

# Hidden Hardships

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## Water, Women's Health, and Livelihood Struggles in Rural Garhwal, India

GEORGINA DREW

*Tiré d'un travail ethnographique sur Uttarakhand, en Inde, cet article examine les luttes pour la survie des femmes vivant dans les montagnes dans une perspective politique et écologique. Leurs commentaires et leurs expériences mettent en évidence les aspects genrés de la pauvreté et des inégalités dans ces villages des Himalaya ainsi que le stress lié à l'eau qui ne fait qu'exacerber leurs misères.*

### **Hidden Hardships and Growing Disparities in a Rising India**

The contemporary moment in many pockets of India, often the ones in which educated urbanites live, is marked by market euphoria. India—with its high savings rates, low mortgage vulnerability, and growing numbers of educated, tech-savvy youth—has been proclaimed in many spheres to be well on its way to achieving the dream of becoming an economic superpower. As critics have pointed out, however, the boons and booms of India's new wealth and opportunities are not evenly distributed. Life is particularly hard for small-scale agriculturalists. Some estimate that 150,000 farmers committed suicide in India from the early 1990s to 2006 due to the crushing weight of agricultural and medical debts that they could not repay (Newman). Those who comment on the horrific problem of farmer suicides point out that many agriculturalists feel marginalized and dejected in a country where the spoils of economic success are dangled just out of reach and that the decision to take one's life is a result of rural disenfranchisement. While phenomena such as farmer suicides must remain front and center to push the needed policy correctives, I would suggest that there are many

more everyday struggles for survival that take place out of the public eye which also merit attention. This article is an effort to examine the difficulties that mountain women in the Garhwal Himalaya of India's Uttarakhand state experience as a means to bring such struggles further into the limelight. I argue that the challenges that women face are complicated by ecological change and by development projects that transform the water balance. Towards the end of the article, I use political ecology as a way to add conceptual clarity to the dynamics at hand.

To orient the reader, some background to the challenges of everyday life in Garhwal is needed. Geographically, Garhwal is located in India's northwestern mountains near to the border of the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China in a hilly topography that experiences tectonic activity as the late blooming Himalaya continues to shift and settle. It is through this terrain that the first stretch of the Ganges River, known regionally as the Bhagirathi tributary or the Bhagirathi Ganges, flows. The river emerges from a retreating glacial source known as the Gangotri Glacier. Along with melting ice formations, the ecological balance of the region, and of the greater Himalaya, is changing rapidly due to substantial variations in precipitation, a growing lack of potable water in many locations, and the sudden cloud bursts that occasionally floods inhabited riverbanks. An increasing number of contested development and hydroelectric projects are also adding to the water stress scenarios (which include too little as well as too much water).

In Garhwal's Uttarkashi District, for instance, the 260-metre (or 855 foot) Tehri dam caused numerous changes to the water balance of the region when it was

completed in 2006. The dam created a 45-kilometre reservoir up the Bhagirathi Ganges that instigated the loss of some of the valley's most fertile and water abundant land. It also displaced up to 100,000 people, many of whom were forced to eke out a living in unfamiliar uphill terrain or move to cities such as Dehradun where they experienced social vulnerability, physical insecurity, and feelings of dejection and cultural loss (Kedia). While the displaced struggled to adjust, downstream cities began to enjoy the benefits of the dam's water diversion and hydroelectricity

kilometers be allowed to perpetually flow unobstructed.

Much of my work studying the dam opposition movement focused on the role of rural and semi-urban women in the movement. I highlighted how women worked to make their concerns for the river and its Goddess heard and known, sometimes to mixed success (Drew 2014a). I also illuminated the socio-economic and locational disparities among women that influenced who was able to get involved in the protests (Drew 2014b). This work pointed out that semi-urban women in the district capital

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generation. New Delhi, for instance, started to receive an extra 350 million litres a day of the Ganges water redirected from the Tehri reservoir. Once in New Delhi, the dammed water goes into a supply system with an estimated 40 percent leakage rate and a substantial number of illegal connections. What arrives to users fuels the inefficient resource use that comes with contemporary residential, commercial, and industrial water management practices. Much of the water is undoubtedly flushed down toilets.

It was partially because of the disastrous consequences and inequities observed along the Tehri reservoir that many of Garhwal's upstream residents opposed the construction of three new dam projects from 2006 to 2010. These diversion dams were located near to the river's glacial source. If constructed, they would have directed even more water out of the riverbed and into tunnels where the water was to be dropped at sharp degrees to produce hydroelectricity. In addition to the fears of what the projects would do to the region's ecology, and to the river's last free flowing stretch, religious concerns were prominent for many of the dam opponents. Since the Bhagirathi Ganges is recognized as the embodiment of the Goddess Ganga that is revered in the Hindu faith for her sin-purifying and grace-granting capabilities, socio-cultural and religious preoccupations prominently entered the debate. As I document elsewhere, dam opponents worried that the three dams would deter their ability to connect to the Goddess and the blessings that she provides (Drew 2012a, 2012b). It was mostly because of the religious framings on what the projects threatened that the dam opposition was able to force the government to cancel the three contested projects in mid-2010 and to mandate that the river's initial stretch of 125

of Uttarkashi were most apt to take a prominent role in the movement campaigns. This was partly to do with their reduced workloads relative to rural women living upstream near to the dam construction sites. Semi-urban women also enjoyed more support from their families and husbands for their dam opposition activities. When rural women did take part in the contestation of dam projects, it was most often to critique the logic and practice of dam building. They made these comments informally and at the large rallies that were sure to garner public attention. At the big opposition events, in fact, rural and semi-urban women were the overwhelming majority, although this did not always result in proportional representation. Male campaign leaders were more likely to speak in front of the large crowds and their comments most often made the headlines.

In this article, I look further behind the scenes at the rural women who, though absent from the dam opposition events, arguably would have been most impacted by the completion of the contested projects. The water directed out of the riverbed would have meant less perennial flow in times of spring water and rainwater scarcity. The dynamite blasting associated with tunnel and road construction also threatened to disrupt the underground spring water networks upon which many villages rely. These shifts would have impacted men and women in different ways, as it is the village women and children who are most often tasked with resource management and cultivation, a point that I discuss more below. In turning away from the statements and actions of those who made the headlines, in other words, I look to rural women's lived realities to illuminate why more people did not take a visible part of

the regular dam opposition campaigns. The day-to-day experiences of rural women, as I show, are marked by increasing hardship that merits exploration to understand the ways that shifting development agendas can add to the resource struggles that women confront.

### **Rural Women's Economic and Health Challenges in Garhwal: Some Examples**

One of the first points to note on the topic of why more rural women did not involve themselves in the inner workings of the dam opposition is that there was not always strong agreement on what the dam building entailed and what it threatened. When I went to the villages near and around where the contested diversion dams were to be constructed, for instance, I encountered mixed reactions to the projects. On the one hand, rural women from Uttarkashi District were concerned about the potential lack of flow in the Ganges. A particularly prominent fear was that the dams would redirect water from the riverbed that people need for the observance of Hindu ritual and rites of passage (especially at the time of death when putting the body of the deceased into the Ganges is believed to help liberate their souls). As indicated, many women also asserted that they need a constant flow in the river to help supplement the growing water scarcity in the mountains. Springs were drying up, they told me, and the tunnel blasting for the dams was unsettling their water sources. This, combined with the increasingly erratic rain and snowfall, causes serious livelihood challenges. Many villages in Uttarkashi district can now only grow crops when the rains are plentiful. When they are not, people are forced to buy from the market at prices that more often than not reflect the economic boom of the Indian plains and not the meager financial resources upon which people live in the mountains. Inflation compounds sentiments of vulnerability and further forces people to search out wage labour to purchase goods from the market. When men volunteer for this work—often because they believe, and/or are made to believe, that it is part of their “responsibility”<sup>1</sup>—male migration exacerbates the “feminization of agriculture” that others have observed taking place in the Himalaya (Kelkar). Although mountain women do not use this phrase, they reflect it in their statements of concern and the laments that they share for the hardships of everyday life.

On the other hand, increasing livestock, agriculture, and household demands are part of the reason that some women supported the dam building projects even though they were uncertain of how the projects would benefit their families and improve the quality of their daily lives. For this reason, some women upheld the need for devel-

opment—*vikas*—in a region that is often positioned as “backwards.” This latter word is symbolically charged and is often employed in the regional politics of development. Rangan (2000) explores the use of “backwards” in Garhwal while critiquing its rhetorical mobilization to promote mainstream development agendas (which are positioned as a move forwards). The women in favour of dams were also likely influenced by their husbands, as men in the region were more apt to support such projects because of the promised increase in non-skilled employment opportunities. The argument was that the region desperately needs employment opportunities regardless of how it impacts a religiously revered river. An added motivator for such statements is that, because mountain economies are increasingly cash-dependent (and since agriculture is not nearly as viable as it once was), extra funds are needed for those that wish to both feed and educate their children. In light of the economic challenges, men often migrate across the mountains, down to the plains, and sometimes even over to Gulf countries to earn income that is sent back to augment household resources. For such people and their loved ones, the dams held the promise of not only regional income but also less time away from home. Despite the marginal and temporary number of jobs that these projects would have created in actuality, the dams were symbolic of the employment generation that many hoped to see.

When men migrate, mountain women are usually left behind to tend to household chores, livestock caring activities, and the cultivation of agricultural fields. The amount of work that this entails in a 24-hour day is immense. During the course of fieldwork, I documented many conversations and conducted semi-structured interviews in which people talked about the difficulties that women face. In the discussions I had, one particular conversation stands out. It took place in Nagpuri, a village on the main flow of the Bhagirathi Ganges that is downstream from a preexisting hydroelectric dam, a 90-megawatt capacity river diversion project that was built in the 1980s. I visited Nagpuri repeatedly in 2008 and 2009 to understand the challenges that the proliferation of upstream dams in the Himalaya could bring based on the experiences of women who struggled to adjust from the imposition of an established project. In addition to reducing the flow of the Bhagirathi Ganges to a trickle in the fall, winter, and spring months, the dam directs water underneath the mountains behind the village. The villagers say that they started to lose their water resources when the blasting and drilling of tunnel construction began. This, they asserted, shook the mountains and upset the spring sources. Now, over 25 years later, their water supply is irregular and contaminated. Partly in response to the harsh conditions



Women from Nagpuri hauling sand June 2009. Photo: Georgina Drew.

in the village, a women's committee (*mahila mangaldal*) was formed to enhance social and financial networks. The committee collects small fees from each member and uses the funds for village improvements, construction projects, and credit lending. Despite small gains from this measure, life is still very hard for many.

When I visited Nagpuri on a cold December afternoon in 2009 that followed a day's labour of sowing wheat, I spoke with Usha, the women's committee leader, about her workload and about what it is like living just downstream from a hydroelectric project. In a familial Garhwali fashion, she turned the tables and started by chiding me. "Our work is certainly different from yours," she pointed out as if in reprimand. Then she added: "What a great life you have.... You aren't married. You don't have to take responsibility for anyone else—no children, no family. You eat alone and live tension-free. Your life must be so peaceful." This she set in contrast to her own life, which she complained was not her own:

*We don't think of our own bodies.... Our whole lives are for others. We have our husband—we do everything to please him. Then there are the kids. They need a lot of help. Then we have our relatives. Then our husband's family. Everyone demands things of us. Then there is*

*the farm work. Then the house work. Then the forest chores [to gather wood and fodder]. Then the guaranteed employment scheme when it is available. It is only now [in the winter and after the crops are planted] that we get a little time to ourselves. The life of a woman here is difficult. Too difficult.*

This was not the first time that I heard the long list of duties a village woman juggles. On an earlier visit, when I was still building trust with Usha Devi in the beginning of my fieldwork, she laid out similar complaints that included an itemized list of the activities that women conduct from morning until night. When she was done with the long description of a day's work, she lightly chuckled at how important women's contributions are in the mountains. Then she added: "Garhwali women are the backbone (*reed ki haddi*) of Garhwal. If it weren't for us, nothing would get done here... our bones are like iron" (Drew 2014b).

Despite the bravado of the iron bones statement—and the heartfelt sentiment behind it—women's bodies in Garhwal are unfortunately quite vulnerable to injury and disease. When she made this statement, I recalled a visit earlier in the year. When I arrived at her home for a three-day stay, she greeted me on the front porch of her hillside two-story house with a gentle half-embrace



*A NREGS project with a marked division of labour. Photo: Georgina Drew.*

while keeping a right hand wrapped in cloth at her side. We exchanged the appropriate pleasantries before I asked about the injury. She unwrapped the makeshift bandage to reveal a swollen and slightly blue index finger that she had injured in the fields a month before. “It hurts a lot,” she admitted, “But it is getting better.” This optimistic sentiment did not match the way she gingerly touched it and the grimace with which she rewrapped the cloth around the finger. When I asked Usha why she did not seek medical help, she gave me another long list of tasks that consumed her time. Among these was her daily “duties” with an initiative she alluded to in the above indented quote—the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS). For 100 Rupees a day (about \$2), Usha and her neighbors hauled sand up the mountainside to help build a watering trough for livestock. Although they welcomed the money, the women did this work in addition to other chores that included time-consuming trips to the forests to collect fodder and firewood. These tasks they squeezed into the early morning and late evening hours so that they could spend the rest of the day in the fields or at home attending to their families.

When reflecting on her workload, Usha liked to remind me that life was not always this hard. Decades ago, women like her would have had more support from a range of family members. When she was the age of her youngest daughter (15), she was skilled in each and every chore

that life in the village demanded. Instead of advancing in school, she helped her mother in the fields and at home along with her siblings. Usha’s three daughters, by contrast, studied up to the tenth and, in some cases, the twelfth grade. The middle child even attended computer classes in a nearby adult education center. Usha supported these decisions—it meant that one day her girls could earn good salaries somewhere or at least marry into better families outside of the village—but it also meant that, for much of the agricultural work, she often works alone in the fields. Although her husband does help her when he is able, his wage labor job takes him away from the village on a regular basis. Contemplating the challenges, Usha lamented: “This is why the women here are so thin,” she said shaking her head. “No matter how much they eat, they can’t put on any weight.” The observation alluded to the many cases of anemia evident in Nagpuri village and in surrounding areas.

In the days that followed, I watched Usha in her daily chores. I tried to keep up. But I failed every time. By the third day, after numerous attempts, I convinced her to come to Uttarkashi to see a doctor about her hand. In the end, I had to bribe her with 100 Rupees to join me on the trip to town. There were two reasons I needed to provide this incentive. For her part, Usha was reluctant to give up the income she could earn that day hauling sand. And, having watched her wince through the lifting and lowering

of heavy sacks of sand the day before, I was reluctant to see her repeat the performance. When I insisted on taking her to the doctor for what felt like the tenth time, Usha tentatively remembered some other errands she had to do in town and agreed to join me.

Once the trip was decided upon, Usha went to the cow shed to prepare a litre of milk that she intended to sell in the market. We left mid-morning after she had finished this and several other necessary chores. After crossing the footbridge that connects the village to the main road, we

is about much more than what it appeared to the doctor. What may seem like a lack of personal care is actually the outcome of the everyday stressors that women like Usha experience. The pressures that Usha and others endure is part of a wider set of forces that act upon women's lives. These forces operate at numerous scales. To understand this conceptually, political ecology is an apt approach. Political ecology is broadly thought of as the level of inquiry that is employed when the concerns of resource management and ecology are paired with the concerns and analyses

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**Usha's delay in seeking medical attention for a broken finger is about much more than what it appeared to the doctor. What may seem like a lack of personal care is actually the outcome of the everyday stressors that women like Usha experience. The pressures that Usha and others endure is part of a wider set of forces that act upon women's lives.**

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waited for a shared jeep that could take us to Uttarkashi's main market. We were seated on the side of the road for a full half-hour before a jeep stopped to pick us up and we squeezed into the back. It was already a full load by Indian standards so Usha perched on my knee as I contorted against five other bodies to create space for my broad shoulders. When we got to town another half-hour later, we went straight to the medical store of a doctor I knew. He greeted me warmly but treated Usha with a contempt of which I did not know he was capable. "This is a month old injury," he chastised her as he looked at the finger. "It has calcified and it will remain bent indefinitely." Usha looked glum and her head hung low as we bought the ointments and pain killers the doctor prescribed. In Garhwali, he admonished her to seek immediate medical attention the next time she hurt herself. Then, speaking to me in English so that she would not understand, he complained: "These villagers, they don't take care of themselves." Casting a stern yet consternated glance at the doctor, I bought the medicine and walked Usha Devi back to the market where she could catch another jeep ride back to her village. On the way, we paused for her to use some of the money I gave her to buy some fresh vegetables brought up from the plains that were not in season in Garhwal. It would be a treat for the family to partake of these rarities and it offered a rare nutritional boost to their otherwise basic fare.

### **The Political Ecology of Mountain Women's Hardships**

Usha's delay in seeking medical attention for a broken finger

of political economy (Blaikie and Brookfield). Another shorthand for political ecology is the scope of inquiry involved when one examines the interplay of 'Nature' and 'Society' or 'Nature-Society' in order to understand environmental-political processes that lead to ecological change (Watts and Peet 6). In looking to the challenges that women in Garhwal confront, political ecology becomes a useful way to examine the multiple dynamics at hand. In its more feminist-influenced strains, it enables a multi-scalar approach to seeing how resource conflicts and socio-economic struggles impact socially differentiated bodies and genders in disparate ways (Biersack et al.; Escobar; Rocheleau et al.). Political ecology, in other words, helps to explore, how "...gender-social systems and landscapes are influenced in both material and meaningful ways by forces and processes that extend far beyond community territory" (Paulson 189).

If we take a political ecology approach to understand women's hidden hardships, their efforts to make ends meet sets a stark contrast with the economic boom of urban centers in the plains. The mountain men and women are acutely aware of the opportunities that seem to lie just outside their reach. In response, and as earlier noted, many men migrate to earn cash income and, in some cases, voice their support for the development projects that they imagine will create employment and economic opportunities. The women vacillate on their stance to these development projects—especially the ones that could potentially disrupt religious practices and regional water supplies. And, as they increasingly prioritize their children's education, they are forced to do more and more work in fields that are becoming less productive. The result

is that rural Garhwali women above the age of 30 are often frail, overworked, and exhausted. They suffer nutritional deficiencies, and many are often unable to care for their own bodies despite injury and discomfort.

Does the future, we can ask, bring more of the exacting labor and compromised health that many Garhwali women currently experience? There is hope that as remittances increase and the youth find employment, these women will have more supplemental income and less struggle to subsist based off of what they can grow or forage. If a trickle-down economy fails to materialize, however, it is also possible that daily life in the mountains could become more arduous. The available forest resources are dwindling, water resources are drying, and the full impact of warming temperatures and glacial melt has yet to be seen. These changes mean that women will be forced to increase the time and energy invested in their work. This would likely result in the further deterioration of household health observed when the confluence of similar economic and ecological factors impacted Andean women (Paulson).

The reality is that no single development project or environmental program will address the multiplicity of the challenges that Garhwalis and other mountain inhabitants confront. This is something that many women readily point out when asked about the impact of the latest initiative, program, or policy to improve their lives. The disillusionment that rural mountain women feel is perhaps another reason why they do not take more active involvement in social and environmental protests, even when the fate of a sacred, grace-giving river is at stake. In addition to the daily challenges women work to overcome, there is an overall sense of distrust that is complicated by sentiments of despair. In future research endeavours, we need to continue to examine such effects in order to understand the full gamut of the difficulties that rural women confront. In the process, we will be able to see how the lack of effort to allow women to shape development agendas feeds the distrust expressed and how the endless stress of the struggle to access water and other resources fuels sentiments of despair. Investigations of how these forces come together within a wider socio-economic or political ecological framework will help us understand how the struggles for resources such as water are simultaneously struggles for power (Johnston; Mehta; Swyngedouw) and how women are all too often forced to suffer the consequences of forces operating outside of their immediate control.

*Georgina Drew, PhD, is a Lecturer (Assistant Professor) in the Department of Anthropology and Development Studies at the University of Adelaide in South Australia. Georgina's work on the anthropology of water engages gender and sustainable resource management, social movement studies,*

*and the cultural and religious politics of development. She has coordinated research in various Himalayan locations in China, India, and Nepal.*

<sup>1</sup>Conversation on 3 December 2009 with a male activist explaining the relative lack of Garhwali men in the dam opposition movements.

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## TARYN HUBBARD

### Type the Drill Twice

I can weld. I can weld very well. I like it.  
 We do our work just as well as you do yours.  
 How I sit has a lot to do with how I can weld.  
 We can give quiet thought to the work that we do.  
 If he goes, I must go, too. You can go, too. I am  
 next. He is quick.  
 I can weld and I do so with nimble fingers.  
 Years ago I earned my Red Seal.  
 An expert is one who does all her work very well.  
 I know I can make my fingers on the stick spark  
 the tank.  
 If you have zeal for your work, you can do much.  
 I must *know* I can do the work: then I weld with  
 out fear.  
 If I want to learn and work to learn, I shall learn.  
 I shall weld. I shall weld. I shall think to weld.

*Taryn Hubbard is a writer from the West Coast. She has published in CV2, Lemon Hound, Capilano Review, Event, Room Magazine, subTerrain, and others. When she's not writing, she works as a communications specialist in the public and private sectors, including five years at a trade union. tarynhubbard.com.*

## Coralie Alles

### Appeasement

J'imagine qu'après la tourmente vient enfin le recueillement.  
 Les dernières bourrasques jouent encore dans les cheveux.  
 Rien à voir, cependant, avec les éléments fous des jours précédents,  
 Venus secouer, cette nymphe adorable au museau taquin, au port royal.  
 Candide dans sa partielle nudité, le cou tendu et à l'écoute,  
 C'est de l'intérieur que vibre cette âme sensible et douce.  
 Sa fougue et sa jeunesse retenues pour un instant,  
 Laisent transpercer une nature noble et délicate.  
 Le voile de pudeur, battant au vent et retenu avec grâce,  
 Témoigne de la virginité des pensées et des intentions.  
 C'est de son regard intérieur que surgit toute sa grâce.  
 Pieuse et radieuse, elle émeut de par sa blancheur innocente.

*Née en Belgique, Coralie Alles a émigré en Afrique à l'âge de 11 ans. De là, elle est venue au Canada avec son mari et ses cinq enfants. Elle a publié «Boule de Gomme et compagnie» suivi de deux autres titres que les jeunes et les moins jeunes peuvent retrouver sur le site de Coralie [www.chevaletpoetique.com](http://www.chevaletpoetique.com).*