**“Reframing discourses of gender and disaster:**

***Pahadi* narratives of change from rural Uttarakhand”**

**(Sponsored research Projects (Uttarakhand)**

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**Abstract for ICSSR publication**

In the aftermath of the June 2013 flash floods that devastated large areas of Uttarakhand, the ICSSR instituted a sponsored research project to investigate various issues that were thrown up by the natural catastrophe. Uttarakhand Seva Nidhi Paryavaran Shiksha Sansthan (USNPSS), an Almora-based organization that has been working in rural Uttarakhand since 1986, submitted a proposal under the broad theme of ‘gender and disaster’, which was accepted. USNPSS’s vast network of village level community-based organizations and women’s federations, along with three decades of immersive field experience, provided the foundations for the extensive research study (February 2014 to July 2017), that served as a means to tap into a rich diversity of knowledge concerning contemporary hill communities. The studycasts new perspectives on two arenas of considerable importance to Himalayan development and research: the spectrum of disaster scenarios that shape mountain communities’ lives, and the ways in which women’s and girls’ attitudes toward work, perceptions of their lives and changing aspirations are feeding into new sources of identity. Both contribute to and enrich the discourse on changing *pahadi* (mountain) life at a juncture of rapid environmental and socio-economic transformations.

Adopting an inductive and bottom-up approach to draw on the grounded lived reality of rural hill communities, the study demonstrates conceptualization and implementation of a distinct community-centric grounded research design, which brings together quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture both comparative and perceptual data. It draws on a selection of eight hamlets (total population 1243) set in diverse agro-ecological settings spread across five districts of Kumaon and Garhwal and which covers a spectrum of social and caste groups. It is a synthesis of voices of 273 women and 54 young unmarried girls, in addition to other community level data collection tools. The result is a deeper understanding of grounded realities ‘from below:’ a richly textured palette that emerges from a research design that is reflexive, iterative and participatory. The perspectives of women and young unmarried girls– a constituency hitherto typically overlooked in research studies – bring alive the multiple experiences and voices that span three generations. Their involvement in responding to, analysing and even questioning the findings in data dissemination workshops helped to clarify and refine the research, often uncovering new perspectives and priorities. In this way the adoption of an inductive approach, beginning with as blank a canvas as possible and prioritising insider perspectives, encouraged a rich and nuanced narrative to emerge organically as well as to challenge widely held views about ‘the’ *pahadi* woman and thus pave the way for new research avenues.

The study offers two broad insights deeply rooted in local concerns and priorities that will be of interest to academics, policymakers and the general public.

1. A need to develop a broader understanding of what ‘disasters’ and their attendant risks and vulnerabilities can look like in mountain areas and to the communities who make their homes there. The conventionally held definitions of disaster have been put to scrutiny in view of the material collected from different villages. The pervasiveness of small-scale recurring adverse environmental events, so-called ‘silent disasters’ that often present as seasonal occurrences, have cumulative and longer-term impacts that can also be devastating to production strategies, agro-ecological linkages and psycho-social well-being. Whether directly affected or living under the constant threat of such events, the experiences of those whose lives are affected highlight the myriad ways in which vulnerability intersects with gender and caste marginalities to extract huge tolls both tangible and intangible. The multidimensional nature of disaster events and their impacts in the hills, the misalignment between “outsider” and “local” perspectives on what constitutes a disaster, and the need to be sensitive to intangible dimensions of vulnerability and what the loss of “place” means are issues that practitioners of mountain development issues would do well to pay attention to.

This moment of socio-economic transition is giving rise to a generational gap that casts a new light on the gender-natural resource nexus that has for long defined thinking about mountain women of this area and which continues to find traction. The common thread that weaves through the many voices forming the fabric of this study is a recognition that the old ways are dying out, and that a declining interest in pursuing them is coupled with aspirations for an increasingly urban lifestyle. This takes on particular significance in the context of the still heavily gendered agro-ecological relationships and labour patterns that continue to characterize village life. While the *jal-jungle-jameen aur jaanvar* (water-forests, land and animals) equation still defines the lives of their mothers and grandmothers, a younger generation of women and girls is increasingly being pulled into an orbit shaped by access to formal education and exposure to a wider world through the use of cell phones, television, and consumer and popular culture. Aspirationally, if not actually, they are being distanced from village ways and work, thus challenging the once-assumed commitment of *pahadi* women to issues of resource regeneration and conservation. This not only opens up completely new ways of looking at *pahadi* women’s needs and priorities, but raises the critical need for mountain research and planning to foreground such issues especially in the context of the new challenges presented by climate change and an increasingly built mountain landscape. The study thus brings in diverse voices from various social-ecological positions including that of young girls

This research study is a valuable addition to literature on the themes of gender, natural disasters, intergenerational changes in aspirations and identities, as well as micro-level village/hamlet studies. In offering insights of both theoretical and practical importance toward addressing gaps in understanding contemporary socio-ecological realities in the mountains generally and the varied and complex ways in which they are expressed across regions and generations particularly, it has a valuable 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, offering a foundation upon which to build further research. As pointed out by the ICSSR appointed evaluators, the study is a rich micro-level account of the lived experience of natural disasters/adverse environmental events and is distinct from hazard focussed disaster studies and variable focussed research. The primary data backed findings are an important contribution for disaster risk reduction policy and its implementation in hilly Uttarakhand. Written in an accessible style, the work may also benefit those outside academic circles.

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