carrying forward of social, cultural, economic and political values since age-old in the mountainous region. Women's different role as food producer, water

fetcher, fuel collector, farm performer, child bearer, cattle rearer have impelled them to be the most significant part of Himalayan societies. Their participation in performing almost all the activities is the key of their social status in such communities. To achieve the women's work participation in the agriculture-animal-forest-domestic based interactive subsystems of Himalayas the interaction with the people was held in these villages. There is a great range of functions at household level varies from cooking to visit far forest areas for non-timber forest product collection. The household functions have been categorized as domestic and outdoor for the purpose of analyzing the role of women in these villages. The functional activities can be divided in two broad categories- Domestic and Outdoor. These activities or functions were further categorized into agriculture-animal-forest-domestic sub system levels.

In fact, the labour of women was a crucial element in the interdependent agro-pastoral system that is prevalent. Material sustenance came from natural resources: domesticated animals converted grasses into milk, draught power and soil nutrients; the forests provided timber for house construction, fodder, firewood and water. But it was human labour that made all of this into a working system: levelling the terraced fields, sowing, tending to standing crops, cutting and threshing, fetching fodder and firewood, channelling water for irrigation, and caring for domesticated animals. Each of these activities was backbreaking in a difficult and hostile terrain. Gender roles complemented the production cycle. Earlier men led a semi-nomadic life – grazing cattle on the lower slopes in the winter, moving up to the higher mountains in the monsoon, and helping with the ploughing, harvesting and maintenance of kools (small irrigation channels) in between. The women, meanwhile, were responsible for all of the other farming and household activities as well as the crucial task of seed preservation and propagation.

Keeping the diverse stock of seeds resilient and robust is an essential feature of subsistence farming. With the out migration of male from the villages, the sole responsibilities of all functional activities bore by women. Despite the hard work, it was still a hand-to-mouth existence, with no surplus wealth. Yet unless there were successive years of drought, nobody ever went hungry. This food security was achieved by growing a highly diverse range of crops, with planting and harvests staggered around the year, and over a range of altitudes and ecosystems. This minimised the risk, as one or two crop failures – from among a dozen small ones each year – did not significantly affect the overall production. Furthermore, farmers in Garhwal practiced “baranaaja” (literally, ‘twelve grains’), a unique version of polycropping, or growing a number of crops mixed randomly on the same field, that optimally tapped the soil and solar energy, and also worked as a defence against pests. Most of the activities and decisions related to agriculture are carried out by women farmers only (Table 1).

Table 1: Work Participation at Agriculture Sub System Level

Type of Activities	Women (%)	Men (%)
Preparing the fields	50.7	49.3
Watering the crops	89.7	10.3
Terrace repairing	51.0	49.0
Clod breaking	92.7	7.3
Ploughing and harrowing	46.5	53.5
Carrying and spreading of organic manure	94.7	5.3
Sowing of grains	24.4	75.6
Weeding and tilling	94.4	5.6
Harvesting of crops	94.7	5.3
Gathering and carrying of harvested crops	86.3	13.7
Thrashing of crops	84.2	15.8
Storage of grains	97.2	2.8

Source: Fieldwork 2008-09.

Women are involved in wide range of agricultural activities. Over ninety per cent of activities like watering the plants, clod breaking, spreading organic manure, weeding and tilling, harvesting of crops, and storing grains are carried out by women. All these activities are very much time consuming and laborious. Most of the women still follow mixed cropping of “Barah Anaaj” or the twelve food grains, which is done prior to the Kharif season. These seeds are sown from mid-May to mid-June and harvested from mid-September to mid-October. The fields are left fallow after that, and are prepared again at the end of March. Farmyard manure is applied. Paddy and barnyard millet are sown and harvested by end September. In the Rabi season, wheat, barley and masur dal is grown and harvested by end April. Again in the third year, twelve grains mixed cropping is done. Ragi (finger millet) is the main crop of this system. Amaranth, rajma (kidney beans), lobia, horse gram, math (traditional soya), buck wheat, sesame, mangjeer (tilhan - an oil seed), makka, green gram, black gram, local gram varieties etc. are sown together. The method of mixed cropping has been developed based on the knowledge and experience of the local women and got accepted from generation to generation.

Agriculture system that existed earlier was a closed system when villages were self – sufficient and self dependents. Now with the roads are built, and agriculture extension services are set up to disseminate hybrid seeds, fertilisers and pesticides under an ambitious state plan to promote the ‘Green Revolution’ – despite questions about its appropriateness for mountain ecologies. It is also during this decade that the free allotment of small pockets of agricultural land, which has long been practiced in Garhwal first by the king and then by the state, also came to a halt. As a result, agricultural production could not keep pace with the growth of the local

population. The cumulative effect of these developments was the gradual weakening of subsistence farming and local self-sufficiency. Women who are staying back in villages have recognised the ill effect of using package for agriculture. They are now supporting movement which can lead to better management of their farmlands as earlier.

By the 1990s, households were producing less than half of what they produced two decades earlier, and there was simply not enough food to last through the year. With negligible cash incomes, this meant starvation. The local communities inevitably responded with migration. Though migration had always been a survival strategy in mountainous areas, the extent of the movement witnessed in the middle Himalaya in the last few decades was unprecedented. This became only more acute, as the rapid diffusion of television attracted a new generation to the charms of the city. Many also attribute this rapid out-migration to the spread of standardised formal education, which included a curriculum that made no distinction between rural or urban, let alone mountains or plains, and which prepared students for anything but local occupations.

Inevitably, the migration of men resulted in new social and production dynamics. The level of pastoral activities, dependent as it was on the labour of men, dropped drastically. Within 30 years, the population of domesticated animals plummeted to just a tenth of what it had been. As terrace farming needed animal compost, this further exacerbated the decline of farm productivity. Earlier when men used to be in the village they used to take animals to forest for grazing, but now they have migrated to cities for work. Consequently the burden of animal caring has also been part of women work. Work participation in animal husbandry sector also reveals similar response as in agriculture of more involvement of women than men (Table 2).

Table 2: Work Participation at Livestock Sub System

Type of Activity	Women (%)	Men (%)
Stall feeding	66.4	33.6
Milk extraction	90.9	9.1
Animal pens/bedding replacement		
	95.8	4.2
Animal rearing	55.9	44.1
Medical Care	79.3	20.7

Source: Fieldwork 2008-09.

Socially, a typical pattern soon took shape: the younger men left for low-paying jobs in the cities, while their wives stayed on in the village, looking after the farm and the household, and keeping the 'roots' intact for the men. Meanwhile, for the latter, home was always the place where they were born and raised, despite the fact that they were visiting it for no more than two or three weeks every year. A

dominant picture emerged, one of the absence of young and middle-aged men, and the predominant presence, instead, of children, old couples and young and married women. The village life is not only dependent on agriculture and animal husbandry but also on the forest resources.

Forests are very important component of village life. The major land use in all the surveyed villages is forest land. People are dependent on energy sources, various types of wild berries and food, timber for constructional purposes, medicines, hunting animals, thatching grasses leaf litter for animals, and much more. Their social and cultural life revolved around forests. Firewood constitutes large part of their energy consumption, although with changing connectivity they are using other sources like kerosene and gasoline besides, crop residues, dung, etc. The collection of forest based products takes more than eighty per cent of time of women. Living in the subsistence economy, people of the surveyed villages are very much dependent on the existing forest resources (Table 3).

Table 3: Work Participation at Forestry Sub System

Type of Activity	Women (%)	Men (%)
Litter collection	97.9	2.1
Fodder collection	97.2	2.8
Fuel wood collection	94.4	5.6
Wood log collection	24.4	25.6
Collection of NTFPs	54.5	45.5

Source: Fieldwork 2008-09.

Women mostly travel into forest in groups. These women spend long hours in the forests as part of their daily routines. Their dependence on forest resources has resulted into their understanding of the importance of trees to their existence and care for nature. Perhaps this was the reason that women were in forefront in the Chipko movement to save forest in the Utrakhand region. They are the people who are directly affected by this. The numbers of males do not go frequently, but they fetch more than a woman per visit as they can travel for long distances and can carry more load. Moreover, they climb the trees to cut them. Most of these females belong to middle age group, going once or twice a week into the forest for wood collection. On an average, a woman spends four to ten hours per trip to collect wood.

The collection of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) includes- food (nuts, fruits, mushroom, herbs, games and so on), medicines, fodder, building materials, honey, rattan, bamboo, gums, aromatics, ornamental plants and resins (Ruiz Perez and Arnold, 1996), along with other services such as grazing in forest and range of environmental activities. NTFPs contribute to household food security and family nutrition through a variety of mechanisms. Hills and Mountain communities especially in the remote areas are found to use forest to meet a significant portion of

their regular diet. In predominantly subsistence economies, many forest and tree foods make important contributions to household nutrition.

Tree foods comprise mainly fruits and seeds, nectars and saps, stems and tubers, leaves, twigs and mushrooms. Garhwali women and men had been partners in the agro-pastoral production system. This equation had dissolved under the compelling force of out-migration. The absence of men not only strengthened the dominance of women in farming, but also in other household affairs. Given the patriarchal structure, land ownership of course did not pass to the women, even while their dependence on cash remittances sent by the men also increased. Nonetheless, the influence of the absent husbands gradually diminished in local decision-making. Consequently, many of the household or domestic activities have been categorised as women's work. There are many household activities which are done only by women (Table 4).

Table 4: Work Participation in Domestic Sub System

Type of Activity	Women (%)	Men (%)
Water collection	85.3	14.7
Food preparation	86.7	13.3
Washing of utensils	87.7	12.3
Child care	89.1	10.9
Education care	53.8	46.2
Cleaning of clothes	87.7	12.3
House caring	87.7	12.3
Grain and Spices Graining	100	0
Groceries purchasing	52.7	47.3
Handicraft preparation	71.6	28.4
House repairing	25.5	74.5

Source: Fieldwork 2008-09.

Out migration of men has given more power to women. Traditionally, men did little during the six months that they were at home, when they were not busy with the cattle. They just use to play cards, drink and chat at the roadside shops. Even when the men were in the village, they followed the division of gender roles rather strictly; if they were idle, they would not lift a finger to do a task that would be categorised as 'women's work'. Household or domestic work is not considered as economic activity, mainly because of its use value as exchange value (Debra 1999), this indicates reason behind neglect of women's economic contribution to

household1 in particular and society in general. The most striking characteristic of household labor is that, whether employed or not, women continue to do the majority of house work (Shelton & John 1996). The women of surveyed villages, although they act as the backbone of the economy, possess immense tolerance, intellect, high level of coordination but the gender disparity does not give them any legal rights. The subsistence farming conducted by women has been regarded as informal sector than cash crops sown by male farmers. But over the periods women have realized that there are many problems with chemical fertilisers and synthetic pesticides to be used massively in crops. They are also dependent on the supply of these inputs from outside. Traditional mountain agriculture is truly a solar-powered ecosystem in which the kinetic energy received from sunlight is stored as organic molecules by green plants, which, in turn, is used for plant growth and maintenance. Additionally, the cropland constantly receives a "subsidy" from natural forest eco-systems (which are also solar-powered). Therefore, such a farming system may conveniently be termed as "natural subsidised solar-powered agro-ecosystem". Green Revolution agriculture, on the contrary, is a "fossil fuel subsidised solar-powered agro-ecosystem" in which petroleum based inputs are to be used inevitably.

Relying completely on renewable sources of energy (inexhaustible sunlight, forest biomass and crop residues, human and animal muscle power, and microbial decomposition processes in the soil) the mountain farming system is controlled by ecological principles. Such a farming system must embrace the characteristics of sustainability. Villagers described Garhwal of a century back as one in which all members of a family participated in agricultural work, had enough to eat, and remained healthy. The Green Revolution agriculture, contrarily, relies on precious and finite energy sources and such a food production system cannot guarantee sustainability. Moreover they earlier used to save seeds for the next season but now with new methodology they have to buy these inputs which required lot of cash. When asked, most of women favoured earlier system of farming where they were self sufficient. They are actively involved in Save the Seeds campaign. Most of the women are considered subordinate to men in every respect in many societies. But in the hills where women are hard working are stronger than men. They take most of the decision in the households especially the older women in the house are very dominating than the younger daughter in law. Women recognise the power of being women in the society. In the surveyed villages it has been realized that they are more organized, systematic and dependent on each other than the men in villages. They have good social status in the village community. Even the participation level in various activities is also very high. The ranking is based on their participation in various community programmes. Despite the fact they are spending long hours in day today activities, over ninety per cent of the time they are also contributing in society's work by actively participating in cultural festivals, panchayat meeting and movements in the village (Table 5).

Table 5: Ranking Matrix showing Social Status of Women in Community

Status Parameters	Participation Level		
	Active	Low	No
Participation in festivals	x		
Knowledge of medicinal plants and curing illness	x		
Initiative in community work	x		
Independent marriage initiatives			x
Power of decision making	x		
Entrepreneur quality	x		
Participation in Panhayat	x		
Participation in Mahila Mangal Dal activities	x		
Involvement in Beej Bachao Andolan	x		
Participation in local deity function	x		
Believe in local knowledge system	x		
Believes in indigenous resource management systems	x		
Awareness of social issues		x	
Practicing participatory resource use/sharing	x		

Source: Fieldwork 2008-0.

With the changing times, changes in socio-cultural pattern, lack of literacy, migration of the male population, tough topography and the environmental degradation has intensified their problems leading to gender disparity. Since ages the women of Garhwal Himalayas is not only the bread earner but also adopted the role of a socio-political activist. They are capable to take decisions at all levels. It can be gauged from the fact that the women of Garhwal have always been in the forefront of the movements largely associated with the well being of the society like Chipko movement-for the protection of environment, anti-liquor agitation-for the well being of the male population, Uttarakhand movement-for the political identity and Beej Bachao Andolaan. They are also participating very actively in Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan under the National Programme of Education of Girls at the Elementary Level (NPEGEL). They show no involvement only on decision of marriage is concerned. This is also contradictory. The girl to be married has not been given right to say but women as a mother does have their say in the households. Low participation also can be seen on the social issues which are not part of their society.

Conclusion

Women's work remains unrecognized and in unorganized sector of economy despite the fact that their contribution to family is vital. At the local level women participation is very high in the functional system of village economy. Women are stronger, systematic and more organized as a village society than their men counterpart. Socially, they have high status as they are the backbone of the domestic-agriculture-livestock-forest sub system existing in the villages of Garhwal.

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