The Theme Of Research

The pivotal role of women in Garhwali hill economy and society widely described in ethnographic accounts and vividly portrayed in folk literature, is visible to any visitor to the region. It is now the subject of growing academic investigation. Even so, an understanding of gender relations and of women's societal position - both historical and contemporary - remain as yet obscured by claims and counterclaims of either an egalitarian or a subordinate status. We have, on the one hand, assertions of gender complementarity and relative egalitarianism based on women's highly active participation in traditional hill economy. On the other hand, there is the argument that hill women are mere beasts of burden with no respect or dignity! These different perceptions reflect an inadequate understanding of the context of a political economy of mountain livelihood system that has lost its largely self-sufficient character, witnessing a very high male migration with strong implications on women's position, work and health.

The present study focuses its attention on these issues, examining them in a broader context of gendered social structures and ideologies. This theme of the research study derives out of several unanswered questions of an earlier investigation conducted by the researcher that sought to examine the relationship between environment and health within the Himalayan system of Uttar Pradesh. Using environmental health approach, which locates health issues within the natural, social, political and economic system, the research highlighted the critical role of ecological and societal factors in the production of ill-health and disease.

The earlier study brought out that modernisation had come in the form of resource-intensive processes which ignored the socio-economy of the local people. Developmental approach in the region focussing on industrial and political centralisation, extension of law and order machinery, transport and communications and other forms of infrastructure undermine village self-sufficiency and people's relationship with the ecosystem.

Deeply embedded in the economies of the plains, the Garhwali hill economy was found to be witnessing steady erosion of peasant subsistence. The advancement of market forces has led to the depletion of life giving natural resources and the region has for long
been drained of both natural and human resources. Exploitative colonial intervention and statist and interest group oriented post-colonial development policy disrupted the symbiotic relationships between the people and ecology of indigenously developed ecosystems. The region was subjected to environmental and forest degradation and socio-economic transition that changed the relationship between the environment and households, causing people to leave hill villages for new avenues of survival and sustenance.

Degradation of forest and land created a precarious situation drastically reducing areas of land cultivable for subsistence. The indigenous redistributive systems increasingly failed to meet growing needs of the growing population. Deforestation pushed cultivated areas to critical limits. Today the balance between forests and land appears irrevocably destroyed. As numerous studies of hill development have shown, post-colonial development policy has not resulted in any noteworthy improvement for natural resource conservation or sustainable development.

In these circumstances, the study revealed that more and more peasants turned off the land to sustain themselves. Some just sought to bridge the growing gap between household subsistence production exemplified in the low productivity of land and the consumption needs of their families. Since there was no alternative employment locally, they migrated to find supplementary off-farm employment in the cities. Migration in this area was therefore partial, male-dominated and interestingly greater amongst the landed group. It created migration endemic pockets.

The sale of labour power as migrants has now emerged as an inevitable option and a key survival strategy. Out-migration is now a permanent feature and a preferred livelihood option of an increasing number of Garhwali men, leading to a sort of 'money-order economy'. Yet, the processes and patterns of migration and migrant labour exploitation are such that they necessitate the continuation of subsistence agriculture and production of use values via the peasant household economy (Whittaker, 1984; Bora, 1996).

However, despite the dependence on the influx of money from outside, the problem of underdevelopment of the local economy remained. Remittance was largely invested in
consumption and not productive. Moreover it was evident that male migration had incurred the burden on women, who continued to be constrained with their meagre resources. The findings of the study forcefully pointed out the overstated importance of money order in the economy – particularly from the perspective of women and family left behind to eke out a living in the degraded environment.

The earlier research had not looked at the gender differentials systematically, though observations from the field were indicating these differences. Moreover in the course of the fieldwork, the researcher noticed how enormous and important “work” was for these women. These observations made the researcher think about the women’s question and impelled her to explore this dimension of social relations in depth. Hence in the present study, the researcher attempts to locate and understand issues related to women’s health within this transitional hill economy.

The ecological and socio-economic developments mentioned above have had serious consequences for women of the region, who are historically and contemporarily active economic participants. As compared to the declining trend of women’s labour force participation in many parts of the country, women continue to constitute a significant proportion of the labour force as peasant cultivators in this hill region now known as Uttaranchal. According to the 1991 Census, 46 percent of the total workers and 58 percent of cultivators in Garhwal are women. However, it is increasingly apparent that the productive and domestic roles of Garhwali women are carried out in a physical and social landscape marked by the degradation of life sustaining resource of land, water, forests, and the shortage of male labour. Women’s labour now appears to be stretched to its limits, fuelled by a cultural ideology that assigned them multiple roles in social production along with the exclusive responsibility of reproduction. Transgressing traditional gender division of labour patterns, women's labour is treated as elastic and infinitely expandable to meet the ever-increasing demands of their households. Studies of hill women have pointed to heavier demands placed on their labour.

This study examines contemporary changes in women's work and patterns of the gender divisions of labour and their implications and consequences for women's health. Further,
it attempts to decipher the macro-micro connections between patterns of rural transformation and the micro realities of Garhwali women's life. Focussing on issues of their work and health in the context of a rapidly changing ecological, economic and socio-cultural environment, the underlying concern of this research study is to grasp the "true" nature of the contemporary status of Garhwali women. Status is intimately linked to and derives out of the degree of female subordination to male, and to the nature of dominant subordinate relationships within the intermeshing of men's and women's lives in any given society. Moreover understanding women's position and status requires that due account be taken of economic, cultural and ideological factors.

Thus the research attempts to decipher connections between larger forces of transformation, their impact on peasant subsistence and women's work. We are interested in both the economic and socio-cultural questions related to women's work. How are patterns of women's work changing as a result of economic and environmental changes? Why do women do the kinds of work they do and under what conditions? The form and extent of male control over female labour and over the product of labour and the cultural valuation of that labour, the degree of economic ownership that women exercise are key areas of enquiry. Do high cultural valuations of work necessarily translate into high economic, social and cultural power? Can socio-cultural status be ascertained from their position in social production is a key question.

The relationship between women's work and health and the specificities of health issues and problems of Garhwali women constitutes the second area of interest of this research. Health is seen to be defined and determined by a number of conditions and factors - environmental, material and cultural. Health like work is also socially constructed on the basis of pre-existing patterns of power and control (Daykin and Doyal, 1995). We explore in this research, work/occupational health, reproductive health and general health. Women's perceptions of the linkage between environment, work, health and their experience of ill-health and disease and their access to health care are important concerns. We seek to unravel patterns of women's health and the factors that shape them. How is health a product of biological, physical, social, economic and political realities? How women's perception and understanding of health has evolved in the context of their own
lives (Doyal, 1995; Qadeer, 1985). As other peasant societies, traditional Garhwali belief systems of disease/illness causation are governed by spiritual and humoral theories. Bodily illness and disease are traced to supernatural and also to spirit possession, witchcraft and magic. There is very little documented history or contemporary analysis of the health and illness situation in Garhwal and hence answers to these questions become important.

The issues of work and health, we argue, are of key significance, both separately and in conjunction with each other, to understand the nature and forms of gender inequality and for an evaluation of women's status in Garhwali society. Particularly in this historical context of the Chipko movement, which saw strong and sustained protests by Garhwali women against the commercial felling of forests, there is a tremendous need for disentangling myth from the reality of women's lives. In the heated debate over Chipko, the issue of the nature of the movement, whether it was a peasant, ecological of women's movement, and the exact role of women have both been contested. Underlying the arguments, are varied unstated assumptions about the Garhwali women's nature, positions and roles in society and culture. At a related but more fundamental level, Indian eco-feminists see ecologically destructive and displacing development as mal-development and see in the destruction of nature, the death of the feminine principle and the ascendance of patriarchal productivity. It becomes imperative in the light of these debates to examine the linkages between environmental degradation, socio-economic process and women's changing place in their biophysical and social milieu.

This research seeks to investigate these questions with respect to an empirically defined and historically located hill community, viz. Bunga and Daurn villages of Pauri Garhwal district, and the directions they have assumed in contemporary times.

The Organisation Of Chapters

Chapter I lays out the theoretical and conceptual canons that constitute the basis of the research and introduces the theoretical perspectives that guide the study. The effort is to confront major theoretical debates, gain clarity about relevant conceptual issues and concepts in the areas of women's work and health. Secondly the chapter conducts and
provides a review of relevant empirical material and understanding of theoretical analysis of women’s work and women’s health.

Chapter II conceptualises the research problem and discusses the methodological approach adopted by the study. It also spells out the methods used to conduct the study and acquaints the reader with tools and experiences of data collection. It also discusses the limitations of the study and its methods.

Together, Chapters III and IV set the socio-historic context of our field inquiry, the results of which will be presented in subsequent chapters. Chapter III aims at capturing key aspects of historical change in the social ecology and the politico-economic and social life of the people in Garhwal region from pre-colonial to colonial times. Adopting a broad political economy approach, this chapter attempts a reconstruction of the pre-capitalist past of Garhwal peasant society, with a focus on examining the interrelationship between environment, population, social structure and culture. A central concern is the understanding the traditional position of the peasant women of Garhwal and their location within the social structure. The chapter also traces the history of migration in the region.

Chapter IV further traces these historical processes into the present times. It has a two-fold purpose: (1) to provide an overview of relevant post-colonial transformations in rural Garhwal and (2) to establish the pattern of out-migration in the high migration district of Pauri Garhwal – Yamkeshwar Block. Analysing key aspects of ongoing change in the hill economy the chapter focuses on the continuities and breaks with the colonial past in terms of the nature of post-colonial socio-economic development, unravelling the changes that set the decline of subsistence. It presents in substantiation of the impetus for out-migration in Pauri Garhwal, the findings of our survey of eleven villages of Yamkeshwar Block.

Chapter V profiles the study villages of Bunga and Daurn in terms of their location, access, social history and social structure. The chapter examines closely the contemporary socio-economic-demographic profile of village households and analyses key changes in the socio-economic life of the village, which are crucial to understanding women’s changing situation.
Chapter VI examines changing patterns of women’s work with a focus on changes in the gender division of labour. Contextualising women’s work in the nature of subsistence work and labour re-organisation in the villages, the chapter attempts to ascertain the significant departures from the traditional patterns within the spheres of agricultural production, animal husbandry and domestic work. The focus of the chapter is on understanding specific implication of these changing patterns, the emergent new forms and its gendered relations, the impact on gender power and familial relations and implications for women’s changing economic and social status. We attempt to understand changes in the character and degree of women’s dependence on men and new patterns of authority, autonomy in work and familial life.

Against the conditions of women’s work life, we turn to the second substantive area of investigation – the conditions of their health and access to health care. The aim is to gain an indepth understanding through an explication of women’s conceptions and experiences regarding health and illnesses through which we attempt to grasp and account for their health status. Exploring the area of reproduction, while Chapter VII focuses on women’s health during reproduction, it attempts to articulates women’s experiences through the three broad reproduction stages: antenatal, natal and post-natal and their perceptions and experiences of the childbearing process. Chapter VIII explores the general health problems of women. Such separation does not presuppose a compartmentalised approach to women’s bodies nor to understanding their health. Rather, the division is only for the convenience of analysis, a device for handling of complex and interlinked data as we advocate a holistic view of women's bodies, illnesses and health.

It addresses the issue of the complex interaction between women’s roles in production and human reproduction and its consequences for the ill health or health of hill women.

Chapter VIII is concerned with women's perceptions and experiences of their general health condition, including their mental and emotional state. Locating women's illness and health issues in women's changing material, social and cultural reality, the chapter further explores the health experiences of women. It seeks to understand women's
experiences, definitions and explanations of their physical states, illnesses, pains and sufferings and their ameliorative efforts.

In both chapters the special focus is on understanding the linkages between women's work and health. We also examine the situation of women's access to health services and how they manage their problems. Together the two chapters underscore an effort to see the relationship between reproductive health and general physiological, emotional and mental well being in order to arrive at a holistic understanding of women's experiences of ill health and their health status.

Chapter IX weaves together significant strands of findings, the empirical insights gained and provide our overall analysis of women's position in Garhwal. It serves to relate to theoretical arguments adduced, with our analysis. We argue that woman's perceptions and experiences of work, child-bearing, illness and healthcare are shaped essentially by the wider context of gender inequality, economic processes and patriarchal control of the family and the state. By taking women's experiences and perceptions into account and by demonstrating that a complex of factors determine women's health, this study attempts to document the political economy of Garhwali women's health and establishes rural Garhwal's variant situation which represents nonetheless underdeveloped societies of the world.