

# VOICES FROM THE GRASSROOTS: THE CASE OF RENU UNIYAL

**Submitted by:**

*Kriti Dalakoti*

*PhD Scholar at Soban Singh Jeena University, Almora, Uttarakhand*

[kritidalakoti@gmail.com](mailto:kritidalakoti@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** *Women's participation in grassroots governance in India has witnessed a remarkable rise over the past few decades. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which mandated reservations for women in rural and urban local bodies, gave an impetus to women's participation along with other factors. These amendments not only opened political spaces for women but also gradually altered the nature of local governance. In Uttarakhand, women have emerged as particularly strong participants in Panchayati Raj institutions, reflecting both the impact of institutional reforms and the evolving social acceptance of women as leaders in community affairs. This paper presents the case study of Renu Uniyal, who was elected twice as the Gram Pradhan of Amaldu Panchayat in Pauri Garhwal district. Her journey demonstrates how women leaders in the region are navigating challenges, mobilising resources, and addressing developmental concerns at the grassroots level. The study highlights her entry into politics, the initiatives she undertook during her tenure, and her aspirations for the future. The case illustrates how women in Uttarakhand are carving independent political identities, reshaping village governance, and strengthening democracy from the ground up.*

**Keywords:** Panchayati Raj, Democracy, Women, Local Governance

**Introduction:** One of the most significant transformations in India's democratic landscape is the increasing participation of women in governance. The passage of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992, which reserved one-third of all seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions for women, prompted an increasing number of women to join politics. This not only increased the numerical representation of women in elected bodies but also created space for them to exercise leadership, influence development priorities, and challenge patriarchal norms. A later effort to boost women's representation in elected bodies was the introduction of the 110<sup>th</sup> Constitution (Amendment) Bill in the Lok Sabha in 2009, which sought to increase reservation for women from one-third (33%) to half (50%) of the total seats in three-tier Panchayats (Roy, 2025). Although the Bill was never passed, however, several states had already introduced the 50%

reservation. Uttarakhand introduced the 50% reservation in 2008 along with Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh.

According to the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Uttarakhand has the highest percentage of elected women representatives at 56%, followed by Chhattisgarh and Assam at 54.8% and 54.6%, respectively. One of the major reasons for this increase is the issue of migration. Pauri Garhwal and Almora districts have the highest rate of migration. The pace of out-migration is so huge that many of the villages are left with a population in single digits (Mamgain & Reddy, 2013). Many men migrate from the villages to other towns or cities within or outside the state, while women remain as primary caretakers of families and communities. Against this backdrop, women's participation in local governance has become increasingly visible. This paper seeks to explore women's experience in Panchayati Raj through the case study of Renu Uniyal, a twice-elected gram Pradhan from Amaldu Panchayat of Pauri Garhwal district of Uttarakhand. Drawing exclusively on a telephonic interview conducted with her, the study highlights how women navigate the opportunities and challenges of grassroots democracy, thereby shedding light on the broader implications of women's political participation in rural India.

*The clock struck 4:15, I was ready with a pen and a diary open, my heart raced slightly as this was my first interview, far from my town of Nainital, in another corner of Uttarakhand, lay Kotdwar; where a woman was resting after a long morning of election campaigning, she too was waiting for my call, the phone rang four to five times before a clear, steady voice answered. It carried both resolve and humility, and over the next one hour, I listened to a woman whose journey wasn't just about holding office, but it was about earning it, again and again.*

As her voice steadied over the phone, she began recounting her journey. Born in 1978 in the small village of Tairi, Pauri Garhwal, Renu Uniyal completed her intermediate education at the Government Intermediate College (GIC), Kotdwar, and later pursued a double master's degree in Economics and Sociology from Pitambar Dutt Degree College, Rishikesh. Prior to joining politics, she was employed at Ranbaxy, first in Delhi and later in Haridwar. Life was professional and away from politics. However, as a social worker, Renu has been active since 2008. In 2013, Renu, along with her husband and kid came to Jaltha, her in-laws' village in Pauri Garhwal. Back then, the village was in a deplorable condition. The village was not connected to a water pipeline; no water

meant no toilets. Women walked miles to fetch water daily from the *naula* (groundwater spring). Renu, too, carried jerrycans of water loaded in her hands and on her head, and became a part of the village's daily struggles. Troubled by the lack of these basic necessities, Renu wanted to work for the upliftment of her village. Seen as an educated, well-spoken and adept at carrying out her work, people recognised her merit and approached her, "*Renu, tum pradhan bano*" (*Renu, you should run for Pradhan*). This push by the villagers ignited the spark in her heart. Renu was determined to contest the 2014 elections for the office of Gram Pradhan of Amaldu panchayat which consists of two villages Jaltha and Amaldu, and work for their progress and development. However, the path wasn't easy. One man, notorious for intimidating past leaders, tried to frighten her too. He claimed she didn't belong to the village, that she was an outsider who didn't know the problems of the villages well. But Renu wasn't the one to bow down and went on with her decision. At this moment, my curiosity piqued, and I asked, "*Aap dari nahi?*" (*Did you not get scared?*) and she replied fiercely, "*main nahi darti thi*" (*I was not afraid*). She stood firm, and when the results were declared, she emerged victorious. The man who once threatened her? He hasn't returned to the village since the time Renu became Pradhan.

Renu's primary focus after being elected Gram Pradhan was to address the most basic needs of her panchayat. She began by ensuring that every household had a toilet built. A long-awaited water supply project was also initiated. Renu personally mobilised the villagers to march to the Jal Sansthan and demonstrate outside its office, leading several rallies and protests. The village finally received approval for clean and reliable water under the Himval Pumping Scheme. While the Himval Scheme water was still making its way to the village, Renu focused on providing a roof over people's heads. Under the PM Awas Yojana, she facilitated the construction of seven houses for beneficiaries. Meanwhile, she also led the construction of the Chandreshwar Mahadev temple. Earlier, there were two temples, both of which were four to five kilometres away from the main village. The path to those temples lay through a jungle inhabited by wild animals, causing difficulty for devotees. Renu took this into account and, with the support of the villagers, got the temple constructed in the main area. The villagers mostly contributed through voluntary labour (*shramdaan*), while some outsiders extended monetary support. Today, the temple is bustling with devotees. Another temple of Raj Rajeshwari Mata is being constructed at Amaldu.

During her second tenure, which started in 2019, her leadership proved even more critical. During the pandemic, about 25 migrants returned to the village, the villagers did not want to make them stay at their places, so Renu made a lot of efforts to rehabilitate them temporarily, she made their stay arrangements at Janata Higher Secondary School, Kathood. Along with other women, Renu lead the distribution of ration among these migrants and other villagers. Around the same time, Renu was tirelessly working to bring more development to her Panchayat. She ran from pillar to post and met the then MLA Ritu Khanduri Bhushan (Kotdwar constituency) who helped include the construction of a Panchayat Bhawan in the district plan with a budget of ₹15 lakhs. Along with it, a Mahila Milan Kendra was also approved at a cost of ₹3 lakhs. Additionally, a godown for agricultural machinery was constructed under the MNREGA scheme. She also played a key role in the installation of solar panels during both her tenures. The first set of solar panels was installed in 2015 from the gram panchayat fund, and the second set in 2019 under the UREDA scheme.

She continues to take an active role in addressing the administrative issues affecting particular villagers, frequently going with them to the Tehsil office to make sure their official matters and paperwork are not postponed. In India, where official procedures are slow, small blockages can severely impact someone's livelihood. She said empathetically that it's her responsibility to stop that. She played an active role in the social sphere as she resolved cases of people either by taking those matters to the local revenue officer (*patwari*) or through family settlement. Renu's work thus extended beyond infrastructural projects. As she continued speaking, I noticed how she never missed the opportunity to express the contribution and support of the locals in her success. Without a trace of pride, she went on and said that the villagers have mostly cooperated with her, whether it's or any other cause. She is approachable, and most people contact her through her number. She also has many WhatsApp groups running through which she stays connected with her people. Meetings are also held regularly- SHGs meetings take place every Sunday, the Gram Sangathan meeting every fifteen days, and Cluster Level Federation, once a week. She works in close association with the SHGs and also leads most of the awareness programs in her panchayat, notable ones being Jungle Bachao awareness campaign, afforestation drives, and pani bachao campaigns, some of these are in collaboration with The Hans Foundation.

Thirty minutes into our call I asked Renu ji if there was any one instance where she made a difference in someone else's life. She paused for a moment, reflected and then recounted the story

of a woman who had severely impaired vision. She was poor and had 4 kids. Renu personally took her to the Chief Medical Officer's office, helped her secure a disability certificate, and ensured she started receiving the *Divyang* pension. Later, Renu also helped the kids in their education with her own resources. Renu's compassion is not just limited to people within her Sabha but also outside of it. Eight people outside her sabha benefited when she got their pensions sanctioned through the Department of Social Welfare. At times, she has collaborated with foundations to provide additional support. So far, she has facilitated pension schemes for two persons with disabilities, around 30–35 elderly individuals, and 10–12 farmers. She's also the president of Cluster Level Federation (CLF) for the last three years. The CLF focuses on empowering women through SHGs, promoting cultivation of turmeric, ginger, taro, pulses, and other crops. The women grow these at their farms, after which the CLF outlet procures the produce and sells it in the markets. This way, women can easily sell their produce and earn money. Under CLF, loans up to 1.5 lakh are provided, women benefit by taking these loans and buying cattle, or investing the amount in agriculture. Currently, 112 women are a part of CLF, and she's trying to connect more women with CLF to provide them economic help and employment. She also serves as member of State Executive Committee of her political party's women wing, balancing her grassroots responsibilities with her broader political engagements.

When asked about any special initiatives she undertook for children's education, she replied with a sense of disappointment. She explained that most villagers were elderly, young couples often migrate to cities for better employment opportunities and as a result, not many children are seen in the village. In fact, in 2021, her husband along with their two children moved to Kotdwar for their children's education. However, Renu chose to stay back. Now she has been staying alone in her village, dedicating herself entirely to her work.

Renu's day starts at 4:30 in the morning. After completing her chores, she leaves by 6:30 to catch her bus. She usually heads to the CLF outlet situated at Chelusain, to carry out her duties there. The rest of the day is spent in field visits, visiting government offices for follow-ups, or assisting people and resolving local issues. Even after returning in the evening, villagers continue to visit her home seeking her help and advice. After a late dinner around 10 pm, she finally rests. Renu compliments her husband, for being supportive towards her and taking care of the kids. When asked, if she faces any interference or difficulty in making important decisions, she said firmly,

*“main apne decision khud leti hu” (I take my own decisions).* In an era marked by proxy candidates, where women leaders act as proxies for the male members of their family, Renu is a refreshing example of women's empowerment and grassroots leadership.

As the conversation drew to a close, I asked her vision for the upcoming elections. She shared her plans to serve people impartially, rehabilitate cows and goats, encourage reverse migration, develop her village into an Atal Adarsh Gram, and inspire people towards these goals. Her message to women is simple, if government has provided reservations for women in Panchayati Raj system, they should come forward and transform the society for the better. She said confidently, *“Jo ghar sambhaal sakta hai vo bahar bhi sambhal sakta hai” (One who can manage a home, can also manage the world outside).* Her son was nine months old when she was first elected as Gram Pradhan; now, the son is about to turn 13. When asked about her journey so far, she said calmly that it didn't even feel like 11 years had passed, and now she is onto her 12<sup>th</sup> year”. She said the reservation made her journey into politics easier.

For Renu, true service means fulfilling her responsibilities to the best of her abilities and extending a helping hand wherever possible. Being a strong advocate of reverse migration, she urges the youth of Uttarakhand to come to their villages, make use of the government schemes, work here and generate employment for others. She believed the villages of Uttarakhand have a lot of scope, but it is being underutilised. When I asked her playfully whether she was tired now, she chuckled and shared that her future plans include contesting elections at higher levels, possibly in the zila panchayat!

I had many more questions I wanted to ask but I had to be mindful of her time as she had to leave for Dehradun the next day, so I wished her luck and disconnected the call. As I sat reflecting afterwards, I was amazed by how a historic constitutional amendment not only empowered women like her but also gave me the privilege to connect with and learn from such an inspiring leader.

## **Conclusion**

Renu is just one of the many women in Uttarakhand who, despite coming from humble backgrounds, found a way to step into politics and make a difference in their communities. For women like her, reservation has opened doors that once seemed firmly shut, while growing awareness about education and empowerment has given them the confidence to walk through those

doors. In the hills of Uttarakhand, where migration often leaves women carrying the weight of both family and village responsibilities, many have quietly taken on the role of leaders. In Renu's own life, her family has been living away in recent years to secure better education for the children, which has left her to shoulder many responsibilities on her own. Yet instead of becoming a limitation, this only strengthened her resolve to lead and serve her village. Her journey is a glimpse into the broader transformation taking place in Uttarakhand, where women are increasingly stepping into the public sphere and giving new direction to local governance.

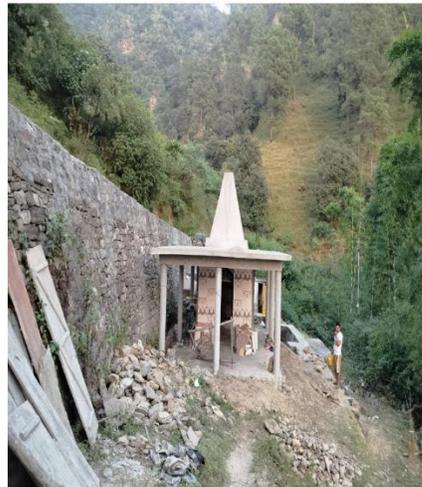
## DEVELOPMENT IN PICTURES



*Toilets constructed for boys and girls at Primary School, Amaldu.*



*Panchayat Bhawan constructed at Jaltha.*



*Construction of Chandreshwar Mahadev Temple at Jaltha.*



*A water tank was constructed during her tenure.*



*A public tap was also constructed.*



Renu Ji outside the newly constructed Panchayat Bhawan and Community Hall.



One of the installed Solar Panels.



Photo from the Kalash Yatra held before the Shiv temple was established in the village.



Celebrating 75 years of Independence at Amaldu Panchayat.



Renu ji taking part in Plantation Drive.



Renu ji and local women villagers engaged in bush cutting as part of a community cleanliness effort.



Renu ji taking part in Cleanliness Drive.

## References

Mamgain, R. P., & Reddy, D. N. (2013). OUT-MIGRATION FROM HILL REGION OF UTTARAKHAND: ISSUES AND POLICY OPTIONS. In *GIRI INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPMENT STUDIES*.  
[http://nirdpr.org.in/nird\\_docs/srsc/srsc-rr-090518-5.pdf](http://nirdpr.org.in/nird_docs/srsc/srsc-rr-090518-5.pdf)

Roy, E. (2025, February 6). In migration-prone Uttarakhand, a fresh crop of women leaders. *The Migration Story*.  
<https://www.themigrationstory.com/post/in-migration-prone-uttarakhand-a-fresh-crop-of-women-leaders>