

Mountain Society in Transition – Reflections on gender, globalisation, and socioeconomic change

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What have been the effects of contemporary processes of globalisation with their expansion of markets and an accompanying consumer culture on mountain communities, and in particular women's lives?

This is a topic of particular relevance in India, where the liberalisation of the economy has transformed highland physical and socioeconomic landscapes considerably in the two past decades. I have been reflecting on this since revisiting a body of research dating to the late 1980s in Tehri Garhwal district in what is now Uttarakhand. The pressing issues then continue today: the drudgery of women's work, the paradox of their importance to the agrarian economy (captured by men's acknowledgement that "women are our hands and legs") and yet their marginality (the admission that "our lives are like that of our buffaloes"), and the distancing of men and boys from land-based activities through education and jobs.

In the late 1980s, conditions and circumstances suggested that in the years ahead, women's and men's lives would increasingly move along different trajectories – that the younger generation of men could envision new possibilities through their education and employment while women's and girls' lives, even those with some degree of education, would remain tied to the land. Their lives would not be fundamentally different to those of their mothers and grandmothers.

In fact, contemporary realities are much more complex. Over the past two decades policy interventions, market integration, and the sheer passage of time have brought mountain households even closer into the orbit of the plains. New work opportunities, rising education levels, and aspirations have served to juggle earlier certainties about a 'village way of life' and women's lives remaining bounded by the confines of a rural-based

existence. Observations from interviews with village and town-based family members highlight some facets of contemporary village life that suggest a more nuanced understanding of 'mountain women,' one that takes into account the multiple and overlapping worlds in which their lives are increasingly embedded.

The revolutions in the communication and transportation sectors and a dynamic consumerism have helped shrink, both literally and figuratively, the distances that once defined and separated mountain areas from the plains.



Improved roads and more vehicles have made moving around much easier; satellite television has brought a once 'outside' world into people's daily lives; telephone connectivity, symbolised by the now ubiquitous mobile, has helped to forge links that would have been unimaginable some years ago.

A growing number of households have been enabled to participate in consumer spending by new forms of income diversification and dowry practices, which enable even modestly endowed households to accumulate in a manner that would have earlier been beyond their means or expectations. New work opportunities, a widening of possible educational degrees, and the new worlds promised by glossy packaging and slick advertising have helped to reshape rural behaviours, dress, tastes, and desires. This is especially so amongst the younger generation whose 'middle class' sensibilities and appearances are often not easily differentiated from their plains' counterparts. Their day-to-day realities, hopes, and aspirations have often widely diverged from those of their elders.

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Against this backdrop of rapid socioeconomic change, it is interesting to reflect on what has changed and what has not for women and girls in this new century. At one level, much has changed for the better. Electrification, gas cylinders, and latrines, now taken-for-granted features of people's lives, have significantly eased many aspects of women's work or provided them with much-needed privacy. More girls attend school and are likely to complete their high school education and a growing number can envisage some form of higher education, often in the form of a degree taken 'privately.' The education of girls is viewed as a conduit to a good marriage or at least not an impediment to one and has resulted in a rise in average age at the time of marriage.

Other facets of this new world touch women's lives. Easier travel conditions now enable women, who twenty years ago had never travelled outside their homes, to travel to the cities where their husbands and sons are employed. They no longer lose touch with their

married daughters as mobiles enable even those who are illiterate to keep connected. Televisions provide a measure of entertainment at the day's end, exposing their viewers to cultural and popular markers of modernity and introducing them to 'newly imagined needs and possibilities.' One emerging trend that does represent a significant departure from the past is that better educated and securely employed men are now establishing roots in the cities of their employment. They increasingly seek marriage partners from a new generation of mountain women raised and educated in the cities where their fathers have worked. These are young women whose dress, comportment, and speech bear witness to how far removed they are from their rural antecedents and what could be described as village sensibilities.

A generation ago, a son's marriage more or less ensured that his family would benefit from another pair of hands, a daughter-in-law who would carry the main workload to provide her mother-in-law with a certain measure of ease. Since women are moving with their husbands to the cities, some households must now adopt new types of labour-saving strategies: cultivating less land, hiring workers, and, on occasion, requesting that a town-born and bred granddaughter (rarely a grandson) be sent to the village to help out. Any new or disguised tensions thrown up by this gradual loosening of village households' once uncontested command of younger women's labour are yet to be explored. The newfound mobility of young married women certainly represents a sharp departure from earlier conventions of feminine norms and behaviour. Although it remains to be seen whether urban domiciles are encouraging them to work.

While so much has changed, so much remains the same. Expansion of the commercial sphere has reinforced the 'maleness' of the marketplace, one from which women have never been excluded but in which they lack the cultural permission to move about freely. The marketplace is also an arena that is populated increasingly by itinerant lorry and bus drivers, traders, contractors, labourers, and government employees, many of whom have no ties to the area. This presence of non-local men, coupled with easier access to disposable incomes and the availability of liquor, has also helped to reinforce the perception of the bazaar as a space that could potentially jeopardise women's safety. In certain areas closer to the roadhead, women only go into the forests in groups for fear of being harassed. Even men agree about the erosion of the shared code of honour and conduct that, until very recently, everyone observed and which ensured that even strangers would be met with a certain level of hospitality.



Uttarakhand, India*

Other factors, such as the continued lack of local employment opportunities and a reluctance to let young women work, ensure that even well-educated girls ultimately have little option but to marry. With no more control over their fertility than their uneducated mothers before them, they are all too likely to begin their child-bearing almost immediately after marriage. However much women are able to benefit from and take advantage of this 'new' world, they still experience it indirectly. Women may no longer liken their lives to that of buffaloes as they once did. However, young women agree that however much the wider world has changed, too much remains the same for them.

Finally, there is the absorption of dominant cultural values and practices, and their underlying ideologies of gender. Dowry has long become a well-established practice. Motor bicycles, cars, televisions, even washing machines, and the occasional fridge bear witness to the extent to which this practice in the hills now mirrors longer-standing consumerist patterns of the plains. This ensures that even the most resource-poor families go into debt to make an appropriate show of marrying off

their daughters. Even more troubling is the practice of sex-selective abortion – once unheard of in the mountains and in fact very much identified as an abhorrent practice associated with the plains. Underlying both these practices is the unspoken devaluation of females.

The 'suburbanisation' of many village households, especially in the lower and middle hills, is now a fact of life. It is a process creating families consisting of urban white collar workers and agriculturalists, of those with advanced degrees along with those who are functionally illiterate, and of elders well-versed in identifying seeds for the following year's sowing and youngsters more attuned to Bollywood hits. What this heterogeneity suggests is a moment of transition for both genders, one that offers opportunities to explore new identities, social relations, and ways of being. It is also a reminder that new values, interests, and social practices, in addition to being hard to 'see' and assess, often have implications for women that are very different from those for men.