

Chapter III

Exploring the ecosystem of sustainable livelihood: Mobility by and for rural women in the Kumayun region

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Abstract: This chapter explores the ecosystem of sustainable livelihoods for rural women in the Kumaun region of Uttarakhand. It highlights the role of women in agricultural and non-agricultural sectors, showcasing their involvement in various enterprises such as the Integrated Livelihood Support Project (ILSP), local cooperatives, and self-help groups (SHGs). These initiatives aim to support rural women by offering skill development, agricultural training, and market access for locally produced goods. The chapter emphasizes the challenges faced by these women, including male migration and overburdening of responsibilities, while also presenting the growing market demand for eco-friendly and ethically sourced products. By participating in sustainable livelihood projects, women are creating economic opportunities, preserving traditional crafts, and contributing to the local economy. These efforts are transforming rural women into agents of change and promoting gender equality in the region.

Keywords: Sustainable Livelihood, Rural Women, Kumaun Region, Agricultural Economy, Integrated Livelihood Support Project (ILSP)



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At some point in our search for natural and organic products, most of us would have come across some amazing and authentic food, cosmetics or even, things like jams or chutneys. What we often don't know is the story behind these products and the secret to them being as good as they are, they are women made in the Himalayas. While my journey into design started with architecture, I diversified my skills as a designer when I joined National Institute of Design for masters in strategic design management. Essentially, we are design journalists at the intersection of design research and business innovation and in general terms, design is sort of an aesthetic profession or the whole concept of design is restricted to aesthetics. But, as design strategist, our domain expands to use design, design knowledge to craft experiences to craft business models, organizational processes, services, and even social innovation.

One such project that I was fortunate enough to be a part of, was, in 2019, when our cohort of students from strategic design management at NID was invited by the government of Uttarakhand specifically the Chief Development Officer of Almora, whose team is working towards the integrated livelihood support project or the ILSP. This programme is funded by the IFAD, a UN organization, the International Fund for Agricultural Development and it aims to reduce poverty by enabling rural households to take up sustainable livelihood opportunities integrated with the wider economy. It tries to look at agriculture and non-agriculture activities to provide growth to the rural economy. Our role in this project was to understand the working of the program in the district of Almora and suggest design framework to uplift the initiative. During the course of the eight days that we spent in the field in rural Uttarakhand, we did an on-field inquiry consisting of various enterprise visits, discussions with producer groups and farmers, understanding the lives of the rural people and the agricultural ecosystem. It helped us get hands-on understanding of the functioning and the ground realities. Our interactions with the villagers, entrepreneurs, NGOs, government officials and policymakers help us uncover some interesting insights about the life and economy of rural Uttarakhand and through this platform I would like to share some of these critical observations and my experiences in

exploring the ecosystem of sustainable livelihood movements by and for rural women in Uttarakhand.

My field of study was Almora which is one of the thirteen hill districts in Uttarakhand falling in Kumaun division. It has been a hub of culture and history and has a strong identity as a cantonment town since the days of the British. Agriculture is one of the main occupations and according to the 2011 census, Almora has a population of 35000 plus of which 18300 are males whereas 17200 are females and what's also interesting to note is that the female literacy rate in the state, in the district is around 84.1 percent. Agriculture is one of the main occupations in Almora and they grow Nutri-cereals, red rice, indigenous pulses, ginger, garlic, coriander, fruits, honey, pahadi aloo and despite the variety of harvest, the hilly terrain results in fragmented land holdings and limited farm produce and there is also uncertainty because it is a rainfed farming process and it sort of proves as a threat to the sustainability of the agriculture practice. There is no assurance of consistent income from farming and every household essentially needs to support it with other activities which is also a reason why more than a third of the population of Uttarakhand rural hilly areas have migrated out in the last two decades in search of better livelihoods. So they work in urban centres in Uttarakhand, whether in Dehradun or Nainital or they move to bigger cities like Delhi or Bombay. Leaving behind the women and the elderly to take care of the family-owned agricultural fields. So, the migration has severely impacted the rural economy and also created major shifts in the demography of the area.

In terms of the future, the youth also do not aspire to carry forward agriculture as a livelihood and they aspire for better lifestyles, move out to the cities and pursue modern careers like engineering, medicine or even tourism which leaves women to take care of the fields and the households and a lot of overburdening of responsibilities. Even men who haven't migrated are rarely seen being involved in agricultural activities. Which is why these are actually the superwomen of rural Uttarakhand and they are juggling many roles of caregivers, of doing agricultural activities, being part of cooperators and SHGs and are also constantly looking for ways to grow their income through non-agricultural activities like crafts or tourism. Programs like ILSP or the Integrated Livelihood Support Project attempts to extend support to these farming communities, particularly the women by organizing them into federations and producer groups. And since the women handle the primary agricultural activities, they form the backbone of these federations. They are imparted training for better agricultural practices, other skills like cattle rearing etc., and also, they learn bookkeeping, run federations and even,

initiate new product innovations. These are images from one of the enterprises run by ILSP where they are making jams and chutneys and you can also see they have the bamboo products which have been made by the local women as well.

Now the ILSP retails through a brand called Hilan's and upskills women to be able to convert local produce into jams, chutneys, squash and the images here are actually, show the ILSP bakery located in Hawalbagh in Almora and they produce bakery products like pastries, cookies, and cakes and retail it through enterprise outlets and an initiative of ILSP called, which is a cafe called Ho Daaju in one of the malls in Uttarakhand. Being a part of these federations, they also attend regular meetings, this gives them a chance to come together, voice their concerns about issues faced in the crop field or other activities of the enterprise and even suggest what can be done better. The images here are actually from one of the meetings we got to attend where the accounts of different federations were discussed and we also saw women taking center stage in terms of suggesting what are the new activities their enterprises would like to take up or how they would like to do things differently. Other than ILSP which is a government funded program and operates on a very large scale across forty-four such enterprises in Almora, there are individual run non-profit organizations such as the Mahila Umang Producers company. The Mahila Umang Producers company has a different division. They are also doing Knit-wear, they are producing jams and chutneys under the name of Kumouni and they also are packaging and selling agricultural produce under the brand name of Himkhadya and these are some of the images from Umang.

One of the interesting things that organizations like these do is to actually get the story of the rural women across. If you look at any of the knits, that Umang, produces and sales they have a very interesting tag where they talk about who created this product and the name of the creator. In this case, is Maya Negi from a village in Uttarakhand and and this sort of help the end user to connect to where the product is coming from and who is making it and how every purchase of any such product impacts the livelihood of rural women. We also met someone called Sunita ji who is a part of the Umang initiative and she trained on the job and now leads the manufacturing unit for Umang located in Ranikhet. What is interesting to note is that she has diversified her income sources by creating her house into a homestay, which she lets out seasonally with the help of Umang and she even represented Umang at an international conference and she was very excited to tell us about that. So, opportunities like these have given women a platform to grow and to travel and learn and to become confident of handling their own finances and in fact, generating income.

We also had the chance to visit Himadri-Hans Hand loom and this is an initiative of Hans Handloom and it's a sort of CSR activity for them. This particular manufacturing unit is an all-women's unit where they are working on preserving the traditional weaves of Uttarakhand and the company then retails it across India and also abroad. These are some of the pictures from there where we can see the women working on traditional weaves and crafts of Kumaun. Even preserving traditional art forms like the 'Aipan'. Similar to this. We all may be familiar with the luxury personal care and cosmetic brand called Forest Essentials. The sources (of) these products is not too far from Almora. Forest Essentials has its factory in the remote village of Lodsi, Uttarakhand. which manufactures soaps, ubtan and cold press oil, oil processes, which are actually labor intensive. The local rural women in this case as well make up a majority of the workforce and the brand also sources raw materials from local organic farms supplementing the income of these rural households. Essentially what products like these and brands like these do is that they create economic opportunities and ecosystems for growth and development of rural women.

Now, in terms of finding a market for these products, we know that the growth of natural products from the Himalayas is actually supplemented by the corresponding rise in the market for these goods. The eco conscious generation seeks products which are eco-friendly, ethically sourced and sustains livelihoods. As a part of our research for ILSP we also try to understand the consumer psychology and the consumer needs and we uncovered that the current market size for natural goods in personal care stands at 17500 crores currently growing at a rate of 14.1 percent in value and by 2019, natural products actually accounted for 35 percent for the personal care market. But how can we actually bridge the gap between the demand and the supply. There are initiatives like Himjoli and Himjoli is an e-commerce platform. It's a social venture company which has been working in Uttarakhand since 2009 and it partners with NGOs like Umang, Arohi and other producer groups and self-help groups across Kumaun and Gadwal. By creating an e-commerce platform, they further the reach of this product, which have been created by women in the Himalayas and it directly helps to increase the livelihood opportunities by creating an urban market for the local produce and craft. What do all of these new opportunities mean for the rural women in the himalayas? It essentially means that they get to lead the change, they get to aspire for better livelihoods and lifestyles and they're passionate about preserving the ecosystem and the local economy of rural Uttarakhand. The women are enterprising, enduring and optimistic and these movements are sort of creating a

platform for equality. They are sustaining rural economy and they are also trying to create opportunities for women who have been left behind while all the men have migrated.

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