



**GENDER PERSPECTIVES FROM
THE MAHAKALI BASIN**

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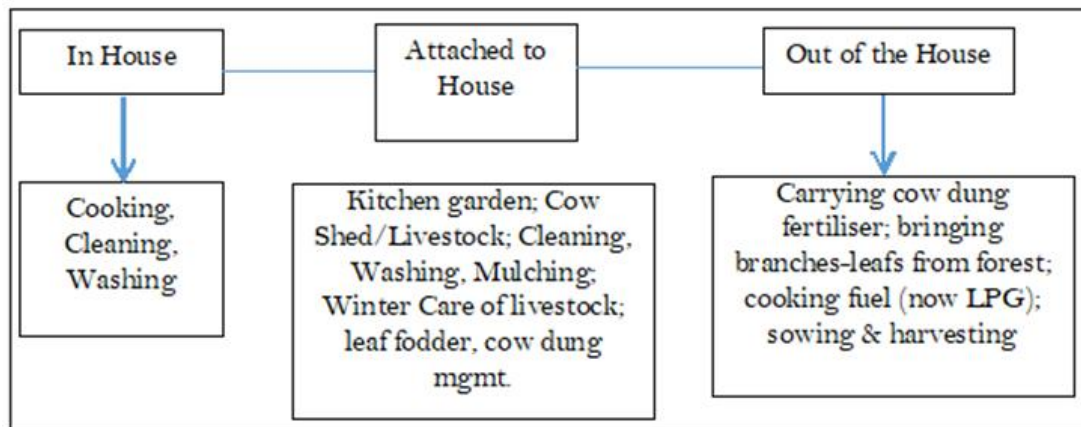
GENDER PERSPECTIVES FROM THE MAHAKALI BASIN

Women have remained the mainstay of social and economic structure of the hill regions as situations compel men to migrate to seek more economic opportunities and earn for the family. Traditionally, women have been part of the sustenance economy and their productive time has not been equated with the economic benefits or economic value they accrue to the family and society at large.

The current field visit was undertaken to understand these very perspectives from the women themselves. The methodology was kept simple and a village wise visit was made and most of the information is based on the interviews and dialogues conducted with the women in their communities. This is not a conclusive study and is purely based on the field narrations and puts the situation as it is observed with a scope of improvement

Preview

Women in the hills have a wide ranging charter of works on their hands and lot of it relates to forests, livestock, farm management and household chores. Women get affected if there are pressures on these related resources both internally or externally.



The involvement of women in the environmental movements is well documented and acknowledged – from the Chipko Movement to their contribution in the struggle of formation of Uttarakhand as a separate hilly state. These instances have also put them in the forefront of rational decision making.

With 50% of seats reserved for women candidates in the panchayati raj system more than a decade back has played a bit of role in shifting the power balance a little bit as most of the women are still a proxy and their men actually play a decisive role in terms of physical works or influence the decisions. The women empowerment programmes, especially awareness generation and education on variety of subjects has taken some positive gains for the women too. In the year 2012, women reservation for the post of Sarpanch in the van panchayats was done by amending the Van Panchayat Rules in September 2012. Most of the changes brought about are socio-political and will require a sustainable development agenda.

Field Observations



Group Discussion at Village Jogbura

In the villages of Jogbura and Bagarihat under the Jogbura Gram Panchayat, women are intensely engaged in agriculture and other traditional works and it is their task to bring back fodder and fuelwood. This village has drinking water taps at household level, thus women do not spend much time going to the nearby streams. Most of these families have their own land, 5-7% of the total population is engaged in share cropping. About 15-17 families are such where women have some kind of social security on their name, be it land or house and they are mostly involved in agricultural activities and livestock management. The two self-help groups (SHGs) existed in Bagarihat prior to 2013 but these are no more active. In Jogbura, women complain about health issues in the village in last few years. The village head mentioned the lack of MNREGA, or any form of development work.

Titri is predominantly a OBC village and no migration has taken place. There is no tap for drinking water or canal/irrigation facility till date and the whole village either fetch water from the river or is dependent on the rain for irrigating land. It had maximum share croppers and hence the economics status of the village was not very good. Devoid of any health facilities and anganwadi, they depend on available facilities in Askot or Jauljibi. People blame under developed village due to negligence of the village head or the decision makers.

Women in villages around Jauljibi (Dutigaon, Jauljibi) are more independent. This comes naturally to them as their men travel to their ancestral places during summers and women have to take charge back in the valley. They were financially secured as most of them were involved in some or the other form of economic activity. Jauljibi is a bustling business and trading centre for communities and traders across borders and the annual fair provides an

opportunity for people to earn from this fair by getting involved in services or selling artefacts or preparing dishes to serve the visitors.

Sunar village is predominantly inhabited by Sunar (gold smith) community and are relatively better off. A meeting was held with women-folk of Sunar village and the salient points emerging from this meeting are being given below.

- There existed many women SHGs which gradually ceased to function owing to lack of guide regarding activities to take up. At present 5 SHGs – Jai Isht Devi, Jai Sai Sangh, Jai Jagori, Jan Ma Bhagwati and Jai Ma Bhawani - exist but most of these are engaged in micro-credit and inter-lending without engaging their members in any employment generating avenues. Many SHGs have collected Rs. 100/month from their members during 2009-2011 and are rotating this amount among themselves. These SHGs have 8-10 members each, one of them has 18 members. Perhaps lack of guidance is a factor in getting these SHGs non-functional. These groups are mostly working in the style of 'committee' where members take loan when required and return it later.



- Two groups active in Sunar are associated with BAIF and NABARD. One was earlier related to Samakhya but now it is defunct as the programme support came to an end in 2015
- Another SHG is actively engaged in providing work to its members in preparing woollen garments and knit-wear.
- Pine leave is another major issue as getting rid of them is major challenge. Their shear quantum makes it difficult to address the issue. Generally first these needle-like leaves are allowed to decompose *in situ* and when these have decomposed to a certain extent, these are used in farms as organic manure. But many a times, men point that wherever 'kaccha gobar' i.e. moist cow dung is used, it gives rise to certain worms which are likened by the wild boar and due to no other feed available, they attack the fields and if the land is sown, they destroy the seedlings also.
- Many women said they don't go to forest for fodder rather they purchase it from open markets at a cost of Rs. 950 per bag (50 kg). They go to forest more for the firewood in the winter. An important fact is that where road have been made, this type of change is fast.
- Women knew about the central government scheme 'Ujjwala' which is being popularised a lot. On being asked about the number of beneficiaries from Ujjawala project (initiated by central government to reduce pressure of fuelwood on forest, by

providing free LPG cylinder to the poor), they informed not a single family has received any gas connection under this scheme, probably they will. This shows that consistent awareness campaigns registers in the mind of people.

- Most of the vegetables, almost 70% are grown at home gardens, or sometimes in farms. Some people also grow vegetables in the poly houses. Though government provides subsidy on poly houses number of people getting this benefit from government is very few. In our area, BAIF is providing 80% subsidy. Normally a poly house costs Rs. 20,000, out of which a family gives Rs. 2,000 and BAIF also provides Rs. 2000 and rest is subsidy. Moreover, BAIF also provides subsidized saplings for the poly house.

Women of Dutigaon have to relatively take care of everything as men engage in land and livestock management in their villages in the upper reaches. Women are involved in selling handicrafts like carpets, shawls, blankets etc. and wild grass to horse sellers during the mela (fair). Dutigaon has two self help groups.

Tham has its agricultural land near Garjiya. The women here are mostly living under a strong patriarchal structure, with no voice of their own. During the whole group discussion, hardly any women joined the conversation, only few old women participated. The villagers have hardly any access to amenities here, even for small needs they have to travel 4-5 Km downhill. As informed by a local villager pregnant cattle died due to lack of veterinary care. It was great loss for the family as it was the only cattle they had. Buying new cattle means they need cash, that either needs to be taken on loan or by selling a chunk of land.

Pati belt has been declared by the state Fisheries Department as a 'fish belt' yet the full potential of this remained to be explored. In Badait village a women's meeting was held and the important issues emerging from this are given below.

- A canal passes through the area but its broken from here and there resultantly whatever water comes to canal remains unutilized and is wasted. Participants said that this should be repaired from the funds granted under MNREGA. It was brought to the attention of women that in the wake of water crisis in most of the rural tracts, the Government has declared that from now onwards MNREGA funds will be utilized only on creation of water sources and water distribution lines. Now most of the villages have Panchayat Bhavan, schools, approach roads, etc. and hence focus should be only to create water sources. This must be brought to the knowledge of Panchayat in the Gram Panchayat meeting and people should demand rejuvenation of canal to bring it back to life through repair and maintenance work. This is important, particularly for women who have to use water in many ways at home and in fields.



- Here too people are severely affected by the onslaught of wild boar on their crops. Some women said that we should get the metallic fences in our fields to protect crops from wild animals. But other women said that in other villages this has failed as wild boar dig under the fence, enter the field and destroy standing crops. Moreover, many families are economically not in a position to purchase metallic wires and poles. Additionally, it brings the issues of mining, displacement and land destruction into center-stage.
- Migration too is an issue and it is evident that all the problems are inter-linked.
- Women have been traditional collectors of fodder, fuel and MFP from the forests. In order to mitigate women's drudgery especially the collection of fuel wood, government has started Ujjwala scheme under which LPG gas connection is given to poor families. But in this village too, no family has been benefited under this scheme.
- People have taken initiatives on their own like in Chaukhtutia area where they have been making pickles, jams, fruit juice etc. for augmenting household economy. For example, in neighbouring Himachal Pradesh 60-70% of state revenue is generated from the horticulture sector but in Uttarakhand it remains in an infant state, despite both states having similar ecological and climatic conditions and it is high time the Uttarakhand state should pay its attention on this neglected sector.

Dutibagarh, a village situated very close to Dutigaon and Jauljibi. It has more independent and self-sustaining women as compared to other nearby villages. About 80% of the villagers are literate and have land in Jauljibi and in Drama Valley. They are especially dependent on the Jauljibi fair for their economy as do many other from upper valleys. The women like every other village of Uttarakhand are involved in agriculture, along with handicraft making and running small shops.



Khanpaira's economy depends on the Jauljibi market as it is the only source of trade for

them. As most of the women here are illiterate and are responsible for daily chores and the farm duties. Most of the men have migrated outside in order to get some work.

Kimkhola has some van raji and other tribals. This village has a very fertile cultivable land and people take three crops a year. The women here are more concerned about climate change that has taken toll over the agricultural production, hence leading to an increase in migration. Most women were illiterate accounting to about 90% of the total population. Every villager has at-least 15-20 livestock and had are quite independent on their own, they grow their own grains and had enough vegetable to sustain the family.



Agricultural Field across Village Jamtari

Jamtari is situated just on the right banks of Goriganga, and is considered one of the most productive in agriculture. Women are engaged throughout the day across the year as they take 3 crops during the year. Subsistence agriculture, animal husbandry, and income generation through small scale trade, and wage and casual labour constitute the main sources of livelihoods in these mountain communities Even after so much of agricultural produce, about 50% of the population has migrated outside the village, as most of the men are in army or other private jobs. Women go for higher education; many are pursuing higher studies in Dharchula. On one hand, migration improves economic conditions and ensures food security in terms of remittance while on the other hand, it has inadvertently women are burdened with extra responsibilities¹.

Munni devi is a traditional vaidh (traditional healer which uses local herbs for curing) and lives in Goragaon, Pitthoragarh. She collects herbs from the local forests near



¹ Hoermann B., Kollmair M., Labour migration and remittances in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region, Status Report, International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), Kathmandu, Nepal, 2007

her village and few which are available during the melas. These are useful locally to cure conditions of fever, skin problems, diabetes, kidney stones, jaundice, typhoid etc. She says this is her occupation and she survives by this alone, her husband also works as a labour but that is not sufficient. Knowledge transfer to next generation is becoming an issue as no one wants to take up this cause.

Wrapping up

With the progressing literacy levels², women are finding employment opportunities in the hills (although limited) but many have to migrate to the city alongwith men once their children require higher education and parents have aspiration for the child. In many villages, women are going less to the forests over the years, especially the younger generation due to a variety of factors. When asked, 'Is lessening of forests or degraded forests are the reason for women not reaching to the forest, the answer was mixed i.e. forests in the surrounding are degraded and one has to spend a good amount of time reaching to the upper reaches of forests which are still good'. One of the women said 'we purchase the fodder (ready mix) from the market for feeding our animals, the need for large volume of oak leaves gets reduced as the nutrition value of ready mix fodder supplements the leaf fodder.

Issues emerging from the women's meetings

Major issues emerging from the specific women-focussed meetings are listed below.

1. Loss of Livelihood Occupation

Agriculture has been the traditional livelihood source since centuries but in last few decades it has lost its pristine position owing to a number of factors – changes in land cover, soil erosion, loss and destruction of agricultural land, non-available and/or inadequate irrigation facilities, increasing man-animal conflict, decreased soil fertility and so on and so forth, leading to large-scale migration from hills of Uttarakhand. Women are still shouldering as 47.82% cultivators and 52% of marginal workers i.e. sustaining the majority of livelihoods in the hills.

2. Rejuvenation of Irrigation Network

Irrigation especially in places where agriculture is still being practiced can strengthen the agri-economy and pressure on women may ease. Water-centric development approach should be initiated at the village level.

3. Migration

Migration from many districts of Uttarakhand has become a matter of grave concern now as its frequency and number have risen sharply in last decade. Migration has a direct influence on role of women and thus Government response to bridge this gap by amply provisioning for rapid assessments could lead to much valid recommendations at the block/nyay panchayat level. Backbone of agriculture needs to be resurrected, irrigation should be made available to farmers and all this should be aimed to make farming an economically lucrative proposition, otherwise it can't be stopped. Ancillary agricultural activities needs to be established

² In 2001, female literacy was around 60% and it has reached 70.7% in 2011, a marked improvement after the formation of state and several education programmes like the sarva shiksha abhiyan (SSA)

4. Distorted Ecological Equilibrium, Environmental Destruction and Climate Change

Increasing menace of wild boar is a reflection of extremely twisted prey-predator chain where elimination of tigers and other cat family carnivorous members has given rise to the dominance of wild boar. Deterioration of their natural habitat and shrinking vegetal cover has forced these animals to look for other pastures and hence attacks on crops in agricultural fields. Forest-depletion has brought adverse consequences like micro-climatic changes, changes in soil physics and chemistry, changes in precipitation and rainfall patterns and other akin factors jointly leading to adversity of agricultural yield. Climate change has already set in as corroborated by nature, extent and magnitude of snowfall in frequency and numbers, receding snow line playing havoc with apple cultivators. Horticulture remains in infancy in Uttarakhand so people literally have nothing to fall back. The state should take initiative to address these issues before it is too late.

5. Re-energizing women SHGs

Women SHGs started with much enthusiasm have failed to live upto the expectations and there is an urgent need for introspection to analyse where things went wrong and adopt a course correction. These SHGs have the potential to transform rural scenario if they function at their full potential,

Many of the SHGs/Mahila mangal dals will require infusion of energy as well as finance alongwith sustainable activities and roles for the upkeep of these smaller decentralised institutions.