

Role of Indigenous Women in Securing Sustainable Livelihoods in Western Himalayan Region, India

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ABSTRACT: The ecology in the Western Himalayan region transforms with the change in altitude. The current study focuses on women of indigenous communities of Pangi Valley which is located in the state of Himachal Pradesh, India. The valley is bifurcated into three different areas – Saichu, Hudan Bhattori, and Sural Bhattori valleys, and the altitude of the valley ranges from 2,000 m to 6,000 m above sea level. The Pangi valley is inhabited by ‘Pangwals’ and ‘Bhots’ tribes of the Himalayas who speak their local tribal language called ‘Pangwali’. Due to the difficult geographical location, the daily lives of these people are constantly challenged and they are most of the time-deprived of benefits targeted through government programs. However, the indigenous communities earn their livelihood through livestock and forest-based produce while some of them migrate to nearby places for better work. The current study involves snowball sampling methodology for data collection along with in-depth interviews of women members of Self-Help Groups and women farmers. The findings reveal that the lives of these indigenous communities largely depend on forest-based products. So, it creates all the more significance of enhancing, maintaining and consuming natural resources sustainably. Under such circumstances, the women of the community play a significant role of guardians in the conservation and protection of the forests. They are into cultivation of products like ‘Hazelnut’, ‘Gucchi’ rare quality mushroom, medicinal plants exclusively found in the region thereby promoting long term sustainable conservation of agro-biodiversity of the Western Himalayan region (Sharma, 2019).

KEYWORDS: Forest Conservation, Indigenous women, Sustainable Livelihoods, Sustainable Development, Poverty Alleviation, Western Himalayas

Introduction

The Indian Western Himalayan region covers 10 Indian administrative states namely Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Sikkim. Various ranges of the Himalayan Mountains include the Pir Panjal Range, Trans Himalayas, Dhauladhar Range, Zaskar Range, Ladakh Range, Shivalik Range, Great Himalayas, and East Karakoram Range. Geographically, the Western Himalayan range stretches from Badakhshan in Afghanistan to Tajikistan in Southern part, passes through North India covering Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, and Uttarakhand, and ends at central Nepal. In India, the Western Himalayan region comprises of Zaskar range, the Pir Panjal Range, the Great Himalayas and parts of Siwalik Range. The current study focuses on the indigenous community residing in the remotest tribal area of Himachal Pradesh. The Pangi Valley is an isolated valley, located in the interiors of Chamba district of Himachal Pradesh which is cut-off from the mainland due to heavy snow and lack of proper roads.

Description of Study Area

The Pangi Valley is a remote, rugged and poorly developed tribal area of the state. The entire valley is divided into Saichu, Hudan Bhattori and Sural Bhattori valley, which is inhabited by the indigenous community at elevations of 7,000 feet (2,100 m) to 11,000 feet (3,400 m) above sea level. The valley is poorly developed due to inaccessibility created by a lack of roads and limited resources available within the region. The semi arctic-like weather conditions make the life of locals difficult and full of challenges each day.

The Pangi Valley falls in Chamba district, surrounded by Lahaul and Spiti district of Himachal Pradesh in South and East respectively, and Jammu & Kashmir in the North. This particular valley can be approached through different routes -one of the routes is from Chamba, crossing either Sach Pass at an altitude of 4,500m or Chehni Pass at an altitude of 4,350m. These passes remain snow-clad for the most part of the year. The other route is via Kullu-Manali (H.P.)

and another is via Kishtwar in J&K. The most commonly used route to reach the valley is through Saach Pass which is open for vehicular entry between June and October but closed at other times of the year due to heavy snow in the region.

The valley is mostly inhabited by 'Pangwals' and 'Bhot' tribes. They speak 'Pangwali' language and follow Hinduism or Buddhism religion. As per the country's census 2011, the Pangi Valley has 3933 households with 18894 of the total population. The socio-economic condition of indigenous people especially women is very poor in the region. With low literacy rates, improper health & education facilities, lack of resources and lack of accessibility of government programs have led the community members to engage into unorganized sector and less paying self-employed work (Census, 2011) There is also absence of financial literacy amongst people which prevents them to engage into small scale entrepreneurship activities and sustainable livelihood opportunities (Sharma, 2019).

Tribal Women – Harbinger of change in the Pangi valley

Mountain ecosystems are fragile and generally identified as having vast agro-biodiversity, sensitive ecological conditions, and socio-economic backwardness. The mountain regions are susceptible to accelerated soil erosion, landslide, uneven glacier melting phenomena, depleting agro-biodiversity, and a rapid loss of habitat. With accentuated climate change conditions, the mountain ecosystem is also under the threat of environmental degradation (Meena, 2019). One of the important aspects of resilience building within the mountain community is the gender inclusiveness and acknowledging the role of women as managers of natural resources & change agents within their community (ICIMOD, 2017). Indigenous women have been playing a crucial role in mitigating environmental risks and combating hazards created due to climate change phenomena (Dhakal & Leduc, 2010). The use of traditional knowledge and conservation practices that are handed over from one generation to another has been proven for the healthy survival of community members in the valley region.

The lives of these indigenous communities largely depend on forest-based products. So, it creates all the more significance of enhancing, maintaining and consuming natural resources sustainably. Under such circumstances, the women of the community play a significant role of guardians in the conservation and protection of the forests. They are the custodians of traditional knowledge of environment conservation practices that have been followed for many years in the region (Subramanyam, 2013). The present study also sought to establish a relationship between some of the development initiatives undertaken by the women in the valley that stimulate sustainable mountain economy and conservation practices. These initiatives include cultivation of products like Hazelnut, 'Gucchi' rare quality mushroom, medicinal plants exclusively found in the region thereby promoting long term sustainable conservation of agro-biodiversity of the Western Himalayan region. The measures taken by the community women are commendable as they ensure access and distribution of natural resources as well as manage them for future generations. Apart from this, the tribal women have actively formed Self-Help Groups promoting financial inclusion through various activities that augment ownership and accountability towards the overall development of the communities. These women groups comprise 7 -10 members in each group who engage in various activities and ensure the financial stability of each member through the mutual lending model. Despite literacy levels being low in the females, the consciousness towards the environment is commendable. Therefore, a study was conducted to capture some of the sustainable livelihood practices followed by tribal women.

Objective of the Study

The current study aims to understand various environment-friendly practices followed by local women farmers. It also attempts to understand how indigenous women can earn livelihood opportunities ensuring environmental sustainability.

The particular study involved an interview schedule for primary data collection whereas secondary data was collected from village level Panchayats and various other reports generated by District

level government agencies, articles published in journals. The researcher has used both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection. The researcher used an interview Schedule for the quantitative method and focus group discussion and in-depth interviews with the women farmers for the qualitative method. The research design is descriptive cum exploratory as it explores the role of the tribal women in securing sustainable livelihood along with protecting the ecosystem. Whereas it is descriptive as it describes the best traditional practices of the community members in conserving forests of the region.

Pangi Tehsil in Chamba district, Himachal Pradesh, has a total population of 18,868 as per the Census 2011. The population constitutes of 9,579 males and 9,289 females. The male literacy rate is 72.17% and female literacy rate is 52.27% in the region. As far as caste classification is concerned, there is a 90.2 % Schedule Tribe (ST) population and 6.6% Schedule Caste (SC) population.

The current study covered 10 villages of the Pangi valley. Respondents included 5 - 6 SHG women from each village thereby making sample size as 60. As per the Census 2011, the maximum of the female population in Pangi are marginal workers. Out of the total population, the females engaged in other occupations are as follows: (Census 2011, Figure 1)

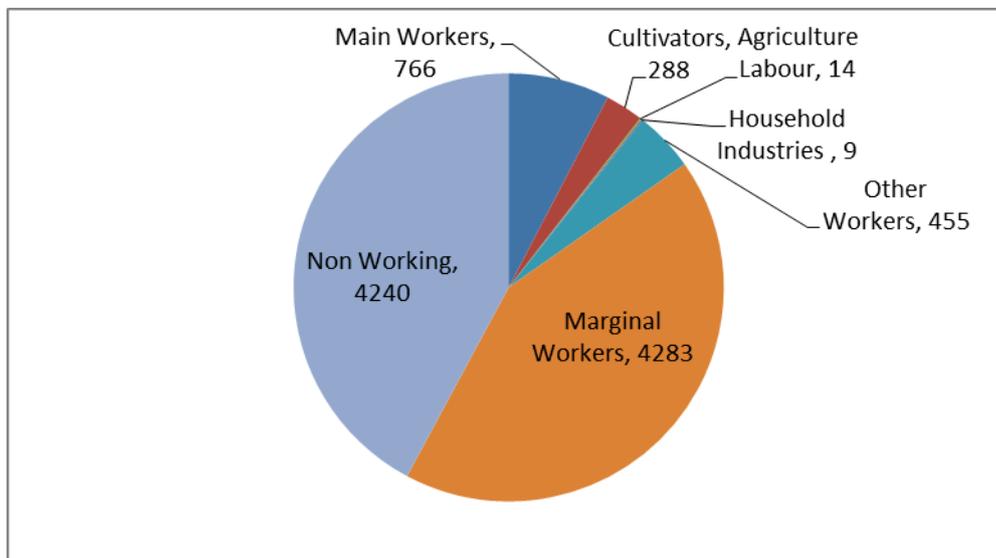


Figure 1. Occupation distribution of tribal women in Pangi Valley

Alternate Livelihoods Availability in the region

The study focused upon various livelihood alternatives available and identified by the respondents in the region.

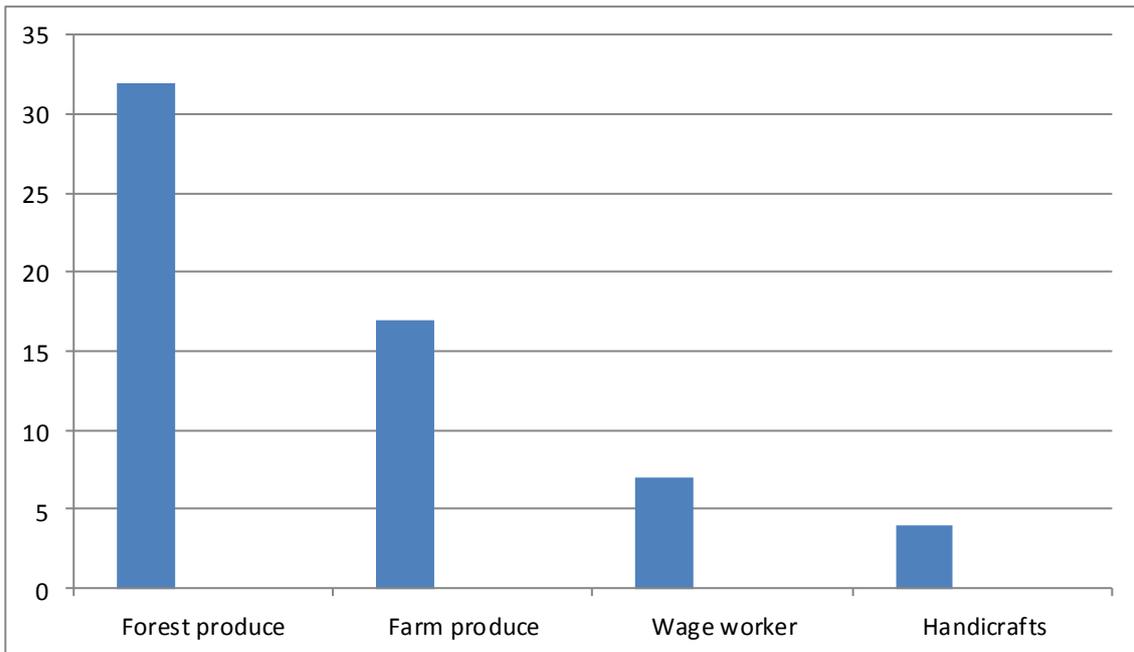


Figure 2. Livelihood Alternatives for tribal women

As it is observed, out of total respondents (n=60), 53% of women mentioned their dependency on the forests for livelihood whereas 28.3% mentioned engaging in farming activity to earn a livelihood. Rest 11.6% of women are into wage workers and attain employment under the government’s NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act).

Impact of SHG in the lives of tribal women

Out of the total respondents, 90% of the women SHG members reported an increase in their monthly income after associating themselves with the group. About 60% of the women SHG members mentioned the increase in their monthly income ranging from Rs.5000 – Rs. 10000, giving rise to more savings in their bank accounts. Apart from this, other positive indicators highlighted by the respondents include (figure 3):

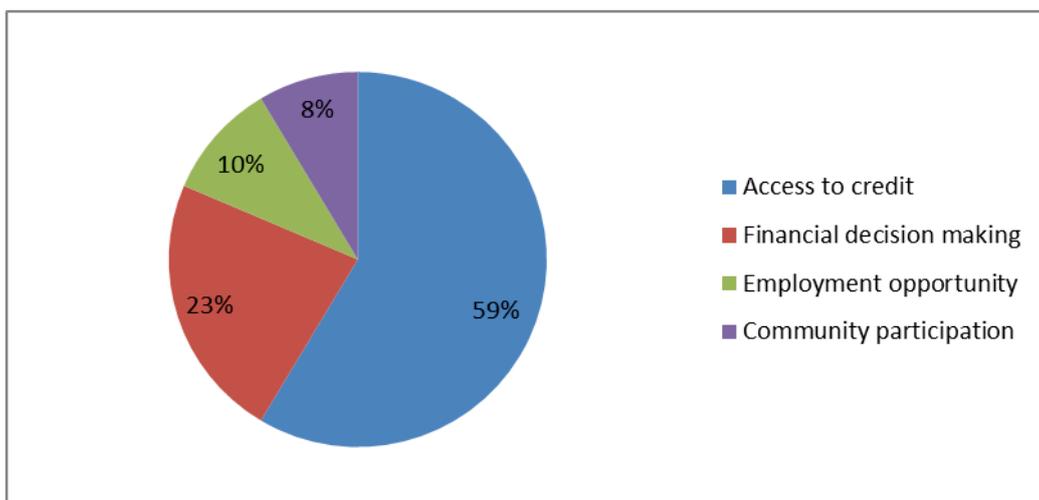


Figure 3. Impact of SHG

Sustainable Livelihood Practices

Tribal women of the community have been following traditional practices for the sustenance of their families for many years. These practices fall perfect with the SDG model that is discussed across the globe. But for this particular indigenous community, the extreme weather conditions and sustaining life within it have instilled co-existing with nature in their lifestyle. Some of the practices as highlighted by the tribal women include:

- 1) Identifying areas of forest that are under environmental risks and prohibit procurement from those regions for around 10 years. This allows replenishing the forests.
- 2) Once the community understood the concept of value addition especially concerning the cultivation of Hazelnut, they collectively decided to restrict the cutting down of Hazelnut trees.
- 3) Bhojpatra trees found at the higher altitudes of the region were extensively used as fuelwood. But excessive cutting down of trees triggered the melting of glaciers so tribal women decided to restrict cutting of Bhojpatra trees.

Conclusion

The current study attempts to study the role of indigenous women in reviving the environment along with earning their livelihood in the Western Himalayan region. Women farmers have adopted many such environments supportive techniques that help them combat present climate change conditions existing in the Pangri valley. As observed, the sustenance of the tribal community in the valley largely depends upon the forests in the region. They procure food, timber, medicinal plants, herbs, material for house construction, etc. One of the commonly found trees in the region called ‘Bhojpatra’ in the local language, also known as Himalayan Birch (scientific name – *Betula Utilis*), was extensively cut and used for household purposes by the community. This particular tree is found at higher altitudes. It was observed by the community members that the depleting forest cover triggered the melting of glaciers, rising temperatures in the valley, soil erosion and avalanche increased in the region. Therefore community collectively decides to restrict any activity in those areas for a few years to mitigate the changing environmental conditions. This eventually replenishes the forest cover in those regions. Other practices adopted by the women farmers include the use of animal manure which maintains soil fertility and mixed crop technique which promotes traditional crop biodiversity in the region and protects from total crop failure. The adoption of the organic method of farming and no premature harvesting makes farming ecologically and economically viable.

The study highlights tribal women’s role in contributing and reviving the mountain economy by adopting sustainable livelihood alternatives available in the region. The recent demand for organic food has provided an opportunity for women farmers to earn better (Sati & Juyal, 2008). There has been a rising demand for forest-based products like Hazelnut in both national and international markets. Earlier, the Hazelnut trees were cut extensively to procure fuelwood but after the intervention of local non-profit organizations and value addition in the product, the women farmers are protecting and cultivating more such trees. The value chain approach has opened many avenues for the tribal women of the valley. Sustained demand for the Himalayan forest-based produce like apples, honey, hazelnut, medicinal plants, herbs, and walnuts is fetching good income and building strong market linkages. With the continuing efforts from the local non-profit organisation, the tribal women have been actively participating in community development programs and forming Self Help Groups for supporting income-generating activities. All the members of SHG have their bank accounts and can collectively avail credit from the bank for any income-generating activity. This has also promoted individual savings by the group members which allows them to take money for personal needs based on the mutual lending concept of SHG functioning. The money loaned from the group is used for house construction, paying children’s school fees and other meeting social expenses. It is a quiet revolution underway in the isolated Pangri Valley of Himachal Pradesh. Despite the women who work tirelessly on farm fields and walk long rugged paths to procure various forest-based products, they are still so not get the right to own

land under their name. The patriarchal beliefs do not allow them to inherit any ancestral property in the region. This gap needs to be addressed to strengthen the role of tribal women in the community.

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As a concluding statement, the local tribal women, long pushed to the margins because of caste and gender, should be recognized for the strenuous efforts they put to take care of their families and surrounding. They enhance, maintain and consume natural resources sustainably.

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