

# Capitalist Transformation, Ecological Degradation & Women's Health : A Case Study of Kumaun (Uttarakhand)

**Dr. G. C. Pandey**

*Asso. Prof., P.G. Deptt. Sociology KGK P.G. College, Moradabad, (U.P.)*

**Abstract :** *In Kumaon, women's everyday lives have been adversely affected at micro and macro level by capitalist transformation. Capitalist-patriarchal mode of development at macro (forest and ecosystem) and at micro (village community) level has destroyed the rich and varied biodiversity of the region. Destruction of diversity and creation of monoculture has increased the workload of rural women and adversely affected their health and nutritional status. The capitalist-transformation and introduction of cash economy have made the situation worse by destroying the subsistence economy creating a threat to livelihood. The destruction of forest and grazing land, unsustainability of common property resources and change in land use have reduced the productivity of land. This has affected women negatively by increasing their daily work burden with reduced nutritional intake as market economy has drastically changed the cropping pattern. The marginalisation of women and the destruction of biodiversity (ecology) are twin processes. This paper is an attempt to analyse how this twin process of capitalist transformation and ecological destruction has affected rural women's health and nutritional status in socialist-feminist perspective.*

**Keywords :** *Women's Health, Capitalist transformation, Subsistence economy, Deforestation, Artificial surplus*

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

**Dr. G. C. Pandey**

*Capitalist Transformation,  
Ecological Degradation &  
Women's Health : A Case  
Study of Kumaun  
(Uttarakhand)*

RJPSS 2018, Vol. 43, No.1,  
pp. 9-17, Article No.2,  
Received on 28/01/2018  
Approved on 31/01/2018

**Online available at:**

[http://anubooks.com/  
?page\\_id=442](http://anubooks.com/?page_id=442)

## **Introduction**

Capitalist - patriarchal mode of development at macro (forest and ecosystem level) and at micro (village -community) level has destroyed the rich and varied biodiversity of Kumaon region and has adversely affected the everyday life of women. The destruction of diversity and the creation of monoculture has increased women's workload and adversely affected their health and nutrition in the rural Kumaun in Uttarakhand. This paper attempts to analyse how twin processes of capitalist transformation and ecological degradation has affected rural women's health and nutritional status in socialist- feminist perspective. ■

The Theoretical perspective incorporates women and ecology, eco-feminist perspective is gender perspective within environmental concern and the main thrust of this paper is on disproportionate impact of environmental degradation on women. This perspective links the subordination of nature to the subordination of women. They interact more intensely with nature than men and have a perspective of their own regarding environment and development. Women as the main victim of environmental degeneration also seen as being the most appropriate participants in healing the alienated human and non-human nature (Ynestra, K. 1989) because subjugation of women and subjugation of nature have occurred together and are co-related.

This paper is an attempt to analyse how the degradation of environment as a consequence of capitalist mode of development in rural Kumaun has adversely affected the lives of poor peasant women, their work load and their health in a particular manner.

Kumaun, earlier was a part of the state of Uttar Pradesh and now a part of newly created state of Uttarakhand. Its western frontiers "(these) extend from longitude 79° 15' to 80° 45' and latitude 31° 4' to 30° 10' a line about 166 Kms Long"(Trail, 1851). Almora, Pithoragarh, and Nainital three districts were reorganized to create three more districts namely Udham Singh Nagar, Champavat and Bageshwar after Uttarakhand came into being. Forest cover in the state is declining steadily. Economic development, capitalist transformation, open market economy, and growth in human and cattle population all have destabilized the mountain system which were the main stay of hill life. The economy of Kumaun, except in the terai region, is based mainly on agriculture, horticulture and forestry. There has been a shift from semi-feudal type of economy to a market economy in many areas of Kumaun. The concept of 'Capitalist transformation'

shows how the process of inflow of capital – in terms of the introduction of a market economy, commodities production and money – has changed the relationship at macro (institutions, state, larger collectives) as well as at micro (group dynamics and interpersonal behaviour in family, household, village, small groups) levels.

The ruthless commercial exploitation of natural resources in the region which had began with the arrival of British rule in India continued in the independent India. It destroyed the isolation and subsistence economy of this area. Even after the independence the system failed to bring about a new turn and change in the lives of the people of the region. In spite of declared objectives and policies, in a fundamental sense the story of colonial rule, a story of exploitation and anti-development in the name of capitalist transformation has been repeated. Due to commercial exploitation of forests two most important tree *Deodar* and *Oak* have become endangered. Due to commercial reasons *Chirpine* was propagated. A policy of monoculture is being executed at the cost of ecological balance and the general good of poor and peasant class women. As there is a close association between capitalist, transformation, environment, work, health, nutrition and gender issues in Kumaun Hills, from the perspective of women environmental issues are quite directly and clearly issues of survival (Shiva,V.1993).

The gender based division of labour, at home and outside, spontaneously lead women to interact with the surrounding resource base far more extensively than men, which in turn results in the differential impact of resource degradation on men and women. Therefore before venturing into the discussion about capitalist-transformation in Kumaun region women need to be placed at the focus of the discussion because research has shown that they do not usually benefit from capitalist transformation. The green revolution is a case in point as it has had a negative impact on many facets of women's lives. This impact has been felt in two main areas - womens participation in rural labour and their relation to the land as part of the food chain.

The influence of green revolution on female participation in agriculture has differed depending on class, caste and region. The women of hilly area of rural Kumaun has not witnessed any life changing role of technology in the region but it has had limited impact on women in other areas of Kumaun. Capitalist transformation and the green revolution are one and the same in India- the former the goal, the latter the means(Cranny,2001).

The green revolution and high yield varieties programme have not been successful in hilly areas (Shah,1997). The central Himalaya had previously been identified as a centre of crop diversity(Khushoo,1992). But the studies (Maikhuri,et.al.2001) of villages in the Kumaun indicates that cropping intensities and areas of several traditional crop varieties have decreased drastically over the years. Nutritive value of various traditional crops and medicinal value of traditional crop earlier grown in the area have been given in the following tables (No.1)

**Table 1**

**Nutritive Value Of Traditional Crops Of The Kumaun**

Traditional Name	Crops Species	Moisture(g)	Value (Cab)	Calorific Protein(g)	Carbohydrate	Fat (g) (g)	Fibre (g)	Mineral
Chuva	Amaranthus Spp.	10	320	15.5	60.1	1.9	9.0	3.5
Madira	Echinochloa frumentacea	11.9	307	6.2	65.5	2.2	8.3	4.4
Madura	Eleusina Coracane	12.4	332	7.1	72.5	1.5	3.7	2.8
Oggal	Fagopyrim	11.3	323	10.3	65.5	2.4	8.6	2.3
Papad	Fagopuriun Tataricum	13.2	349	9.2	63.2	2.0		
Owajau	Hordoum Himalayons	10.8	351	13.1	62.3	1.2	4.2	2.7
Jau	Hordown Vilgaro	11.0	336	12.6	66.8	2.0	5.0	2.6
Gahat	Macrotylome Unifloriun	11.8	321	22.0	57.2	0.5	5.3	3.2
Bhanga	Panicum Miliaxeum	11.9	341	12.5	70.5	1.1	2.2	1.9
Kauni	Setaria Italica	11.2	331	12.3	60.9	4.3	8.0	3.3
Rains	Vigna angularis	13.4	323		24.1 54.5	1.0	3.8	1.2

Source: Maikhuri, R.K. et.al. in Himalayan Paryavaran, The Journal of Environmental Protection Society, 2000.

The other major impact of the green revolution has been reduction in the number of crops cultivated and in their marketability. Among the traditional crops,

*chuva*, *potato*, and *rajma* have shown significant average increase at higher elevation following increased marketability. *Bhangeera* (*pascilla fruscens*), *til* (*sesamum indicum*) and *sarson* (*brassica compestris*), these traditional cooking mediums have been replaced by HYV *Sarson*. *Ghee* (clarified butter) have become marketable products resulting in a decrease in fat sources for local consumption.

Capitalist transformation and penetration of cash economy have reduced the availability of subsistence crops such as *madua* (*eleusina coracane*), *madira* (*echinochloa frumentacea*), *gahat* (*macrotylema isniflorum*), *phaphar* (*fagopyrum tatarica*), *koda*, *kauni* (*setaria italica*) and *rains* (*vigna spp.*) and are substituted by HYV Crops and the income from it is not necessarily invested in better food and is rather used in purchasing other consumer needs. Not only does the burden of any ill health in the family falls directly on the women but given the low nutritional level of women, both in absolute and relative terms and the socially imposed gender discrimination in intra-family food distribution, any decrease in nutritional level affects women most severally.

The staple diet of people here consists of *chapatis*, *dal*, milk and curd and some fruits and vegetables. The most common vegetables available here are potatoes, *lahi* (*brassica compestris*), *pinalue*, *gaderi* (*colocassia himalayensis*) and *torriyaa* (*brassica spp.*). But these vegetables are available for very short periods during the year. Other vegetables such as egg plant cauliflower, cabbage and ladies finger are used economically as they are expensive. Unavailability of green leafy vegetables might explain the most common deficiency of iron, folic acid and vitamin-A widely reported in the area. The most common nutritional deficiency among the women in India is iron deficiency and anaemia is. "60-80 percent off pregnant women suffer from anemia and 20 percent of maternal mortality is due to it. They live with chronic fatigue, breathlessness on excretion, headaches and palpitation often experience heavy bleeding during childbirth and give birth to low birth weight babies (Shiva, M. 1993).

While decreased nutrition affects the entire family negatively, its impact on women is more severe because of the already low level of nutrition that they receive. Women generally eat after the male members and the children of the family. Hence, they generally get a smaller share of food supplies, both in relation to other family members and also in relation to their own needs. Ecological degradation and catastrophic deforestation have reduced the availability of many nutritional wild food products and have direct impact on women's nutrition as they are the main collectors as well as consumers of these forest produce.

The important wild berries and fruits available earlier in abundance in the forest were *kafal* (*myrica esculenta*), *ghingarū* (*ryracantha crenulata*), *hessalu* (*rubus ellipticus*), *kilmora* (*berberis asiatica*), and many medicinal herbs too women these days report unavailability of these forest produces because of deforestation and monoculture plantation whatever little quantity is available is sold by children to local shop keepers. Hence, ecological degradation and erosion of forest biodiversity in the area has resulted in depleting food resources adding to various nutritional deficiency among the women in rural Kumaun.

Reduced availability of biomass and ecological deterioration leads to lower agricultural productivity which compels women to buy essential requirements from local shops mostly on credit ultimately resulting in increased level of poverty. Often women cut daily consumption of milk, ghee and other vegetables and fruits grown, depriving themselves and children of basic needs in order to earn some money by selling these products to local agents to fulfil other requirements of the household. Thus, they create 'artificial surpluses'. The degradation of environment has also led to the reduced agriculture productivity, and consequently no surplus agriculture produce to barter the supplies and staple that they can not produce. Therefore, artificial surplus are created to meet out the growing consumer demands which deprive women of basic nutritional requirements (Cranny,2001). The village economy of Kumaun is subsistence and depend heavily on agriculture. Women take active part in agricultural activities. The women's day is divided between the domestic work (cooking cleaning and child care) and the non-domestic work or the chores outside the home (collecting fuel- wood, fodder, water and agricultural task).

A study (Pandey,2005) conducted in 2005 clearly indicates that hill women devote 16.57 hours in a day for performing various domestic and non- domestic task. The percentage analysis of women's daily work clearly reveals that women spend 63.13 percent time (10.46 hrs) on non-domestic activities. These women spend about 36.87 percent (6.11 hrs) time on the domestic front. This analysis clearly indicates that hill women spend the major portion of their time doing non-domestic activities. Agriculture and animal husbandry together account for 32.10 percent (5.32 hrs.) of the total time. As the ecological condition worsens, the long march in search of fuelwood and fodder becomes even longer and tiresome. Collection of fuel for hearth and fodder for cattle alone take nearly 4-5 hours. Probably no other group is more affected by environmental degradation than rural women (Jain,S.1984).

Water is another crucial and inevitable element for human survival and when the biomass in a surrounding environment disappears, water sources like streams and *naula* (spring water) tend to disappear soon after the monsoon. Although tap water is provided in some of the villages by the govt. but it has failed to solve the water problems of women folk. Different studies give the evidences that women have to fetch water for cooking, washing, cleaning, drinking and for cattle etc. from as much as 2-3 Km. away climbing up and down an average 200-400 ft. everyday. Women who produce most or all of subsistence goods wish to maintain the status-quo by retaining the traditional eco-system. Women see the question of forest conservation as one of their survival (Jain,1984) .

The problem of women of Kumaun does not end with their fight against exploitation of natural resources but the great problem that male migration has brought, ironically is borne by the women left behind. Currently over 55 percent of the households in the region are dependent only the money received from the migrant family members, because the income earned from agriculture and other sources is much below the level of their requirements (Mehta,1999). According to Weber migration of men folk in search of work, leaving women alone to cope with the drudgery and strenuous life of villages where they lead their life as ‘quasi-widows’(Weber,1988) is not a new phenomenon.

Finally, the extraordinary work load affects the health status of women. They get to eat even less food than that is required consequently most of them are malnourished and face various types of health problems. Besides, the years of back breaking hard work ,over exertion and malnutrition make them vulnerable to a number of diseases, which often cause premature death. The basic health facilities are unavailable in rural areas of Kumaun and women hardly get time to avail even those little health facilities that are available there. A study conducted by Pandey (2005), shows that hill women work for 16.49 hours a day. The worst condition of women’s reproductive health can be gauged by the fact that child birth most of the time takes place at homes and these women are assisted by the untrained elderly women. They continue their back breaking work almost until child birth and often immediately after the child birth.

In the context of rural women of Kumaon the health issues and environmental issues are all most same and interrelated. Erosion of health is a consequence of environmental degradation and is further aggravated by increased work burden at home and outside. “Environmental problems become health problems because there

is continuity between the earth body and human body through the processes that maintain life. Ecological erosion leads to deprivation of essentials.” (Shiva, V. (1993). The minor forest produce that use to supplement income and food supply are not as readily available as it was before the capitalist transformation. Although nutritional status of the whole family is related to economic status but degradation of environment and capitalist transformation have an immediate negative impact on the health and nutritional status of rural women due to their inferior status in the family and gender discrimination in intra-family food distribution.

In the final analysis it can be submitted that the pitiable predicament of rural women in Kumaun is owing to capitalist transformation, penetration of market economy and unfair division of labour based on gender and ecological degradation.

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