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## **Bearing the Burden: Struggles of Women of Uttarakhand to Save Their Mountains**

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### **Abstract**

Uttarakhand, the 27<sup>th</sup> state of Republic of India was carved out of UP on 9<sup>th</sup> November 2000. Major portion of Uttarakhand is mountainous and in the form of Himalayas it has one of the youngest mountain systems of the world. The majestic Himalayan mountain ranges dominate the geography of Uttarakhand, forming the northern boundary of the state. Some of the notable peaks in this region include Nanda Devi, Trisul, and Kamet. Nanda Devi, the second-highest peak in India, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. These snow-capped peaks not only add to the scenic beauty but also contribute to the state's rich biodiversity. Ecologically, it is very fragile and prone to frequent natural disasters like earthquake and landslide. It is now also facing severe impacts of global warming and climate change like changing weather patterns, drying up of traditional water sources, rampant fires among others. Since in mountain

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regions, women are traditionally the primary caretaker of their households, they have to bear the brunt of these ecological and man-made disasters. The women of Uttarakhand have always been on the front line whenever it comes to saving their mountains. From Chipko Andolan to Maiti movement, women have always been the focal point.

In this study, women's growing role in conservation and preservation of flora and fauna of Uttarakhand's mountains will be studied. Additionally, the changing dynamics and social structures of villages of Uttarakhand due to migration and women's position in these changing scenarios will also be studied. A brief study of a village of Uttarakhand will be done to get a clear understanding of women's challenges and their involvement with the surrounding environment. It will also try to suggest some solutions to solve the problems faced by the women of Uttarakhand.

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### **Keywords**

Uttarakhand, Women, Environment, Mountains.

According to Indian state of forest report 2019, Recorded Forest Area (RFA) in the State is 38,000 sq km of which 26,547 sq km is Reserved Forest, 9,885 sq km is Protected Forest and 1,568 sq km is Unclassed Forests. Based on the findings of IRS Resourcesat-2 LISS III satellite data of the period Oct 2017 to Oct 2018, the Forest Cover in the State is 24,303.04 sq km, which is 45.44 % of the State's geographical area. As per Census 2011, of the total population of Uttarakhand state, around 69.77 percent live in the villages of rural areas. In rural regions of Uttarakhand state, female sex ratio per 1000 males was 1000. Uttarakhand is divided into two major regions, Garhwal and Kumaon, each with its distinct geographical features. Garhwal, to the west, is known for its rough terrain and high-altitude meadows. Kumaon, to the east, is characterized by picturesque valleys

and dense forests. The two divisions are separated by the Alaknanda and Bhagirathi rivers, which later converge to form the Ganga. Traditionally in these mountain regions, women are responsible for farming, cattle grazing, and gathering firewood among other things. Therefore, they have a direct relationship with their forests and surroundings. This symbiotic relationship has evolved over the time but essentially it is what defines the complex societal structure of Kumaon and Garhwal. The society is dependent on the natural resources of their surroundings and these resources have kept them alive in these remote areas. Migration has also changed the dynamics of these societies. Most men now work in cities and women are left behind to look after their families. Traditionally, a patriarchal society, now due to this male migration is transforming into a quasi-matriarchal society.

Mountain regions of Uttarakhand are facing severe challenges in the form of rampant forest fires, cloudbursts, deforestation, mining and landslides. A study of 16,206 fire points across Uttarakhand between 2011 and 2020, showed that the maximum forest fire frequency was 34. The no-fire frequency class happened across 13,619 fire points which cover an area of 84.04%, whereas the low fire frequency class occurred across 1784 fire points covering an area of 11.08%; the moderate fire frequency class was across 674 fire points, which covers 4.15% area. In high fire frequency class, 129 fire points were recorded covering 0.79% of the total geographical area of Uttarakhand. There were 11,219 landslides in Uttarakhand from 1988 to 2022. In 2023 total 1,123 landslides were recorded before the month of August. Almost every year several parts of Uttarakhand experience cloudburst associated hazards. Cloudburst during August 1998 at Ukhimath (Rudraprayag) and Malpa (Pithoragarh), August 2001 at Phata (Rudraprayag), August 2002 at Burakedar (Tehri), August, 2012 in Asi Ganga (Uttarkashi), September, 2012 at Ukhimath (Rudraprayag) and June 2013 at Kedarnath (Rudraprayag) are some of the examples of recent cloudburst incidences associated with flash floods and landslides in Uttarakhand. These hazardous phenomena affect lives of people of Uttarakhand severely and in mountainous regions their impact is most severe. These remote areas do not have access to

facilities like transportation, hospitals, relief camps and other important resources.

The entire Himalayan region, including Uttarakhand, has a high earthquake hazard potential. Historical records reveal the jolting impact of past seismic events, with four major earthquakes shaking the region, including the Kumaun Earthquake of 1720 and the Garhwal Earthquake of 1803. The entire Himalayan terrain falls within Zone V and Zone IV of the Earthquake Zoning Map of India, with Zone V witnessing intensities reaching IX or higher on the MSK Scale. In recent decades, Uttarakhand faced the brunt of seismic forces in 1991 and 1999 with the Uttarkashi and Chamoli earthquakes, respectively. Traversed by major Himalayan tectonic discontinuities, including the Himalayan Frontal Fault (HFF), Main Boundary Thrust (MBT), and Main Central Thrust (MCT), the state is susceptible to frequent seismic activity of varying magnitudes. However fortunately, despite these tremors, Uttarakhand has not experienced a great earthquake (Mw e" 8.0) for over two centuries.

Rampant deforestation, often driven by logging and land-use changes, also poses a serious threat to the region's biodiversity and contributes to soil erosion. Deforested areas of these areas become prone to landslides, disrupting ecosystems and impacting water availability. Despite being a water-rich state with numerous rivers, water scarcity is a concern in certain mountainous areas of Uttarakhand. Unequal distribution of water resources, along with increasing demand and changing rain patterns, leads to challenges in providing sufficient water supply for both agricultural and domestic use. Agriculture in mountainous parts of Uttarakhand faces numerous challenges, including limited arable land, dependence on traditional farming methods, and vulnerability to climate change. The short growing season, coupled with the rugged terrain, makes agriculture less productive and economically viable. The mountainous landscape poses challenges for transportation and connectivity. Remote villages often lack well-maintained roads, making it difficult to access essential services and this also hinders economic development. Limited infrastructure also

affects emergency response during natural disasters. Remote mountainous areas often face challenges in providing quality healthcare and education services. Inaccessibility and limited infrastructure contribute to difficulties in delivering essential services, impacting the overall well-being and development of the population.

Uttarakhand, blessed with diverse ecosystems and rich biodiversity, is also grappling with the intricate challenge of human-wildlife conflict. As the boundaries between agricultural landscapes and natural habitats blur, incidents of wild animals damaging crops have become a recurring concern for farmers in the region. The issue is further complicated by factors like poverty, lack of infrastructure, and limited enforcement of wildlife protection laws. The coexistence of agriculture and wildlife in Uttarakhand has been a delicate balance traditionally maintained by communities. However, as population pressures and land-use patterns evolve, this equilibrium is increasingly disrupted, leading to conflicts between farmers and wildlife. Several wild animals pose a threat to crops in Uttarakhand, with elephants, deer, monkeys, wild boars, and even leopards frequently venturing into agricultural fields. Foraging for food, these animals often devour cultivated crops, resulting in significant losses for farmers. The incursion of wildlife into farmlands brings about substantial economic repercussions. Farmers witness crop damage that jeopardizes their livelihoods, as efforts and resources invested in cultivation are often compromised by the uninvited visitors.

In hilly areas of Uttarakhand women have responsibilities towards their forests. Their involvement can be seen through various movements and practices. One of the earliest movements of modern times is Chipko movement. The Chipko movement, or “tree-hugging movement,” was a pioneering environmental movement that originated in Uttarakhand in the early 1970s by C.P.Bhatt. The movement emerged in response to rampant deforestation and the issuance of logging permits by the government to commercial entities, which posed a severe threat to the region’s ecosystems and the livelihoods of local communities. During the 1970s, the government’s forest policies favored large-scale commercial logging, leading to widespread deforestation in the

Himalayan region. The repercussions of deforestation were felt acutely by the rural communities dependent on forests for their provisions and livelihood. Gaura Devi led a group of 30 women and children in the village of Reni to stop contractors from cutting trees. The Chipko Andolan achieved significant success in drawing attention to environmental issues and influencing policy changes. The movement resulted in a 15-year ban on tree cutting in the region and contributed to the development of a more ecologically sensitive forest policy. It also inspired similar movements across India and internationally, emphasizing the importance of local communities in environmental conservation. The Chipko Andolan had a strong element of eco-feminism, with women taking a prominent role in the movement. Women, who are often the primary users of forest resources, play a crucial role in protecting the environment and highlighting the socio-economic impact of deforestation on their lives. Their participation has always been crucial for success of these movements. They are dependent on their forests and in return they take care of forests. In case of forest fire, they often are the first responders. They make sure to extinguish the fire before it consumes their fodder and fuel. Women of these areas understand their duty towards their mountains and it is also necessary for them to conserve the biodiversity of the forest. It is not uncommon among the people of Kumaon and Garhwal region to treat their mountains and forests as sacred deities. People often organise rituals and ceremonies to please these deities. In Bhikiyasen region of Almora, people worship Bhumiya Devta or Bhumiya Bubu, who they believe takes care of their land and farming. People also have a spiritual connection with their forests. In Kumaon region of Uttarakhand, people celebrate a festival called Harela. Harela has a great significance in Kumaon, it symbolizes a new harvest and the onset of rainy season. Harela, as a festival has always been associated with conservation of environment and also a celebration of environment. It links festivity with plants. It shows a deep attachment of people of Uttarakhand with the nature. Government of Uttarakhand, also encourages people, offices, schools and colleges to plant saplings on Harela. Similar celebration of nature and plants can be observed in Maiti movement started by

Kalyan Singh Rawat in 1995 in Gwaldam village of Chamoli district. In this tradition when newlyweds step outside from their house, the bride plants a sapling. The groom then gives money to Maiti sisters, to take care of that sapling. After that the parents and Maiti sisters, who are unmarried girls of village, make sure that the sapling grows to be a healthy tree. The tree symbolizes the happiness of their daughter and they believe as long as that tree is green and flourishing, their daughter is also happy and prosperous. It creates a bond between the people of village and their trees. The celebration of nature among people of Uttarakhand is often rooted in traditional practices, cultural rituals, and a deep spiritual connection with the land. Women have an important role in these festivals. Festivals like Phool Dei involve decorating homes and temples with flowers and greenery, symbolizing the prosperity of the land. Traditional dishes are prepared using locally grown crops, emphasizing the importance of sustainable agricultural practices. In certain traditions, women also participate in rituals where they offer prayers and blessings to specific trees, groves, or mountains. This is often a way to express gratitude for the resources provided by nature and seek protection from the environment. Women in Uttarakhand often play a crucial role in imparting environmental education to their communities. They share knowledge about the importance of preserving forests, the role of biodiversity, and the impact of climate change on the region.

Women of Uttarakhand face various kinds of challenges in their lives. Deep-rooted patriarchal norms often prescribe traditional gender roles for women in Uttarakhand. These roles can limit women's participation in decision-making processes, restrict their mobility, and confine them to stereotypical responsibilities within the household. Traditional gender roles are reinforced, assigning specific roles and responsibilities for men and women. Women are often expected to fulfill domestic duties, while men are expected to go out and earn money. These gender biases limit women's autonomy and career opportunities. Despite modernization, some areas in Uttarakhand still witness disparities in educational opportunities for girls. Societal norms prioritize boys' education over girls', leading to lower enrollment rates

and higher dropout rates for female students. Due to geographical constraints and traditional gender roles, girls often have limited access to education, especially in rural areas. Girls are often wed at a very young age restricting their chances for growth and self-actualization. Women's representation in political spheres in Uttarakhand is very limited. There is a lack of female voices that can put their problems and concerns forward.

To understand the challenges faced by women and their involvement with their surroundings a study was done on a small village named Baseri. It is located in Almora district of Uttarakhand. At present Baseri village inhabits 14 families. In these 14 families there are 18 males and 22 females. Most of the working-age males of the village are working in cities like Delhi and Haryana. Traditionally, the village people have relied on farming for their income and women are the primary caretaker of their land but with the passing of time, women are finding it extremely difficult to continue with their farming. With challenges like irregular rain patterns, changing weather, forest fires and attack of animals like monkeys and wild boars are forcing them to look for other alternatives. Wild animals like monkeys and wild boars also routinely damage their crops. They have to work hard to protect their crops from them. They have switched from traditional farming of wheat, corn and pulses to farming chilly and mushrooms and have started to focus more on animal husbandry. Women of Baseri village also face the severe calamity of forest fires regularly. Since, the village is situated at the edge of Pine jungle, they live in constant fear of destruction from forest fires. Earlier, these fires were prevalent during summer season but from past few years, due to climate change and delayed winter rain, forest fires are becoming more and more common in months of November and December. Women keep regular watch for these fires in their adjacent forests because these forest fires tend to spread rapidly. Some families of Baseri village have even suffered loss of cattle and fodder reserves due to forest fires. On interviewing local residents of Baseri village, it was found out that the yield of crops have also gone down. The village has experienced devastating changes



in weather patterns and agricultural practices due to climate change. Women engaged in agriculture find themselves struggling to adapt to the new challenges, such as unpredictable rainfall and shifts in crop cycles. Women of Baseri village are tackling these problems in their own way. They have deviated from the traditional farming methods and now they also look for alternate sources of income. Most of them sell pulses, spices and animal husbandry products like milk and ghee in nearby market like Bhikiyasen to support their families. They are responsible for taking care of their families, land, animals and they also constantly working to supplement income into their household.

Many steps can be taken to overcome the myriad of problems faced by the women of Uttarakhand. Female literacy in Uttarakhand, while improving, remains lower than the national average. This hinders employment opportunities and perpetuates cycles of poverty. This can be improved by increasing government funding for quality education across rural areas, focusing on girl's access and safety in schools. Skill-based programs can be launched which are relevant to local industries, this will empower women with marketable skill. Training and support should be given to women teachers, which will lead to creation of role models and will further encourage girls to pursue education. Along with education inadequate healthcare facilities and lack of awareness about critical health issues affect women of Uttarakhand disproportionately, especially in the mountain region. This can be solved by increasing accessibility and affordability of healthcare in rural areas of Uttarakhand, with a special and targeted focus on women's health needs. Community-based programs should be launched by the government with assistance from the local bodies to educate women about hygiene, reproductive health, and disease prevention. Women should be trained and empowered as frontline healthcare workers and community mobilizers. Special funds should be allocated for the same.

In Uttarakhand, limited access to land ownership, finance, and market opportunities restrict women's economic participation and despite their contribution their share is limited. Government and NGOs

can facilitate access to microloans and financial literacy programs, enabling women to start and grow their own businesses. It is a successful strategy and already in various parts of India and Uttarakhand various women groups, with the financial aid of government have started their own businesses helping their financial growth. One such example is Hilans. Government of Uttarakhand created Hilans -a brand association with Uttarakhand Gramya Vikas Samiti (UGVS) to market state's farmer produce across the world. At present, products of Hilans are sourced from 9 districts of the state. Its products are widely popular and loved in the market. Government should also provide training and infrastructure development for women engaged in traditional livelihoods like agriculture and handicrafts. Various online and offline platforms should be developed for women entrepreneurs to showcase and sell their products, connecting them to wider markets.

Patriarchal norms and limited decision-making power still hinder women's progress. This can be corrected by starting awareness campaigns and educational programs to promote gender equality and combat discrimination. Women should be encouraged to stand for panchayat and local body elections; this will give them a definite voice in decision-making. Effective implementation of laws should be ensured to protect women's rights and timely access to justice mechanisms should be provided to them. Technology can bridge some of the existing gaps and empower women. Women should be educated on accessing and using technology for communication, information, and various economic opportunities. Technology should be utilized efficiently to provide healthcare consultations and information to women in remote areas. Apps and e-platforms can be developed for providing healthcare facility online. Online marketing can help to expand reach and income of women's products.

These solutions require a multi-pronged approach: collaboration between government, NGOs, civil society organizations, and the community. Empowering women is not just about addressing individual challenges; it's about creating a ripple effect of positive

change throughout Uttarakhand. By investing in their education, health, economic opportunities, and social inclusion, we can unlock the true potential of these remarkable women and build a brighter future for the state of Uttarakhand.

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