



# **A study on three womens' enterprises in the high altitudes of Uttarakhand – India**

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## **Summary**

In the wake of the adverse impact of the monetary economy on subsistence and its effect on the status of women, this study assesses the status and scope of three traditional enterprises that women engage in, namely, the wool-based cottage industry, extraction of medicinal and aromatic herbs from the wild, and the production and sale of 'Daru' or local liquor. These enterprises span different worlds, timeframes, and the subsistence, self-reliant, and traditional economies as well as the modern 'global' market.

This paper will look at the vulnerability of and opportunities for the women involved; the segmented nature of access to economic opportunities – and how reforms have opened up new livelihood options for some while closing down options for others; the changes in key rural markets and institutions that determine rural livelihoods and the significance of the recent import liberalisation; and if the government regulations and support systems facilitate or hinder rural economic activity

The study, encompassing the Pithoragarh, Chamoli, and Uttarkashi districts of Uttarakhand, is based on documents, detailed household surveys, interviews, and meetings with various stakeholders and players. The communities involved are the Shilpakars, or the present day Scheduled Castes, representatives of the Kols, the first known ethnic group of Uttarakhand. The second oldest are the nomad-pastoral Mongoloid Kiraats, with origins somewhere in eastern China. The present ethnic groups, representative of the Kiraats, now inhabit the border areas of Pithoragarh district. In the border district of Chamoli, west of Pithoragarh district, live the Tolchas and Marchhas of Niti and Mana valleys, and the Jadhs live in the westernmost border district,

Uttarkashi. The British Administration classified all these groups as the 'Bhotiya' tribe.

Although import liberalisation has made Merino wool from abroad cheaper, a significant proportion of locally-produced wool is still used. Most of the weaver households (76%) used their own sheep wool or procured local wool either directly from the sheep owner, or from retail outlets, or from within their village. In place of raw wool, 95% of weaver households procure a relatively poorer quality ready-made yarn for making duns from three main outlets in Munsiri Bazaar. State funds have been earmarked to establish wool banks and women entrepreneurs are taking up the challenge.

Wool products were traditionally aimed at the regional market for clothing and bedding, with no significant diversification of product types. With the advent of the mechanised woollen industry, the demand for local products has diminished. Women continue to produce and sell to an ever-constricting regional market, faced with competition from cheaper synthetic products flooding even the local rural mountain markets. The households engaged in wool work as an enterprise amounted to 64% of those surveyed (907 HHs out of 1414), of which 66% are from the Shauka community, 33% from the Shilpakars, and just 5% from among the general castes' category. With no access to any other means of production, women, especially those widowed or living singly, are the most dependent on traditional weaving of woollen products as a source of livelihood. Nearly 20% (289 HHs) of the total households surveyed are headed by women. About 65% of these families belong to the Scheduled Tribes, 27% to Scheduled Castes, and 8% to the General Caste category.

The local market for woollen products still accounts for half the sales. The demands of the local market have exerted a strong influence on the products, especially the use of bright colours and big designs for the carpets (*duns* and *asans*) as against the preference for natural colours and traditional designs for the export market. Entrepreneurs from this region have traditionally sold their products through friends and relatives to military personnel and to the tourists visiting Munsiri. Sale to the service classes constitutes the second largest market option. Woollen apparel, such as the *pashmina* shawl and the *pankhi*, are sold more to this section of the market than locally. Sale in the cities and towns (primarily of Kumaon, Uttaranchal) accounts for one-fifth of sales' outlets. Only a small section of households today reaches the larger urban markets of Delhi.

With the changing market (competition with cheaper, mass-produced machine-manufactured woollen goods), some non-local entrepreneurs have set up small factory-based enterprises. Today, there is growing competition for a share of the rural market between the handloom sector and mill-based



production. The Munsiri office of the Industries' Department has at various points of time initiated at least 14 programmes for the handloom sector. Following a major reorganisation of departments and the expenditure-saving exercise with the appointment of the Mazumdar Committee in 1993, most of the departments and facilities have been closed down. The sole exception is the wool carding plant, which, despite functioning well below its optimal capacity, is the only critical service still being extended by the state.

In a bid to strengthen livelihood options for women in the mountain regions, several development agencies and women entrepreneurs have undertaken to promote the wool-based enterprise, Panchachuli Mahila Hathkargha Utthan Samiti (set up in 1999 by a local woman entrepreneur from Munsiri).

- The formation of this Samiti has improved the availability of the locally valued Tibetan raw wool, along with that of average quality pre-dyed manufactured wool. By intervening in the raw material market it has successfully pushed down the price of the cotton yarn required for weaving *duns*.
- Where women were paid a daily wage for the spinning of wool yarn, the quality of work suffered, rendering it difficult to use.
- The Samiti is run in the traditional style of a one-person show and has yet to develop systems of management that optimise the interests of all shareholders.
- Pancha Chuli Woollens is an enterprise run by a guild of skilled women artisans with production centres in Almora and Pithoragarh districts.
- Not having a tradition of weaving, the women of Almora were more amenable to training in the modern skills of management, accounting, and current market trends in design.
- Being factory-based, it is able to ensure efficiency in meeting production targets and adherence to standards of quality and design.
- Although the organisation markets its products through four outlets in the two major towns of Kumaon, Uttaranchal, a large number of its top end products are exported. Strong market linkages have been established and designs changed each year to meet the demands of an ever-changing market.

Single and widowed women, especially of tribal origin, without gainful employment and with no access to land or capital, make a local liquor for the village, neighbouring communities, and even townships. The enterprise is informally acknowledged and accepted, and forms an important source of livelihood for these women. Consuming liquor is not traditionally considered immoral among the dominant community of the Shaukas. 'Jaan', the local rice beer, and 'Daru', the alcoholic liquor that is further distilled from Jaan, have been brewed in this region for personal consumption and for sale, in spite of the changing (sometimes negative) attitudes of the state administration towards this practice and enterprise. The last round of prohibition was lifted in 1996 in the hill districts of Uttar Pradesh in the face of protests by the

proponents of the separate state of Uttarakhand. The new state of Uttaranchal defends its patronage of liquor sales, as the excise tax derived from liquor sales is the state's largest revenue earner.

The findings are that about a sixth (17%) of the households surveyed (442) in six villages are engaged in the production and sale of the local liquor. Of them 60% are Shaukas (ST), 39% are SC, and just 1% are from the general caste category. Of the 21.27% female-headed households surveyed (94), 33% depend on the sale of liquor for livelihood. The Shauka women form the biggest group with 64% and the SC with 36%, while, typically, there are no women-headed households among the General Caste. Significantly, the female-headed households that do not engage in this enterprise have livelihood options.

There is strong resentment and moral disapproval towards women who make Daru for sale within the community. Women have joined the protest against state-sponsored liquor sales, citing the effects of alcoholism on several households in the area. The political implications of the state's involvement in promoting the liquor trade in the name of earning revenue for the state, and more significantly, the patronage the political parties derive from the liquor Mafia are issues that women oppose. Proponents of tourism believe that the resident Shauka populace should be issued licenses to brew only Jaan for sale, as it would give a fillip to the tourism industry, and also keep the money within the region. Others feel that the sale of state-licensed liquor should only be through local bodies and not by the liquor syndicate.

Women in the mountain villages of the border districts have traditionally migrated, along with their families, to high-altitude villages. One major source of livelihood available to them is the collection of high-value medicinal and aromatic herbs from the alpine pastures of their village-owned Van Panchayats and neighbouring reserve forests. Herbs such as *Aconitum heterophyllum* (Atis), *Picrorhiza kurroa* (Kutki), and *Dactylorhiza hathageria* (Salam panja) have now become the mainstays of the poorest households that migrate to their seasonal dwellings in the 12 high-altitude villages of Gori Valley. Women have specialised in the collection of lichens (Jhula), *Chaerophyllum villosum* (Ganjari), and other herbs found closer to human habitation. In the last couple of years, women have participated in the proverbial gold rush with the collection of *Cordyceps sinensis*. In the 216 households surveyed of a total of 345 medicinal plant collectors, 40% (136) were women.

Herbs such as *Arnebia benthemii* (Laljari- used in hair oil) and *Rheum australe* (Dolu – roots used for dyeing wool), which are not in much demand, are collected in small quantities for domestic use, while others that fetch from Rs 25 per kg (Jhula) to Rs 40,000 per kg (*Cordyceps sinensis*) are extensively extracted. Women are responsible for the post-extraction processing of herbs collected by each household and are also employed by the locals to do the



initial cleaning and sorting of lichens that find their way to the aromatic and paint industry.

Entire families are engaged as a unit in collecting medicinal and aromatic plants from the wild. Of the 518 households surveyed in the 12 villages, 42% (216) of the households derive approximately 1/3rd of their income from the sale of medicinal plants. Increasing numbers of women collecting medicinal plants have led to stiffer competition and less herbs to be found.

As far as trade is concerned, in villages where households migrate to the 13 high-altitude villages, a system is in place whereby they take an advance or *bayana* in lieu of the medicinal plants that they will collect to repay the loan later. Of the 88 households that migrate to the three surveyed high-altitude villages, 55% (48 HHs) take advances. In villages, where there is no migration, the extracted herbs are sold directly through local agents to the road head contractors of the valley. A number of road contractors, with 14 local agents in villages, supply the medicinal and aromatic plants traded from the valley.

There is, however, no market intelligence among the local traders, much less among the collectors, of the destination of the resource traded by them or the eventual use to which it will be put. Market demand waxes and wanes, controlled by a global market, and often, local collectors are reduced to mere labour subsisting off this diminishing resource. The terms of trade in medicinal and aromatic plants from this remote and fragile mountain ecosystem are so unfavourably stacked against the primary collector that any concept of sustainable commercialisation will be at the eventual cost of wiping out the resource altogether.

Although there is a flourishing trade in this plant resource in the valley, the collection from the wild of a large majority of these high-value herbs has been banned by the Forest Department. Those that can be legally traded are under two regulatory agencies appointed by the State – the Bhesaj Sangh and the Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam. Both, however, operate as commission agents between collectors and traders and have not done much to develop a market that benefits the former.

## Conclusion

- In the border districts of Uttaranchal, wool-based activities remain the main source of income for women that do not have enough land for agriculture, mainly the Bhotiyas/Shaukas and, to a lesser extent, the Shilpakars (SC). The craft is alive and continues to be passed down from one generation to the next.
- Marketing is perceived as the critical element in the making or breaking of this enterprise. Today, the competition posed by the fast-changing tastes and mass-produced synthetic products has prompted the need to

create alternative marketing avenues, apart from strengthening the supply to the large local markets in the mountains themselves. Marketing drives through traditional annual trade fairs and the Autumn Festival will help popularise these products.

- Promoting the wool-based enterprise as a unique craft engaged in by mountain women of the Himalayas will help create a special niche market for woollen products from this region. A diversification in the range of products to suit changing needs along with the use of other natural fibres would help expand the market.
- Wool banks and assured marketing linkages are critical.
- There is a need to upgrade the skills of more women so that they are able to produce quality products on a large enough scale to enter the market. These include managerial, accounting, and banking skills, which will enhance professionalism of the enterprise.
- There is also a need to develop collective bargaining power through the establishment of producers' collectives.
- With more local women entrepreneurs choosing to participate in producers' collectives and Wool Banks, exploring prospects of setting up a Natural Dyeing Centre, and collaborating with larger city-based enterprises, the enterprise has begun to grow.
- However, with the withdrawal of state support in dealing with an unfairly stacked larger market, the challenges before this enterprise are many. The government plans to hand over the ailing carding plant in Munsiri to a group of women.
- Women that make the local liquor for sale are often single women, widowed, deserted, or those with little or no land for subsistence. Women engaged in this traditional, now legally proscribed, enterprise are therefore exposed to risks.
- Women that have livelihood options will opt not to brew liquor for fear of stepping on the wrong side of the existing law. Those that do are vulnerable to the state's double standards, itself the biggest sponsor of the sale in liquor, as well as to social censure by the community.
- With low investment, poorer women can set up such an enterprise with relative ease. The daily sale of liquor brings in cash, sometimes well beyond catering to daily subsistence needs. It will continue in the grey areas between state policy and a social need.
- The extraction and sale of medicinal plants and aromatic herbs from the wild are engaged in by women with virtually no livelihood options and those that are the most deprived in the community. Livelihood dependence on the extraction of medicinal plants has increased in the past decade with a substantial increase in the participation of women.
- There is no market intelligence even among the local traders, much less the collectors, of the ultimate destination of the resource traded or the eventual use it will be put to, and hence they cannot intervene.
- The cultivation of a limited set of aromatic and medicinal plants could be developed in the long run as a lucrative enterprise for women.

