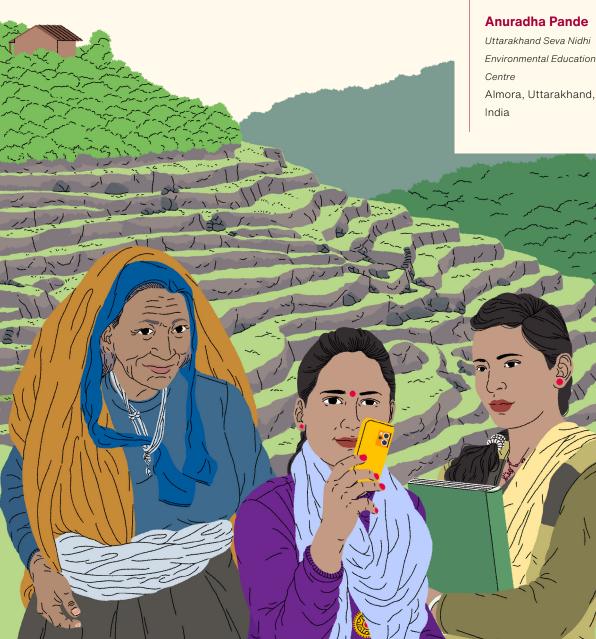# Narratives of inter-generational change from rural Uttarakhand, India

Reframing discourses on the *Pahadi* woman

By

Manjari Mehta
Independent researcher/ anthropologist
Dehra Dun Library & Research Centre
Dehra Dun, Uttarakhand, India

Ritu Yumnam
Independent researcher
Uttarakhand Seva Nidhi Environmental Education Centre
Almora, Uttarakhand, India

Anuradha Pande
Uttarakhand Seva Nidhi Environmental Education Centre
Almora, Uttarakhand, India

About the authors

Manjari Mehta

is a social anthropologist with a background in university-level and participatory non-formal teaching, field-based research and project evaluation. Her areas of expertise include social/gender analysis and trainings with reference to disaster-risk reduction, rural livelihood diversification and community-based water projects in the central Himalayan region and elsewhere. Presently a Research Fellow at the Doon Library & Research Centre (Dehra Dun, Uttarakhand), she previously taught in the Anthropology Programme at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and was a Gender Specialist at ICIMOD in Kathmandu, Nepal.

Email: manjari25mehta@gmail.com

Ritu Yumnam

is a young researcher whose career trajectory spans the social and consumer research sectors. In her capacity as a researcher with the Uttarakhand Environmental Education Centre, since 2014 she has been engaging with themes of urgent relevance to rural futures in Uttarakhand, such as inter-generational change and the aspirations of young people, gender and labour, mundane life in hazard-riddled geography and methodological questions of voice and inclusion. Her educational credentials are cross-disciplinary, including an MPhil in Natural Resource Management from the Indian Institute of Forest Management (Bhopal) and a Master's in Social Entrepreneurship from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (Mumbai).

Anuradha Pande

has worked with the Uttarakhand Environmental Education Centre in Almora since 1992. She has been part of a team designing, testing and mainstreaming environmental education in government schools, which led to policy reform in education in Uttarakhand. She is the founder and coordinator of the Uttarakhand Women's Federation, a state-wide network of rural women's groups which organises women and adolescent girls into village groups and conducts training sessions. In addition to developing educational materials for use in villages, she organises annual conventions across the state that bring women together to raise their voices.

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Abstract

This paper looks at the diversity of women's and girls' lives, work patterns and aspirations across different agro-ecological and social contexts in the north Indian mountain state of Uttarakhand. Adopting an intergenerational lens and drawing on location-specific empirical material that emerged from an inductive, iterative and dialogic research process, we explore how *Pahadi* (mountain) young women and girls express rural modernity. The younger generation's access to schooling and exposure to a wider world through television, social media and consumer and popular culture is shaping aspirations for another kind of life; girls are distancing themselves from the agriculture and forest work that still defines the lives of their elders. This generational gap casts new light on the diversity of experiences and growing complexities that characterise contemporary *Pahadi* households, as trajectories of change over the past few decades have altered physical, material and social landscapes. People's relationships to the land and natural resources are changing, as are their concerns and priorities; the young in particular seek new social roles, relationships and ways of being in the world. Our work highlights the urgency of developing more nuanced understandings of the embodiment of gender in mountain ecosystems that draw on these contemporary realities and, critically, acknowledge social and attitudinal realities as the young themselves perceive them. At a conceptual level, gender analysis based on cross-generational differences challenges the common perspective that views mountain women within a restrictive domestic economy and natural resource management approach while overlooking the heterogeneity of circumstances and experiences that shape their lives. At a methodological level, this study contributes to learning from a participatory bottom-up research design that enables under- or unrepresented voices to come forth, not merely in academic writing but also within the household and the community. At a practical level, it offers a way of reflecting on what a realistic mountain perspective and sustainable development approach needs to consider in this moment of the 21st century that will contribute to a more engaged on-the-ground policy for mountainous areas.

Keywords:

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Background

Picture the scene: a large multi-generational gathering of women, including the elderly, middle-aged and young married women as well as unmarried girls, sitting on rugs spread out on the uneven, damp ground; the blue skies and a mild sun offer a welcome break from the rain of preceding days. There is an air of festivity. There are all too few occasions during which women of the Uttarakhand communities in the Indian Himalayas have the luxury to relax or to engage with one another in informal ways. The discussion is lively, occasionally heated, as the women reflect on how their roles within households and the community have changed over time. One older woman remarks, "Our days were very dangerous; we used to be so scared of elders. If the mother-in-law came then the daughter-in-law would keep quiet. We were scared as we would be of a tiger!" Others nod in agreement, sharing the horrors of those long-ago years of youth. Then a young voice pipes up, "If we have not done anything wrong, why should we be scared at all?"

This exchange captures the essence of an important change visible throughout these hills: a growing confidence amongst girls to voice their opinions even amongst elders. Not long ago, their lives would have been charted by a roadmap similar to that which shaped their mothers' and grandmothers' lives. Today it is possible to envision another future, made possible by increasing access to schooling, the adoption of mainstream values, and the messages of consumer and popular cultures that satellite television and social media are bringing into once isolated villages.

These changes owe in considerable part to the unprecedented economic and social growth that has followed in the wake of the liberalisation of India's economy in the early 1990s. In tandem with the formation of the mountain state of Uttarakhand in 2000, these changes have extended the parameters of rural people's lives far beyond their immediate communities largely through 'revolutions' in the telecommunication and transportation sectors. These have led to improved levels of accessibility and connectivity hitherto unknown, new levels of market and urban growth, population expansions and displacements, increasing land prices and new industrial policies that have reconfigured mountain landscapes and the lives of rural communities (Govindrajan, 2018; Ganguly-Scrase & Scrase, 2008; Joshi, 2001). The certainties about a 'village way of life' that once prevailed are fading as households and communities become more heterogeneous and a culture of consumerism reshapes behaviours and aspirations. A commonly heard remark is that "now there is no difference between the town and the village," which bears testimony to how the distances that once literally

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and figuratively defined and separated highlands from lowlands, mountains from plains, and villages from towns are being erased.

In this chapter, we explore what the experiences of *Pahadi* (mountain) rural modernity, described as an "era of the consciousness of the new," means for young girls.[1] Though the young are a constituency inadequately represented in regional and national discourses on mountain development policy in India, their voices offer rich insights into their lives and aspirations, and how these remain at odds with those of their elders. This generational divide, expressed in a distancing from the village way of life, further highlights the diversities and complexities of contemporary mountain households. It also casts light on the challenges girls face in balancing the allure of a 'modern' life with the realities imposed by their social environments.

Various strands of research have influenced our work. At a broad level, we engage with studies drawn from both mountainous and plain areas that look at the myriad ways in which this moment of modernity, shaped by global flows of capital and technology, education and consumerism, is shaping people's lives and evoking responses (Resurrección et al., 2019; Sijapati & Birkenholz, 2016; Kumar, 2014; Mines & Lamb, 2012; Mines & Yazgi, 2010; Johnson, 2005). Specifically, the issues we raise resonate with existing conversations on how this time of rapid social change and emerging aspirations is shaping gendered and youth subjectivities (Dyson, 2014, 2010; Jeffrey, 2010; Klenk, 2010, 2004). Our work also draws on and adds to a continued interrogation of an element of the *Pahadi* narrative that, despite endless critiques and challenges, continues to permeate policy and development thinking about women in mountainscapes: that their lives are framed by a close affinity to their natural resource bases (Joshi, 2014; Batliwala & Dhanraj, 2007; Gururani, 2000, 2002; Sinha et al., 1997). The most recent incarnation of the women-environment convergence has emerged around the envisioning of mountain women as the bedrock of sustainable mountain development who can serve at the forefront of responding to climate change-related issues (Rudaz & Debarbieux, 2012; Nellemann et al., 2011; Leduc, 2010). As noted by others, this is a discourse that places an undue burden on women themselves and is increasingly divorced from the contemporary realities in which women find themselves.
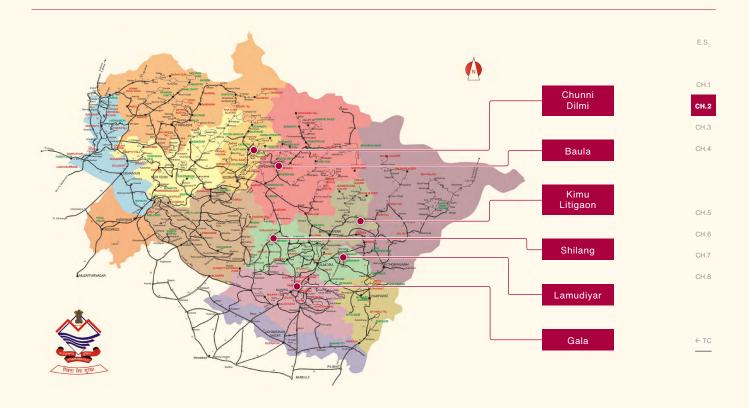
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1   *Pahadi* refers to 'of the mountains,' an identity people use to describe themselves as well as the languages spoken. The majority of the population in our research site is Hindu; while people observe the major festivals of the Hindus of the northern plains, they also follow feasts, fasts and rituals that are distinctive to this region. For discussions of religion in the contemporary Himalayas, see Sijapati & Birkenholz (2016); Berreman (1972); and Sax (2009).

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Figure 1. Map of Uttarakhand depicting the eight hamlets that were part of the sample of the study

Source: Uttarakhand Police Department [website][2]

Methodology

Our discussion draws on an inductive disaster research study conducted during 2014–2017, the genesis of which lay in the urgent need for fresh insights into hazard-induced disasters in Uttarakhand.[3] One fundamental dimension of the study was to capture the diversity of labour roles and aspirations of women of different age groups, including young girls, across different agro-ecological and social contexts. Guided by the rich body of lessons derived from the participatory involvement of the Uttarakhand Environmental Education Centre (UEEC) in the villages of Uttarakhand over three decades, we locate this study within a body of up-to-date grounded knowledge about the contemporary realities of rural hill communities.

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2   Available at: https://uttarakhandpolice.uk.gov.in/pages/display/169-uttarakhand-road-map (Accessed 16 September 2020)

3   In the aftermath of devastating flash floods that ravaged Uttarakhand in June 2013, The Indian Council for Social Science Research funded several research projects to look into issues presented by the disaster. UEEC, a grassroots non-governmental organisation in Almora, was awarded funding to look into the broad theme of gender and natural disasters. See UEEC (2017).

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Since close engagement with community members was a critical element for our research, we adopted Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) to shape the research methodology. CGT is a qualitative research methodology that seeks to construct theory about issues of relevance to people's lives and acknowledges the subjectivity of multiple truths and realities. CGT encourages the research experience to develop in an organic manner, drawing on an inductive process of data that encourages a dialogic relationship, whereby the research participants can express issues they deem important. This multiplicity of voices enables researchers and participants to engage in the co-construction of meaning, which helps to shape the research process. Thus, from the start our research was participatory and iterative, encouraging inputs and feedback from varied sources. We also attempted to promote, as far as was feasible, equitable participation amongst all involved in the research endeavour.[4]

We selected a purposive sample of nine hamlets across five districts in the Kumaon and Garhwal regions of Uttarakhand. Selection was based on meeting one or more of a combination of thematic criteria. This included caste distribution; reliance on traditional hill agriculture versus commercial horticulture; the nature of participants' involvement in non-farm activities; the nature of adverse environmental events; and relative remoteness. Each of these thematic groups also represented different altitudes and socio-ecological conditions which had implications for the local economy and community life, women's labour, attitudes and the transitions they had experienced in day-to-day living and, finally, experiences of vulnerability in the context of environmental disasters.

A combination of qualitative methods (including in-depth interviews at the individual/household level, focus group discussions and participatory resource mapping at the community level) and quantitative tools were employed to collect expansive evidence. In addition to group activities, our findings draw on detailed inputs from 273 adult and married women and 54 girls (aged between 12 and 21 years), who were the primary interview respondents. Quantitative data was generated through a detailed interview schedule designed to elicit household-level information on a wide range of issues: household demography (education levels, types and levels of migration and return migration, household incomes and remittances, land-based and non-farm sources of livelihood and

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4   There is a large amount of literature on constructivist grounded theory. See Lincoln & Guba (2011); Morse (2001); Patton (1990); Glaser (1992); Glaser & Strauss (1967); and Strauss & Corbin (1998). For good overviews, discussions about and limitations of CGT see Redman-MacLaren & Mills (2015); and Mills, Bonner & Francis (2006).

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asset ownership), the nature of individuals' dependence on natural resources and the related intra-household labour distribution, changes and continuities in village life, and, finally, lived-experiences of hazard-induced disasters.

Two critical features of the research design included providing space for often under- or unrepresented stakeholders -in this case, women and most notably young girls- and a commitment to inclusion and ongoing dialogue between the researchers and the community sub-groups through out the duration of the research. An important aspect of gaining the confidence of and working with the women was being able to offer them an encouraging environment in which to articulate opinions that would be valued. For most respondents, it was the first time their opinions were prioritised over those of adult male household members. Women would often initially direct us to talk with their husbands or sons and were amused when we insisted that we wanted to hear *their* opinions. The young girls were shy and needed time to open up, and we had to work on presenting our questions in a way that would not appear intimidating. We were also conscious that the presence of other family members might put pressure on the girls.[5] As a result, each interview had its own flavour, shaped both by circumstances that had to be dealt with, as well as matters of personality and temperament. The UEEC's long-term engagement in these mountains and our choice of research tools facilitated a dialogic process between intra-community interest groups. Research tools used included in-depth interviews, multi-generational focus group discussions, and participatory resource appraisals that brought together the entire community including men.

Ensuring that these heterogeneities were adequately reflected gave a particularly rich texture to the process of data recording, coding and analysis.[6] We presented data analysis and findings based on three events in Almora, Uttarakhand. These were attended by multi-generational groups of women from different parts of Kumaon and Garhwal Himalayas (including the women and girls from villages where we had done fieldwork and elected women representatives from villages where we had not previously conducted research). The free-flowing discussions, inputs, critiques and clarifications not only strengthened our

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5   Some elders expressed reservations about why we needed to talk with their daughters in private, questioning what sorts of issues we were going discuss with them.

6   The open-ended responses from the interviews were recorded in respondents' words so as to retain their undiluted meaning and then coded to convert them into quantitative data. All group interactions were audio recorded and transcribed in the local dialect and only later translated into Hindi, so that context specific meanings were not lost in translation.

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understanding of the emerging data but also helped us to acknowledge our own biases in interpreting the material.[7]

Figure 2. Girls from the remote hamlet of 'Litigaon' in Bageshwar district during an interview

Photo credit: Ritu Yumnam

In retrospect, there were obvious challenges and limitations to the study. Given the objectives of the research, we deliberately privileged women's and girls' experiences and voices over those of men and boys. Inevitably, many of the issues that we engaged with – gendered norms, expectations of labour, migration and aspirations – would have generated different sets of concerns from the men and boys. The research might well have benefited from their inclusion, but it would then have been a very different study and not the one we intended. Moreover, working in areas in which UEEC has had a long-standing engagement over three decades brought both benefits and certain limitations. We were able to tap into networks and prior relationships but also had to contend with raised expectations about what the research might mean for the communities.

7   Another workshop was held with participants from academia, administrative and non-governmental agencies at the UEEC office in June 2015.

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Figure 3. A data dissemination workshop being held at the UEEC office at Almora

Photo credit: Ritu Yumnam

Results and findings

Consuming modernity *Pahadi* style

The 'rural' has long engaged with processes and dynamics of the 'new,' an interaction which has brought about a merging of the old and 'traditional' with the new and 'modern,' giving rise to new occupations and activities. This interaction has enabled new attitudes and practices to shape how some people begin to think about themselves (Dalmia & Sadana, 2012, p.5). The multiple facets of modernity are also reflected in ways of working, interpersonal relationships, modes of thinking and, increasingly, new objects of desire played out and experienced in the material/social domains, such as access to schooling, a mobile phone, novel kinds of foods and satellite television. Also pertinent are patterns of behaviour "calibrated to morality and to emotions, affecting not just what people have in their homes or pockets but in their souls and hearts" (Gold, 2012, p.14). Ambiguities are also embedded within modernity allowing for the embracing of new ways of being that are no longer circumscribed by place but coloured by anxieties about what embracing the 'new' might mean in terms of losing the past and its related moorings. Complex socio-economic and gendered contexts also

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suggest that the impacts of modernity are necessarily layered, sending out mixed messages, and carrying different meanings depending on whether one is female or male.[8]

The relatively isolated mountain communities of this region have until recently been protected from the onslaught of changes that have been experienced in the more accessible rural areas of the plains. Today Uttarakhand's villages are no longer entirely rural in the sense of the word's normative association with an agrarian economy. Depending on location and accessibility as well as migration and employment histories, these villages are likely to be a melting pot of the old and the new. Changes are apparent in newly constructed houses with contemporary urban designs, the penetration of consumer goods, expanded mobility and so on. The most visible manifestations of generational change in the hill villages of Uttarakhand are revealed in the different preferences for clothing and foods as well as an explicit transition from the use of local dialects to Hindi as a common language. These shifts are apparent even within a single household, where it is common to see women at different life stages wearing different types of clothing, stating a preference for different types of foods, and observing different customs in their preparation of food. Preferences also differ regarding how open they are to eating outside the home or at community functions and their choice of language. Each decision constitutes a small step towards embracing 'being modern,' a reflexive act which to varying degrees has inter-generational and gender implications.

Food practices offer a rich terrain on which social meanings play out, highlighting issues of identity and belonging that offer people ways to think about themselves in relation to a wider world, including the preservation of cultural identities or a desire to belong to the modern world (Baviskar, 2018, pp. 49–50; Mintz, 1996, p.70). Diets in these mountains have been undergoing changes for decades; the devaluation of once central food grains reflects a diminishing agricultural base, the expansion of markets and the availability of hybrid grains through agricultural extension agencies.[9]

In one multi-generational focus group, the discussion highlighted the ways foods can serve as links to or breaks from the past in ways that show stark generational differences. The older women are critical of

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8   Gold (2012, p. 16) talks of the "intense affect" surrounding the "potential polarities of desire and revulsion for the trappings of modernity."

9   This is noted throughout the Hindu Kush Himalayan belt. See Adhikari et al., 2017; Gautam & Andersen, 2017; Dame & Nüsser, 2011; Maikhuri et al., 2001; and Finnis, 2007.

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how packaged foods have entered village diets, pointing to the adverse effects these have on the health of people and especially children. A woman remarks:

> **"Earlier we used to have just *Mandua ki roti* (bread made from coarse-grained millet); it is much more nutritious than *atta* (wheat). Look at us! We are healthier because our daily diet has consisted of local cereals and vegetables like nettle leaves which are said to contain iron. Today, they do not like to eat traditional foods. Chow mein (noodles): where is the nutrition in that?"**

The young are certain that their food choices are the right ones: "If the food isn't nutritious, so what? Calcium and iron tablets are available in the market. We will eat those in case we become anaemic or weak." Expressing a clear association between what one eats and the extent to which one is of the modern world, a young interlocutor added, "One has to make progress. We cannot keep having the same old food items while the world is changing." Her companion adds, "We do not want to eat *Mandua ki roti*. It is hard, thick and difficult to eat. Moreover, it is brown ... if we eat it, our complexion will change."

Millet reflects culturally valued aspects of life that still find expression in folklore and festivals which correspond with the agricultural seasons, and which offer something for elders to grasp in the face of rapid change. In contrast to the flavourful foods of their remembered pasts, new hybrid forms of wheat and vegetables constitute a literally "tasteless modernity" which many elders decry (Gold, 2012, p.21). Today these so-called 'inferior' grains are finding new popularity amongst urban buyers, while also signifying for permanent migrants a way of connecting to their *Pahadi* identity.[10] Symbolically the younger generation's refusal to eat certain foods is seen as liberating, a "form of self-identification" that involves a shrugging off of the past (Mintz, 1996, p.13). The equating of certain foods to skin colour also highlights the extent to which once-isolated mountain villages are now connected to the Indian mainstream, and how advertising and product accessibility enable people to participate in a collective national obsession around skin colour with products like Fair and Lovely, a popular skin lightener.[11]

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10 For elaborations on the 'psychology of loss' and the emotional responses to the evocation of the past through the senses, see Ann Grodzins Gold (2009) and Seremetakis (1996).

11 Since the late 1980s an ethos of consumerism, central to the message of modernity, has been disseminated via television, initially conveyed through a popular programme, '*Hum Log*' (We the people) via the state-run television channel *Doorsharshan.* See Ibrahim (2012) and Johnson (2005, p.43).

Clothing, a signifier of modernity *par excellence*, similarly lays open generational divides, in addition to making assumptions about the wearer's moral status. This pertains particularly to women. Women of different age groups wear different types of clothing. The older generation (e.g. women who are now mothers-in-law) often prefer traditional, mostly home-made clothing; middle-aged women (their daughters-in-law) tend to wear machine-made nylon saris that are easy to wash and dry; adolescent girls and young newly married women, on the other hand, wear *salwar-kameez*, while children favour jeans and tee-shirts. Homemade clothes are now viewed as rough, embodying 'backwardness' and older women talk of the pressures to change their grandchildren place on them:

> **"I feel more comfortable in my *pankhula* (homemade cloth, Figure 4) but my grandchildren scold me. They say that the times have changed and I should wear a *sari.* Pankhula was warm, and one could wear it with ease. A sari is thin, and I feel cold in it, but what can I say? Children don't like us dressing up in the old ways, so we give up."**

Schools also serve to channel mainstream values, behaviours and trends, which overtly delegitimise and devalue the local ways. A young woman in her 20s remarked, "Teachers from the cities come to the village...(and) ask why we dress like that. Children also feel that their friends will make fun of them." Against these restrictions, the perceived freedoms associated with urban life further add fuel to the aspiration of living another kind of life.

The most significant inter-generational change that women experience is in the domain of education. One woman describes a context common to her generation:

> **"Earlier the social norm was that boys would attend school and girls would look after the cattle ... they would get married by 12–13 years of age. Later...many girls expressed their willingness to study, but they had to struggle to get enrolled in school. Now, the situation has changed completely. In my own village, all girls go to school; some of them are in college now."**

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Figure 4. Three generations of women from a single family wearing very different kinds of clothing

Photo credit: Anuradha Pande

Even when girls began going to school in the last years of the previous century, it was common to withdraw them after the primary level; the ability of girls to continue their education was likely to be contingent on their families' labour needs. Today, on the other hand, the education of girls is seen not only as desirable but essential even amongst parents who themselves are illiterate (Mehta, 1994; UEEC, 2017).[12]

Many women in their middle and older years who did not benefit from going to school see education as a stepping stone to achieving a life outside the hamlet. One woman said, "Given the conditions and the way the world (is), even we feel like educating our children and helping them to progress." Nodding in agreement, another added, "What they turn out to become depends on what they do with their mind. If they study, only then they can become something." Another woman remarked, "When we were children, some of us went to school, but we still had to do household

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12 Lower-caste households typically exhibit the lowest educational levels for girls, a trend confirmed by Census data (2001, 2011).

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and agricultural work ... Now we never ask our daughters to do this work. We say study hard and do well. If they do that, they will get a job."

Increased accessibility to schooling in these hills has played a key role in introducing a particular version of 'the modern' to village communities through the inculcation of values, orientations and perspectives that have brought once peripheral geographic and cultural spaces into the Indian mainstream. The type of education to which the rural children of the mountains are exposed is one which privileges an urban-based modernity. At a time when the rural economy is in decline and livelihood opportunities are seen only as possible somewhere else, the general pull of urban life (further strengthened by the influences exerted by the mass and social media) is a powerful one (Kumar, 2014, pp.38–42).[13]

One important dimension of education has been the introduction of Hindi-medium instruction. In the late 1980s in many areas, even in the accessible lower hills, it was common for women in their middle years to be more comfortable speaking Garhwali or Kumaoni rather than the Hindi that the men and children spoke which they acquired through jobs and schooling (Mehta, 1994, 1996). Today women of that age group, some of whom might have had access to some schooling, speak Kumaoni or Garhwali amongst themselves but are comfortable speaking Hindi if they need to. This schooling-language equation has contributed to an erosion of a linguistic tradition once centred around an understanding of *jal*, *jungle*, *jameen aur jaanvar* (water, forests, land and animals) as central to subsistence livelihoods and through which people made sense of and understood their surroundings.[14] The greater use of Hindi and knowledge systems imparted through schools and other institutions external to the community (e.g. extension agencies) have also brought in a new language of environmentalism that has helped to break this link. Words like *paryavaran* (environment), *paaristhitiki* (ecology) and *jalagam* (watershed), translated directly from English to Hindi and used widely by educated youth, have now entered the *Pahadi* idiom; however, they are likely not to resonate with the elderly who have a more holistic understanding of 'the environment.' Today

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13 This is not to suggest an unchanging Indian village; as Kumar (2014) points out, this is something constructed by the "modern, urban imagination" (p.43). There is, however, a way in which 'the rural' is positioned, in terms of rural development projects (Pigg, 1992) and at a conceptual level in which "village and villagers remain resolutely in the past" (Gupta, 2004, p.7).

14 For more on the ways in which the social, religious and cultural order are connected to ecology, underscoring the strongly held belief that the environment does not exist as a separate entity, see Gokkale and Pala (2011); Bhagwat and Rutte (2006); Bisht and Bhatt (2011); and Everard et. al. (2019).

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arguably migration, new income sources and changing environmental trends have further contributed to declining hands-on interactions with natural resources.

For all that is positive about girls' access to schooling, what also emerge are the contradictions of contemporary *Pahadi* life that lie not too far below the surface, which affect girls and young women's lives in ways not true for their male counterparts. Education may be an avenue for employment and much-needed income, but it also highlights a tension at the heart of the patrilineal system which emerges at the time of marriage: that there are "two kinds of mothers – those of sons and those of daughters" (Pande, 2003, p.xix). Thus, the same women who want their daughters to be educated and who speak of the importance of letting girls stand on their own feet express concern that overly educated daughters-in-law could jeopardise the well-being of the household: "Why would a girl with a BA or MA be interested in agricultural work?" is a commonly posed query.

Young lives: agency and aspirations

"Who will do the field and animal work?" is not an idle question. Going to school is increasingly a way for girls, especially those from better-off households, to distance themselves from agricultural and forest work, even if they are still expected to chip in with domestic labour in a way that is not the case for their brothers. A well-known *Pahadi* folk song women sing as they work in the fields speaks to this shift in what was once an unquestioned division of labour. The old lyrics went: "We have sown the seeds of fenugreek, sister. We have sown the seeds of fenugreek. We will work together and complete the tedious work of cultivation in the hills." A newer variant offers a picture of less compliance, rejecting the life that their mothers have had. Embedded in the lyrics is the hope of marrying men who will take them away from the hardships that village life represents, "We have sown the seeds of fenugreek, sister. We have sown the seeds of fenugreek. I refuse to do this (hard) work, sister I cannot do this work in the hill farms."

Conversations about how women's lives and labour have changed from one generation to the next are invariably lively, accompanied by bantering and friendly teasing. For the very old, there is no question that the work burdens of their young days were immense; one woman said, "Earlier people would put in a lot of physical labour, they would run around for work, it is not so now." There is general agreement that the young women of today would not be up to the task of doing what their elders did – they are simply not strong enough. One older woman remarked, "Now women are not doing that work. So, they have time,

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and they watch television. For today's women, everything is at home, a toilet, running water and cooking gas … The kind of work we have done, women of today cannot do." Yet, another woman contemplated the newfound confidence and ease apparent in young women when engaging with the opposite sex, something that would have been unthinkable in another time:

> **"In our day when the groom's family reached the village, we would start crying. We are now old, but we have never referred to our husbands as '*tum*' (informal you). These days the girl will herself say that the boy's family has come to select me and from that moment on the groom becomes '*tum*'."**

For older women, the pace of change is bewildering, and many view the decline of the old ways with something akin to pain. Young and even middle-aged women are likely to view this situation as contributing to less arduous work, greater leisure, and more time for self-care. By communicating through their words and actions that cultivation and cattle-rearing are not the only ways to live their lives, the young women and girls are helping to construct a new human-environment relationship that looks considerably different from what once shaped the lives of their elders. While forests and agriculture are important aspects of *Pahadi* material life, they do not necessarily take precedence over other activities that the young see themselves as fully capable of performing. In reply to an older woman's concern that an educated woman will not be motivated to work in the fields or take care of the cattle, a young mother exclaimed, "No, it is not that if she is educated, she won't want to work. But of course, she will not spend her entire day in the forest. She will give time to her children, and she will take out some time for farming also, and she will also take out time for herself." Her companion added, "…the ways of working have changed. We work in ways that save time. People also spend time on themselves, on self-care and take care that they do not inconvenience themselves too much."

It remains to be seen whether girls are actively demonstrating a belief in development as a dynamic process. Nevertheless, they readily speak of wanting to learn new skills, focusing on further education and, with any luck, finding employment. The consequences of environmental and resource degradation carry special meanings for them as opposed to their elders. Young women do not necessarily see environmental degradation as a cause of their hardships; rather, it is the absence of educational and employment opportunities that they envisage as the most pressing problems they face in their villages. This is not to suggest that girls are not aware of the role of environmental health for the

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welfare of their households but rather that their more pressing concerns are now focused on themselves.[15]

Figure 5. Adolescent girls taking the lead in mapping their hamlet during a resource appraisal exercise in 'Kimu' of Bageshwar district

Photo credit: Ritu Yumnam

'Working smart', thus, is not just about the dismissal of the physical labour that is a defining feature of their mothers' and grandmothers' lives. It also acknowledges an approach to domestic responsibilities that is about not overly inconveniencing oneself and leaving time for other things that combine chores with entertainment: watching television while cooking, listening to film songs while cleaning the house, and talking regularly to friends on the mobile. In this respect, mobile phones have transformed so many aspects of young women's and girls' lives, helping to attenuate the social seclusions accruing from remoteness and lack of cultural permission to move around in the way that boys and

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15   While we didn't specifically probe levels of general awareness about environmental issues and how these influence many of the hardships they and their families experience, young female participants did not seem to see excessive construction and road building as relevant issues.

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men do. They are used to talking with friends, sending messages and downloading songs and videos in Hindi and in the local dialects, adding spark to drudgery, as a newly married woman explained:

"We take the mobile to the forest and share songs and see photos in each other's sets. While we cut grass or collect fuelwood, one of us will play the film songs. It is nice to be able to combine music with physical work...we feel relaxed... it gives a sense of freedom and relief."

Her friend added: "From here (the forest) I can talk to my mother and friends in my *maika* (parents' house) without anyone from my *sasural* (husband's house) listening to me." Mobiles are also beginning to transform the experience of childbirth, at least for those living in more accessible areas within closer reach of roads and towns, "When a woman is ready for childbirth, we use the cell phones to call 108 (a free ambulance service). The long time we used to spend at home experiencing pain is now replaced by quick delivery (in the hospital)."

Figure 6 and 7. Mobile phones have opened up a new world to young girls and women

Photo credit: Anuradha Pande

But mobiles also clash with age-old restrictions pertaining to rigid gender norms and parental concerns. Parents view them warily, speaking of their potentially bad influence in enabling girls to communicate with boys; in some families, mobiles have become tools of surveillance, a way in which elders and even brothers can exert control over daughters and sisters.

Another example relates to fashion and the increasing choices girls have regarding clothing and their appearance. These choices collide with the realities of village life that include the lack of anonymity and a sense

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that a girl's every action is subject to scrutiny. One girl exclaimed, "It is so difficult to wear a pair of jeans in the village. All the women in the village begin to talk about it, making up stuff … and when our mothers get to hear what they are saying, they criticise us." This is an illustration of how the externalities of 'modern ways' can and do co-exist with more culturally entrenched mores. The adoption of new behaviours and ways are, at one level, far more easily donned relative to the kinds of thinking and attitudes that shape the various cultural 'permissions' that dictate gender roles, relationships and ways of being in the world. Thus, for some, jeans serve as an emblem of the dangers of modernity, constituting a state of decline or *bigad jaana* (getting spoilt) that affects girls in ways that are not true for boys.

The 'stick' of modernity

For all the trappings of newer ways, changes in girls' and women's perceptions about themselves and those of society about women are slower to emerge. Girls' lives thus remain limited by social mores and the persistence of codes shaping gendered behaviour that affect their ability to take advantage of the few opportunities available to them in the broader world. This is the double-bind created by a wider social environment that offers the young, girls as well as boys, a glimpse of ways of life that feed into their aspirations, but also persistent limitations laid down by families that limit their ability to truly spread their wings.

Girls speak of the opportunities that would be available to them elsewhere: access to better and higher education, training in vocational skills, access to the use of computers, learning English, and greater avenues for shopping and for travelling. They long to make these and other trappings of 'modern' sensibilities introduced via television and social media their own: the freedom to choose what they wear and where they work where the privilege of anonymity allows escape from constant familial monitoring. Here they collide with reality: many families refuse to give their consent for their daughters to study or work elsewhere on the grounds that, unmonitored, a girl's morality can all too easily be called into question. There is also the persistence of a line of thinking that if girls pursue their own lives, they will continue 'getting spoilt' (*bigad jaana*); even parents who aim for something more for their daughters are aware that when the time for marriage comes, the *sasural* (the in-law's house) will not want 'that kind' of daughter-in-law, one who prioritises her own independence.[16]

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16 For a discussion of the harassment girls and women routinely face in towns and cities see Gadekar (2016).

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A gendered analysis of educational attainment and associated aspirations uncovers complex dynamics that suggest that while *Pahadi* girls are experiencing important changes in their lives, arguably these are superficial rather than substantive. This dynamic begins early on in the domain of education, which is of poor quality in the hills, and most young people – boys and girls alike – from rural backgrounds are ill-equipped to get well paid jobs in a town. Provisions to challenge gender inequality in education have gained traction over the last two decades under the government-led scheme *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (Education for All) which, along with the Right to Education Act 2009, mandates that both boys and girls are expected to attend school. However, high enrolments have not challenged gender stereotypes which are, in fact, often reinforced by teachers and textbooks and do not necessarily build confidence in girls to make decisions about their own lives.

While gender norms and practices are slowly becoming less restrictive, as discussed above, boys continue to be permitted greater leeway in taking time for themselves. At the same time, their sisters are expected to share in domestic chores and, if needed, fetch fuelwood and fodder. Gender-differentiated roles and responsibilities, along with cultural entitlements to act in a certain way, have bearings on girls' and women's confidence in stepping into non-traditional spaces, reflected in lower female participation in education and, subsequently, in community-level matters (Pande, 2001). One consequence is that in adulthood, men participate more in public spaces and engage in community networks while women, even those who are educated, tend to limit themselves to traditional household activities.

Given the limited opening up of opportunities for girls, their lives continue to be viewed through the prism of marriage and eventually motherhood. Here a regressive ideal of domesticity is emerging, especially amongst young women from relatively well-off families who seek to emulate a middle-class standard of living by 'protecting' their status through 'being at home' rather than 'in the fields.'

Reflections

This paper has attempted to bring alive a moment of transition in rural Uttarakhand which, through a dialogic and participatory methodological approach, helped us to look beyond prevailing truisms about mountain communities and women's lives and to focus on the changing aspirations of a younger generation of girls and women. Certainties about a 'village way' of life and of gendered agro-ecological relationships and labour

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patterns that might have prevailed in an earlier time can no longer be taken for granted. This is the main policy implication our work brings to the table, which needs to inform the reshaping of sustainable mountain development. Even modest village households wear an increasingly 'urban' face which is reflective of new types of work in new places and diversified income sources, and are characterised by a greater diversity of needs, concerns and interests. Trajectories of change over the past few decades have altered physical, material and social landscapes; resource endowment is undergoing a change, as are relationships to the land and natural resources that were once central to the *Pahadi* domestic economy. Agriculture and its allied activities, which have long held a prominent place in the way hill women's lives have been thought of, are now giving way to more diverse and complex realities shaped by these intersecting circumstances.

These findings offer insights of both theoretical and practical importance toward understanding contemporary socio-ecological realities in the mountains generally, and the varied and complex ways in which they are expressed across generations particularly. They have a contribution to make to a much-needed dialogue about how development policy can become more attuned to on-the-ground situations and conditions in mountain areas and offer a foundation upon which to build further research. While it fell outside the scope of this chapter to talk about the generational divide in the context of communities' lived experiences and their perceptions of adverse (often) recurring environmental events, in closing it is useful to bring these two issues together.[17] At a time when the young are moving away from the land, literally and aspirationally, climate-induced variability and the impacts of climate change are contributing to the declining quality of agriculture and natural resource endowment, and the more frequent extreme weather events are creating new levels of uncertainty, risk and vulnerability.

Against this backdrop, the voices of young women suggest an urgent need to interrogate what older understandings of a 'mountain perspective' and 'sustainable development' mean for the communities of the Uttarakhand Himalaya at this juncture of the 21st century. Many youth desire to live another kind of life and experience a dilemma. While they

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17   See Ritu (2020) for a discussion on the phrase "adverse environmental events" which better reflects the grounded reality of complex and varied encounters with natural hazards (such as the considerably common experience of recurring landslides in the region) than what is suggested by a focus on catastrophic events. Such events can introduce new dimensions of risk and vulnerability that are often considerably more complex and diverse than what is evident from a focus on big events that more readily catch public and bureaucratic attention due to their sensational attributes.

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are proud to call themselves *Pahadi*, they are acutely aware that there are perhaps not many resources available in their villages to pursue their aspirations. In no longer prioritising the environment and agriculture in their lives, this younger generation offers a reminder of the changing face of the social capital of these mountain communities. The existence of an educated and youthful population familiar with social media and technology opens the possibility of developing a more dynamic and layered conversation, which could be directed toward engaging with disaster-risk reduction initiatives and forging new pathways to develop sustainable nature-based approaches. Rural and urban areas in these fragile environments urgently require these new approaches.

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