

## Women and Ecological Problems in Uttarakhand

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### **Abstract**

*Uttarakhand is a comparatively young state within the Himalayan mountain system with a fragile ecosystem. The ecological crisis of the region has a very long history. Various developmental activities, excessive use of explosives for extension of roads and deforestation has contributed to the present state of ecological degradation. This ecological imbalance has created acute scarcity of fuelwood, fodder and water making life of hill women more difficult. The worst victim of ecological crisis are the women in the state of Uttarakhand. Cultural division of labour within the family entrusts upon the women collection of fuelwood, fodder and water fetching. Dependence on natural resources for livelihood increases work burden of already overburdened women as no able bodied men are left to help these women. This paper is an attempt to analyse how ecological problems in Uttarakhand make women's life worse as they depend on nature to draw sustenance.*

**Keywords:** *Ecology, Women, Drudgery, Casheconomy, Migration, Reproductive health.*

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## **Introduction**

The hill state of Uttarakhand comprises 13 districts of Kumaon and Garhwal, two important administrative and linguistic divisions of the newly created state stretching between 28° 44' and 31° 81' north and 78° 35' to 81° 5' east is a typical case of how development has led to ecological imbalance. Kumaon division consist of Almora, Pithoragarh, Nainital, Bageshwar, Champawat and Udham Singh Nagar districts whereas Garhwal division consists of Uttarkashi, Chamoli, Pauri, Tehri, Rudraprayag, Dehradun and Hardwar districts. Except the Terai plains of Udham Singh Nagar district and some areas of Dehradun and, Hardwar districts the newly created state of Uttarakhand is within the Himalayan mountain system. Geo Tectonically, the region has a very fragile eco-structure. The twin process of forest destruction and widespread use of explosives for road extension and mining have accelerated the rate of soil erosion and landslide creating severe ecological imbalance.

The current ecological crisis in the region has a long history. For more than a century, various developmental activities going on in this region, are affecting the lives of hill women. Some of the major problems plaguing this region are heavy male migration to the plains and money order economy to bridge the subsistence gap, excessive commercial exploitation of the forest for defence and developmental needs, construction of river-valley projects, industries and communication network creating an acute scarcity of fuel- wood and fodder, over felling of trees causing floods, soil erosion and landslides affecting agricultural productivity.

The worst victim of the ecological crisis in the state are rural women of peasant household who depend upon forests and natural resources for their survival. Vandana Shiva, a noted environmentalist appears apt in this regard that the violence to nature, which seems intrinsic to the dominant development model is also associated with violence to women who depend on nature for drawing sustenance for themselves, there families, their societies (Shiva, 1988). The ecological destruction has affected rural women of the area in a catastrophic way by increasing their work loads and consequently reducing their status and affecting their health. Heavy male migration from the region has further worsen the condition of already overburdened women of the region. "The special difficulties that women face... their extraordinary work burden or lack of access to health care, for instance do not arise out of ecological deterioration per se. They are located in the sexual division of labour, marked by a double work burden (at home and outside) and by the specific nature of tasks they do, and in the unequal distribution of resources like food within the household, which stem from women's inferior status in the household and from a lack of control over

cash and productive resources like land. But given this situation, environmental destruction exacerbates women's already acute problems in a way very different from men's"(CSE, 1985).

The women of the state are overburdened with subsistence agriculture and cattle care in addition to the drudgery of bringing fuel wood, fodder and water from long distances and other domestic responsibilities. More than 95% women are cultivator in the hill state of Uttarakhand. The uneconomic and fragmented land holdings are managed by women with a little help from menfolk. Culturally accepted division of labour within the family entrusts upon them, collection of fuel wood, fodder and water fetching. The reduced availability of biomass and other natural products due to ecological degradation compel them to cover long distances for collecting fuel wood, fodder and water per woman. Detailed analysis of different activities performed by the rural women in the hill economy and time devoted to them has been exhibited in the table No.1.

**Table-1: Activities Performed by the Rural Women and Time Devoted**

<b>Activities</b>	<b>Male/Female</b>	<b>Time spent by per women Hr./day</b>
<b>Agriculture</b>		4.11 Hrs
Field Cleaning	F	
Ploughing & Harrowing	M	
Putting Manure	F	
Levelling & Weeding	F	
Transplanting & Harvesting	F	
Threshing & Winnowing	F	
Transporting	F	
<b>Animal Husbandry</b>	F	1.13 Hr.
<b>Water Fetching</b>	F	1.42 Hrs.
<b>Fodder &amp; Fuel Wood Collection</b>	F	4-5.41 Hrs.
<b>Domestic Drudgery</b>	F	4-5 Hrs.

Source : Various studies and field work by the author (2005).

In Spite of the fact that the agriculture is not even subsistence in the existing situation, even then it is largely predominant in Uttarakhand. But it is by no means easy and simple. It requires very diligent and intensive labour. "Every male cultivator here needs a wife to perform the drudgery of the field" (Pant, 1935). Most of the agricultural tasks except ploughing and harrowing (taboo for women according to Dharmashastras) are performed by the women of the state. Due to heavy male

migration most of the household are left with no able bodied men to help her in agriculture. Therefore most of the agricultural work right from preparing field to threshing and winnowing are the responsibilities of women. "The few men left behind are not really of much help as they themselves admit without much shame that their work normally finishes after ploughing the fields"( Khandekar , 1986).

Animal husbandry and Fodder collection are also duties of women in rural household. The women are required to look after cattle, clean cattle sheds (goth) and take them to grazing. Scarcity of fodder requires women to take longer march to collect it. Forest department is also accentuating the problem by banning grazing and collection of fodder in the forest.

Water fetching is one of the most strenuous activities in the hill areas which is assigned to women and it consumes lot of time and energy. Different studies give the evidences that women spend long hours in hill region of Uttarakhand in fetching water. Women have to fetch water for cooking washing, cleaning, and drinking for cattle etc. from as much as 2-3 km. away climbing up and down an average 200-400 ft. everyday. The availability of water is directly related to the level of biomass available in the surrounding environment. In the hill region rich humous of the oak forest helps in storing water. The destruction of oak forest and changes from oak to chir pine plantation is responsible for perennial springs to seasonal one resulting long march in search of water for women. Fuel wood collection is also exclusive responsibility of womenfolk. A study conducted by SwaminathanMadhura in Garhwal hills shows that one or more members of each household daily walk 5-km. steep uphill to collect fuelwood. Collection of fuel for hearth and fodder for cattle alone take nearly 4 to 5 hours( Jain, S. 1984).

The dependence of women folk in rural area of Uttarakhand for livelihood on forest brought women much closer to forest and as a result these rural peasant women took part in the Chipko movement of the region. Women who produce most or all of subsistence goods wish to maintain the status quo by retaining the traditional ecosystem. Women see the question of forest conservation as one of their survival (Jain S.1984). Thus, it is implied that women's consciousness of the environment and therefore their conservative approach is then not something inherent, arising out of their being women as is often propagated. It is rooted in their roles and work tasks, which lead them to interact extensively with natural resources for survival (Venkateshwaran, 1995).

The problem of women of Uttarakhand region does not end with her plight against exploitation of forest and natural resources but the great problem that the migration of male has brought ironically is borne by the women left behind. "The

research unravels that there is a massive male out-migration in Uttarakhand due to lack of farm activities...hence ,the entire agriculture and household burden falls upon the women”(Singh S, 2014). The penetration of cash economy has created a new culture, which has psychologically alienated men from their ecosystem. The other reasons assigned to heavy male migration from the region are primarily prevailing structural conditions at the origin which operates as push factors or a combination of both push and pull factors in which push factors dominate (Khanka,1988).

Social and psychological impact of migration can't be quantified. Women of migrant household face many tensions, pressures and anxieties. The worst sufferers of migration are young married women who suffer from loneliness and long separation. Export of able-bodied men from this region means more work for women, making women's plight more miserable. The drudgery and migration of menfolk in search of work, leaving women alone to cope with strenuous life of the village where they lead their life as quasi- widow is not a new phenomenon for them.(Weber, T. 1987).

Finally the extraordinary workload also affects the health status of women. They eat less food that is required consequently majority of them are malnourished. Besides, the years of hard work, overexertion and malnutrition make her vulnerable to a number of diseases, which cause premature death. The health facilities are very scarce in rural areas of Uttarakhand and even those little facilities are available are not availed by women because they don't have enough time to seek health care. A study conducted by Pande (1999) 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 childbirth takes place at homes, are assisted by the untrained elderly women. They continue their back breaking work almost until childbirth and often immediately after childbirth.

In the final analysis it can be submitted that the pitiable predicament of rural women in Uttarakhand is owing to unfair division of labour based on gender and ecological degradation. The problem of women in the region has multiplied manifold due to heavy migration of able bodied men, which leaves women alone to cope with harsh conditions of life prevalent in the region.

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