

## INTRODUCTION

The central and western Himalayan districts are amongst the poorest regions of the north Indian State of Uttar Pradesh. These areas are characterised by subsistence agrarian systems (based on coarse grains cultivated under rain-fed conditions) and typified by low (and declining) productivity, fragile natural resource bases, poor infrastructural development and market linkages, and high levels of male migration. The widening gap between subsistence production and consumption needs has historically resulted in a high dependence on external markets. In recent years hill development directives have sought to redress this lop-sided relationship by introducing commercial agriculture into certain resource-rich regions, thereby enabling communities to participate in the market economy as producers.

### Trends in Hill Development

Although the applicability of mainstream models of development for the hill regions has long been questioned on national and regional eco-development agendas, there remains a curious vacuum regarding how "hill development" is conceptualised and operationalised. Preoccupation with issues of productivity has obscured discussion of related parts of the equation -- notably equity and sustainability; even less concern has been directed towards gender dimensions.<sup>1</sup>

This neglect, in part, stems from the popular perception of mountain communities as "backward" and "marginal," whose survival is dependent on linkages with labour markets in the plains. This image, which implicitly informs policy prescriptions, has served to justify all interventions that purport to facilitate regional development through more complete integration into the market economy as "necessary evils".

The problem is two-fold. On the one hand, inadequate attention has been directed towards the implications of the growth-oriented (plains) model of development to sensitive (and highly dissimilar) mountain environments. This has not only hindered a better understanding of the types of constraints which set mountain areas apart from other ecological zones -- not to mention the tremendous micro regional variations that exist within them -- but has also had important consequences for the types of solutions that are advocated.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, preoccupation with quantitative methodologies, drawing exclusively on district and block-level data, which focus on economic criteria as key indicators of viability and success, has failed to disaggregate the "community" and to uncover differentials operating at the inter and interhousehold level. Thus, the human dimensions of processes of social change -- the emerging class and gender differentials -- have not found much space in the existing literature.<sup>3</sup>

New directions towards making hill agriculture commercially viable beg a re-examination of the oft-posed question -- "prosperity" or "development" for whom and at what (and whose) cost? -- compelling a reassessment not only of conventional paradigms of development, but also the sustainability of such models both for local ecological, and social environments.

## Scope of the Study

### *The Case Study*

This case study is based on fieldwork carried out in Saklana, a high-rainfall valley located in the outer hills of Tehri Garhwal. Within the past decade there has been a rapid transition from the cultivation of traditional subsistence foodgrains to that of cash crops (potatoes, peas, and beans).

The new cropping patterns for market sales have brought a degree of monetary prosperity hitherto unknown to the region, in terms of enhanced purchasing power and improved standards of living. The reverse side of this prosperity, however, is that increased pressure is being placed on the natural resource base; women have to put double time in the fields; and subsistence needs are being pitted against commercial imperatives.

This case study examines some of the gender structured consequences of ecological and economic transformations that are emerging as a result of these developments. Particular focus is given to the interplay between the economic and socio-cultural forces affecting women's work, decision-making, and status that are reshaping gender relations and defining (and indeed, limiting) the extent to which women are benefitting from, or bearing the costs of, the new cash-based prosperity.

### *Objectives and Methodology*

The specific objectives of this research were:

- o to investigate the impact of cash crops on women's roles in hill agriculture by looking at their work patterns and participation in agricultural decision-making;
- o to highlight, through an analysis of the socio-cultural and economic factors operating at both the household and community levels, the barriers to women's effective participation in the production process and market economy;
- o to assess the "gender dichotomy of interests" in the face of growing dependence of hill communities on the market economy, both as consumers and as producers; and
- o to propose some arenas for future research, that contribute to base-line data on women's roles in hill farming systems and articulate a participatory and gender-sensitive approach to hill development.

### *Research Design*

The emphasis was on qualitative rather than quantitative analysis. A combination of methodologies was used to explore two interrelated research agendas. The first phase consisted of survey-work in four villages to identify broad patterns.<sup>4</sup>

- o household demographic composition; (including sex, age, and migration pattern)
- o education levels and employment patterns;
- o income and expenditure patterns; and



- o the impact of changes in cropping patterns and resource (forest) endowment on animal husbandry strategies; and the viability of subsistence production to cover household and consumption requirements.

The second phase consisted of an in-depth fieldwork in one of the villages over the course of one year.<sup>5</sup> Several methodologies were used, including household agricultural surveys, informal discussions, and group interviews. These highlighted some of the less visible yet no less crucial dimensions of village women's lives that are all too easily obscured by more rigid and figure-oriented approaches.

The following questions were considered:

- o How has male migration enabled women as de facto heads of households and managers of the land, to respond to new spheres of responsibilities and opportunities? What types of institutional, structural, and socio-cultural factors help to limit or facilitate this?
- o Has differential access to off-farm income eased some women's workloads by virtue of households being able to hire labour and services or purchase resources?
- o How has the increasingly time-consuming nature of fodder and fuelwood collection created greater sensitivity amongst women to issues of resource depletion and the need for ecological regeneration? If not, what sets of constraints can be identified?
- o Are processes of commercialisation reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies and widening notions of differential entitlements, thereby preventing women's high profile in agriculture and other subsistence activities from being translated into enhanced status in the public domain?
- o How are women excluded from playing a more active role in the market sector?
- o How is surplus used to transform society in general, and women's lives in particular? How do women experience the costs and benefits of participating in an increasingly monetised domain, and how do they respond to processes of marginalisation?
- o What types of interventions would enable women to participate more actively in and benefit from the cash-based economy?

### **Agricultural Change and Women**

In the aftermath of the U.N. Decade for Women (1975-1985), a huge body of literature has emerged documenting the myriad ways in which the development process is bypassing and marginalising women. The backdrop for this discussion is the incorporation of traditional subsistence agrarian systems into larger market systems, and the ways in which processes of rural transformation are restructuring sexual division of labour, patterns of resource allocation, and decision-making; both within the household and in the community.<sup>6</sup>

#### *Invisibility and Devaluation*

The evidence drawn from different agro-ecological zones conclusively points to the intensification of women's work burdens, along with a deterioration in the conditions of their work. Despite their centrality to the agrarian economy and household sustenance, rural women's work remains largely "invisible" by conventional gauges of productivity and is devalued in

relation to what men do. A complex web of economy and socio-cultural constraints, operating both within and outside the household, undermines survival strategies and challenges rural women in their struggle to adequately provide for and sustain their families. These constraints include restrictions on their mobility, inability to gain independent access to productive resources (such as land and credit) or to benefit from improved methods of technology, and structural biases which force them into disadvantageous positions in the labour market.

That women's work is invisible and under-valued, and that their status is declining rapidly, finds expression in policy statements which recognise that women bear a disproportionate burden of the costs of development (and underdevelopment) without necessarily sharing in the benefits relative to men. Nonetheless, whilst the need to incorporate "gender-sensitive" perspectives into the planning process has become the cornerstone of policy rhetoric, efforts to translate this into an operational level have been less than satisfactory.

### *Neglect of Women's Roles in Hill Farming Systems*

Thus far the debate on agricultural change and its impact on rural women has focussed on the socio-economic and ecological transformations engendered by the "green revolution" technological interventions, in the farming systems in the plains. The bias towards "progressive" agriculture has been at the expense of traditional coarse grain and rain-fed agrarian systems, a neglect which is reflected in the paucity of empirical documentation of mountain agriculture in general, or women's role within it, in particular.<sup>7</sup>

Despite growing awareness to gender issues, the extent and nature of hill women's contributions to the agrarian economy, as well as the impact of processes of change on their lives continue to be veiled. Although anthropological perspectives have tremendous potential in bridging some of these shortcomings, these have not been effectively utilised. The older anthropological literature on the U.P. Himalayas, in particular, provided rich ethnographic documentation of specific regions, but had little to say about women. Even now, although gender and class perspectives are recognised as legitimate and indeed necessary concerns, the more recent record for the region is poor.<sup>8</sup>

This absence of a data base to inform a more coherent and gender-sensitive hill development policy is a cogent reminder of the extent to which, rhetoric notwithstanding, hill women's lives and needs remain peripheral to wider policy concerns and academic discourse. Much of the available information on women of the U.P. hills is based on the body of writing that emerged out of the Chipko actions of the 1970s. This material has played an immensely important role in giving expression to the hitherto muted lives, concerns, and visions of hill women. It has not, however, realised its potential for providing a point of departure for deeper investigation into the changing context of hill women's lives.<sup>9</sup> Three features of this writing, drawn from a limited and region-specific empirical base, have played an important role in defining, and actually limiting, perceptions of the critical parameters of hill women's lives.

- o The impetus for collective action centred around forest movements. This inevitably focussed attention on women's relationship to forest resources to the exclusion of the other interrelated domains and contexts of their work;
- o Women's receptivity to mobilising has typically been located in the sexual division of labour, through which women are the first to experience and suffer from any adverse changes in the environment. From this emerges greater sensitivity to threats to their livelihoods and responsiveness to the benefits of collective action; and



- o Related to this is the posing of subsistence and commercial livelihoods and interests as theoretical polarities. Women's responses were, thus, conceptualised as emerging out of needs and interests in opposition to those which dictated local men's actions.

How useful are these categories for understanding the dynamics of contemporary socio-economic and ecological changes in the hills and women's responses to them? A re-evaluation of basic assumptions is necessary -- for instance, women's "natural" affinity to the environment, their roles as "resource managers", and the inevitability of tension between gender perceptions and interests. Changing environmental conditions, market relationships, new values, and economic imperatives are not only altering the context of women's work and their survival strategies, but also throwing up new compulsions and constraints that have to be considered in any assessment of women's responses to contemporary processes of social change.

### *The New Interventions*

Until recently, the hill districts' relationship with the wider national economy was based on an extractive mode of development. During this phase, from the nineteenth century onwards, the primary linkage was based on the export of natural resources (timber and labour) from the hills into the plains.<sup>10</sup> In the past decade, however, new pressures have emerged which challenge the old dichotomy between local subsistence needs and non-local commercial needs. The earlier forces of transformation centred around the imperatives of commercial forestry. These included a set of personnel (forest guards, contractors) and goals based on the exploitation of natural resources for commercial ends, and posed a threat to communities' livelihoods and were detrimental to local interests.

Contemporary changes are considerably more complex. Commercial agriculture is, literally, "rooted" at the very core of subsistence strategies. Although a new set of sectors (extension agents, seed merchants, marketing middlemen, and money lenders) has emerged, these positions are often occupied by local people rather than outsiders, thus making it more difficult to place the new relationships within a "us against them" framework. In addition, whilst the ecological costs of new cropping patterns (based on high yielding seeds, chemical fertilisers, and the decline of traditional fallow systems) may be recognised, there is a sufficiently long-term dimension which enables those who lack other options, to pursue more immediate survival strategies.

### *Contemporary Pressures on Hill Women*

These new developments are tearing the fabric of hill society and may prove to be more disruptive than the earlier ones. This fragmentation of society, against the backdrop of increasing monetisation of hill economies, has important implications for what women, specifically, stand to gain and lose. The dual process of ecological and economic transformations, thus, provides an important context in which to examine the shifting parameters of women's work and, more critically, offers insights into how changing relations between women are affecting their traditional support mechanisms and survival strategies.

What insights do the experiences of rural women in other parts of India offer for understanding how agricultural changes affect the roles and status of women in hill farming systems? There are a number of commonalities. Like their counterparts elsewhere, rural hill women are being pushed by two contradictory forces. Compelled to assume responsibility for their families' survival, they are at the same time constrained to do so effectively by a host of structural and socio-cultural factors. The erosion of traditional subsistence livelihoods and support networks, along with deterioration of natural resource bases, privatisation of traditional common property resources, and male migration, have greatly intensified women's "double days," whilst new

opportunities for women remain closed.

There are, nevertheless, important differences which highlight how ecological and socio-cultural imperatives, unique to mountain farming systems, impede and, in a sense define the parameters of (and responses to) development interventions in the hills. Caste (and class) distinctions play a relatively unimportant role in defining the context of hill women's work. In addition, the isolated terrain, small and scattered landholdings, and poor infrastructural development, characteristic of these areas, constrain the nature and extent to which technological innovations can be introduced into hill agriculture. These are restricted to the limited use of new high yielding seeds and chemical fertilisers, rather than mechanisation and drudgery-reducing technologies typical of interventions in the plains. Thus the common trend, of withdrawing higher caste/class women from certain agricultural activities in the plains, has not occurred (and in all likelihood will not occur) in the hills.

#### *Neglect of Women's Role in Hill Farming Systems*