

## SAI ROPA MEETING – ISSUES

The underlying objective of the Sai Ropa meeting was to formulate a representation of the mountain people of the Himalayan region at the international level, in order to collectively develop new modes of action that could enrich the lives of people living in the Himalayan region. The Himalayan members of the WMPA have constantly tried to highlight the failure of the states and the Government in meeting the developmental needs of the mountain communities, especially in terms of management and control of their natural resources and environment. The parallel movement of privatisation of natural resources and the consequent dispossession and displacement of mountain people from their own land and resources, whether it be to tap resources (such as hydropower dams or mines) or under the pretext of protecting biodiversity, gave an impetus for the Sai Ropa meeting to discuss these issues and work out a future course of action.

One of the main objectives of the Sai Ropa meeting was to enable the growth of a Himalayan civil society, which could meaningfully participate and contribute to the creation of a universal respect for human values. The intent of such an objective was to enable a universal exchange and sharing of such values embodied by diverse mountain populations across the world – be it the Andean region of South America, the Alps of Europe or the Himalayan region of Asia. A mutual sharing and exchange of such diverse human cultures could give shape to a better understanding of life in the mountains and highlight the problems and issues plaguing mountain societies of the world today.

Broadly, the Sai Ropa regional meeting addressed the issues of:

- Natural Resource Management- in order to throw light on the inadequacy of National and International policies and on pressing issues of privatisation, globalisation and the resulting displacement and gradual disempowerment of mountain communities, in terms of their territorial rights, sovereignty and control over the management of their resources.
- The intrinsic and seemingly extraneous pressures that impact lives of mountain people living in the Himalayas- such as issues of livelihoods, ecological sustainability, and consequent out-migration, social inequalities, grappling with larger global pressures of multinational corporations and other international agencies, which seem to pose a threat to the autonomy and local authority of indigenous mountain communities.
- Understanding and sharing of traditional practices which mountain people have constantly adapted to meet the constraints of changing times. These could be exemplary for others and could be emulated in different contexts – for example, use of natural dyes, forest produce, small craft practices, Non Timber Forest Produce (NTFP) and so on. The intent of such an agenda was to know what is being practiced and learn about the traditional actors (women, community and tribal organisations or social movements) who are responsible for the success and sustainability of these practices.

A central area of concern is the question of management of natural resources like land, water and forests in the mountains and people's rights and decision-making powers over the use of these resources. Available resources need to be judiciously used to meet energy requirements, and the existing forms of agriculture suitable for these areas need to be strengthened, keeping in mind the fragile ecology of the mountains. Over the centuries, through appropriate practices decided by their traditional institutions, mountain people have a very strong awareness of their duties to nature and mankind. Nevertheless, their rights and responsibilities

over the proper management of their territories and their institutions are under violent stress. There are gaps that need to be bridged between the autonomous character of these institutions and the demands that are exerted by a modern nation-state. Health, education and communications are issues that impact the everyday lives of people and specific policies need to be framed which are in tune with the social and cultural character of mountain communities. The pressing issues of privatisation of natural assets such as forests, rivers and streams and mines, and globalisation and development agendas decided by foreign funding agencies are resulting in the displacement and disempowerment of mountain communities, in terms of their territorial rights, sovereignty and control over the management of their resources. A key concern is to devise strategies and create a common forum to voice and safeguard the interests of mountain communities in the Himalayan region given these pressures. On the basis of these deliberations, the Sai Ropa Regional Meeting sought to suggest measures for policy change from the collective views expressed by participants in this forum.

## Forests

### Critical Concerns

- Loss of community control and ownership over forest land
- Impact on livelihoods and erosion of people's rights over forest resources
- Diversion of forest land for development purposes by State and private agencies
- Classification of forests as Protected Areas leading to curtailment of rights of local communities
- Strengthening mechanisms for community management of forests

Forests are a significant resource for most mountain communities. In the Himalayan region, they play an important role in the local economies. Himalayan forests are rich in biodiversity and the vast array of resources that they hold are integrally linked with the livelihood practices of these areas. These practices have taken shape over the years, depending on the nature and availability of particular resources in particular areas. Most hill communities have traditionally revered and protected forests given the symbolic value of these forests and the dependence that they have on the resources that these forests hold. Among others, forests provide fuel wood for domestic purposes and fodder for livestock. In addition, they are also rich sources of various other produce – non-timber forest produce, herbs, fruits, which can be collected and sold in markets.

Most mountain communities in the Himalayan region have evolved systems over the years which seek to control and regulate the use of these resources. Among others, this can be seen in the traditional management of forest areas by local institutions in Meghalaya and the manner in which communities have managed their forests in Uttarakhand. Traditionally, these systems have ensured the harnessing of forest resources in judicious ways, whether it is in terms of access and sustainable extraction of resources or in terms of ensuring an equitable access of these resources for all sections of the community. However, in the present day, there is tremendous pressure on the resources that forests hold. A part of this can be attributed to the increase in population since the second quarter of the 20th century, and the changing dynamics of these communities, unable to cope with this growth rate, coupled with the weakening of traditional institutions in the management of forestland. More significant reasons for these are the gradual divestment of community control over forestland by the State, the loss of access to forestland by local communities through development projects or the creation of Protected Areas and the promotion of the interests of private agencies in forest resources to meet the demands of the market. All these issues were discussed at the Sai Ropa meeting in the context of different sub-regions of the Himalayas – issues ranging from the loss of forestland to dams and micro-hydel projects in Himachal Pradesh and the North Eastern region of India, the positive aspects and present-day lacunae in the management of forests by traditional institutions (like in Meghalaya) and the positive example of community forestry in Nepal.

The gradual erosion of community control over forest land was a huge cause of concern for representatives from various regions of the Indian Himalayas. This was happening in various ways. For example, in Uttarakhand, which has had a long history of successful management of forests by local communities, legislations and programmes have been implemented by the State which have undermined these existing systems and have severely impacted people's access to forest resources. While on the one hand, legislations like these affect access to basic resources necessary for everyday survival, on the other hand, the State is not averse to the involvement of foreign donor agencies to implement schemes for the management and exploitation of these very resources. The working of these agencies and schemes are often in conflict with existing structures of forest management. This is apparent from the resistance

offered by local bodies like Van Panchayats in Uttarakhand to the implementation of government schemes like Joint Forest Management (JFM) because these schemes are supported by agencies like the World Bank. The implementation of these schemes could lead to the loss of autonomy and decision-making powers over the use of local resources which could have serious consequences for the other sectors of the local economies.

The propensity of the State to bring common forest land under a scheme/programme (say, an afforestation scheme) is actually perceived as a de facto way of the State to increase its control over forests. In most parts of India, there are no clear-cut mechanisms for benefit-sharing with local communities that could accrue as a consequence of these schemes. Often, the State is the primary beneficiary of these schemes, thereby alienating local communities and leading to an adverse effect on the health of these forests. The absence of these mechanisms and the weakening of customary laws in community-managed forests could lead to the acceleration of natural resource exploitation, pushing resource extraction to unsustainable levels.

Another disturbing trend is the classification of more and more forest areas under State classifications of forests like Reserve Forests and others. Forests which are classified thus are controlled through various rules and regulations regarding access and usage of resources. This has resulted in the dilution of traditional rights of communities and has seriously undermined the relationship that they once shared with their forests.

Another issue concerning forests discussed at the Sai Ropa meeting was the notification of more and more forest areas as conservation units mandated by law –the creation of Protected Areas like National Parks, Wildlife Sanctuaries and Biosphere Reserves. While the creation of these areas is generally done from the point of view of biodiversity conservation, this is often in conflict with the interests of people who depend on these forests for their livelihoods and their everyday needs. There are several stringent conditions imposed through law regarding the degree of access and usage of forest areas which are notified as Protected Areas. For example, in India, the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 does not allow any human interference in National Parks while partial human interference may be allowed in particular areas of Wildlife Sanctuaries. These have created grave difficulties for communities living in and around these Protected Areas as their erstwhile rights over resources in these areas have now been severely curtailed. Out of the existing 86 National Parks in India which have been initially notified, only 20 have been finally notified. The final notification of a National Park is generally done only after the customary and other rights of the people living in the area have been settled (which could be rights over the collection of certain products or over grazing) and they have been duly compensated by the State. Until this is done, people living in the area may continue using the area in accordance with their traditional rights. However, in most cases, laws regarding access and usage in Protected Areas often come into force when an area is initially notified as a National Park or Wildlife Sanctuary. Local people are alienated from their resources and livelihood base without proper settlement of their rights, leading to huge conflicts between them and local forest departments. In some cases, the creation of these Protected Areas leads to the displacement and migration of local populations, severely impacting their livelihoods and making them environmental refugees. Often, there is no clear demarcation of the boundaries of Protected Areas leading to arbitrariness on the part of enforcing agencies like the forest departments in dealing with what are perceived as violations of the law.

A huge point of disjunction is the non-involvement of local populations in the conservation process through the creation of these Protected Areas. In the perception of the State, local societies are, incompetent in managing the biodiversity of their territories, hence, its ideology of conservation is based on principles of exclusion undermining the interests of local people and threatening the very survival of this biodiversity. This biodiversity has been sustained

through the very presence of these societies and their appropriate traditional activities and practices. The institutional mechanisms for the participation of people in these State-initiated conservation processes are very weak and practically non-existent. The State refuses to acknowledge that people are active elements of the landscape and can play a vital role in ensuring the success of these conservation initiatives which cannot succeed simply through the enactment of laws and rules that alienate people from their own environment. Major revenue is earned by the State through the formation of these Protected Areas, whether it is through tourism or through the involvement of international agencies like the World Bank and DFID. These agencies adopt tokenistic measures like the formation of women's Self Help Groups or eco-development schemes to address livelihood concerns of people who might have lost out through the formation of Protected Areas. These schemes are generally not suited to the contexts or the populations where they are applied, as is evident from various schemes that have been implemented in areas surrounding the Nandadevi Biosphere Reserve in Uttarakhand.

The adverse impact on forests through the implementation of development projects in various parts of the Eastern and Western Himalayas is another very serious issue affecting communities living in these areas. The forests in Arunachal Pradesh, one of the biodiversity hotspots of the world, are today under tremendous stress owing to the 182 dams that are coming up on its many rivers. More than 350 micro-hydel projects are being planned in Himachal Pradesh. Large tracts of forestland, home to many exotic flora and fauna species and extremely significant for the populations in these areas, are today being submerged. There are numerous other examples of contradictions in the State's ideology of creating Protected Areas for the conservation of biodiversity. For example, portions of several Protected Areas have been denotified to facilitate the execution of hydel and other developmental projects. A case in point is the Great Himalayan National Park in Himachal Pradesh, a portion of which was denotified to facilitate clearance for the Parvati Hydro-Electric Project in the Parvati Valley (Himachal Pradesh).

The Indian Himalayas, thus, present a complex picture with relation to forests. There is a growing tendency to weaken community control and decision-making powers over forests which have been traditionally owned and managed by them, so that these forests can be diverted by the State for more economically beneficial purposes. In Nepal, however, the forest management scenario is somewhat different. Like in many parts of the Indian Himalayas, communities in Nepal historically managed their forest resources over the years, until the State (under the Rana rule), took over the ownership and the management of these forests. Because of the incompetence, corruption and inability of the government bodies to check deforestation, this management was given back to the village communities in the eighties, along with the creation and proper training of forests users groups and nurseries. Today, Nepal has over 14,000 community forest users groups managing about 1.18 million hectares of forestland all over the country.

Even though these systems of community forestry have come under new threats from government and private agencies for commercial or big development projects, these community forest user groups have merged into a federation (FECOFUN) which can effectively resist the overtures of the State or private agencies. Today, the federation works as an egalitarian body involving equal representation of local men and women of the villages where these groups are present. These groups include all sections of society and this has helped in addressing issues of caste and gender prejudice intrinsic to Nepalese society. Through their democratic functioning, they also ensure equitable access and utilisation of forest resources and regulatory mechanisms imposed by the groups themselves ensure a sustainable use of these resources. There has been a significant improvement in the forest

landscape. These community forestry groups also play the role of watchdogs with regard to government and private agencies' encroachment over their forests.

The efficacious functioning of these community forest user groups has had a positive impact on other spheres of life as well. Through their very structure, they ensure compulsory representation for women and this has helped in improving the status of women in a traditionally patriarchal society. 33% of women are today in leadership positions in various forestry groups. Over the years, they have emerged as strong community leaders and have been responsible for the effective management of at least 700 forests. Forestry groups have been able to execute various rural development schemes like the promotion of informal education models, women's health and savings and credit schemes. They also provide training to their members and have been able to set in place a proper marketing system for forest products.

Despite the small and significant success stories of these community forestry groups, there are many challenges which these initiatives have to grapple with to ensure their sustainability. In what capacity can the government strengthen these community forestry groups in Nepal, rather than being in opposition to them? Even though communities have traditionally managed and looked after their own forests since time immemorial, the increasing population and the subsequent pressure on available resources pose an intrinsic threat to these community forestry models. Such initiatives also need to reflect on ways in which professional and outside inputs in Natural Resource Management can be accessed and incorporated in the existing community forest management programmes, so as to seek maximum benefits from appropriate technologies without exerting unsustainable pressure on available forest resources.

## Water

### Critical Concerns

- Political economy of water
- Harnessing of Himalayan rivers for development projects like dams- ecological, social and economic consequences
- Water for power and electricity over water for agriculture and domestic use
- Commoditisation and privatisation of water by State and International agencies
- Conflict over water - sharing at National and International level

The question of water as a natural resource and the politics surrounding its use figured centrally in the deliberations of the meeting. Laying out the significance of water as a life-giving resource of the mountains, many participants at the meeting presented a disturbing picture of the crisis of water in the mountains, in terms of over-exploitation of available water sources in the mountains – be it rivers, lakes, natural springs and so on. The various discussions at the meeting emphasised on the excessive commercialisation of water and therefore a need to evolve strategies to counter this trend. Water has become a commodity to be sold in the market and the rights of the mountain communities over the use of this resource is being increasingly restricted and controlled. The unsustainable tapping of water in the Himalayan region has had huge ecological, social and cultural impact on the lives of people in these mountains.

Water today is being looked at as a potential source of power and electricity. Water from the mountains is being used to generate electricity to supply the needs of people in cities and other areas outside the mountains. Almost each and every Himalayan river has been tapped. Natural springs are being converted to bottled water and sold. Tapping of ground-water in the Himalayas has led to a drastic reduction of ground-water level, impacting the irrigation and domestic water requirements of hill communities. Water has been harnessed to support all forms of industrial growth in the name of development. This was spoken of in the light of the innumerable hydro-electric projects in the states of Himachal and Arunachal Pradesh. The river basins in these states are being severely impacted by the huge number of projects coming up here- at least 182 dams in the Brahmaputra and Siang basins of Arunachal Pradesh and more than 350 micro-hydel projects in the tiny hill state of Himachal Pradesh. Such illogical and extreme use of a natural resource like water has disastrous consequences on the fragile ecology of the Himalayan region. Fertile agricultural land, already present in small measure in these areas, and several critical biodiversity areas have been submerged as a result of these hydel projects. The appropriation of water for these development projects has also led to a weakening of traditional institutions of water governance that communities have set in place to manage natural resources like water for their own use .

The other issue which was discussed extensively was the political economy of water vis-à-vis the viability of big dams and development projects. Mountains are generally seen as providers of raw materials, energy, water, and as areas of recreation to cater to the needs of people belonging to the plains. There are various dimensions to the politics of constructing big dams in the name of tapping water and exploiting its potential as a resource for power generation. The politics of water, dams and development were critically presented and discussed at the meeting. Most of the big dam projects are funded by powerful players like the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and the Japan Bank for International Cooperation. These private donor agencies are interested in funding such projects as they want to generate more profits through the interest that they will earn on these loans. One of the points of concern which came to the fore in the meeting was the clearance procedures of these hydro electric projects.

Environmental Impact Assessment studies that are carried out by agencies interested in executing hydro-electric projects generally provide data which is misleading and faulty. These are generally overlooked by the State because of the prospect of revenue for the State and the prospect of so-called development of the plain areas. The complicity of the State and these private agencies becomes apparent from the ease with which clearances for such projects are granted. The local people are never consulted before such large-scale development projects are sanctioned and once such a project is cleared, outside agencies that fund these projects garner insurmountable rights over the mountain territories and subsequently the rights of the local communities over resources of their own territory are undermined.

The social impact of big dams on the mountain communities cannot even be measured. Thousands and thousands of people are displaced and dispossessed from their own land. In India, there are innumerable “environmental refugees” as a consequence of these big dams. Most of these people have not been resettled nor have they received adequate compensation, either monetary or in the form of suitable cultivable land that could ensure their dignity and survival. Very poor resettlement and compensation of people displaced from their own land for development projects have always been adverse impacts of such projects and the government has totally failed in this front. As far as the Government of India is concerned, there is no concrete Resettlement and Rehabilitation policy for people displaced as a consequence of development projects in the country. People in Himachal Pradesh who have been displaced by the Bhakra Nangal Dam, built way back in the 1950s – a symbol of the new emerging independent nation-state of India, have not been resettled till date. About 20,000 families who were displaced as a result of the Pandoh and Talwara Dams in Himachal Pradesh have also not been resettled. As a result of displacement, people’s social and cultural ways of living are drastically ruptured. No policy takes into account such social costs of displacement. Giving land in a desert area to people who have lived in the mountains for generations, leads to a complete breakdown of their social structures, eventually threatening the very survival of such communities, as was the case with a particular hill community from Himachal Pradesh who were resettled in Rajasthan.

Whose interests do such big dams serve? This was another critical issue as far as the politics of big dams is concerned, which came to the fore at the Sai Ropa meeting. Most of the power generated through such projects is meant for export rather than to meet local energy requirements. The power generation potential of dams vis-à-vis what it actually manages to generate is a critical area of concern, which needs to be seriously studied and analysed, especially given the huge costs incurred in the construction of such dams on the promise of its potential capacity. One needs to undertake a cost benefit study of the amount spent on these dams in terms of the power that it will eventually generate. Given the nature of the glacier-fed Himalayan rivers which carry a huge amount of silt, big dams in the Himalayan region generally have a life of about 30 years. The eventual silting of dams in the long run, therefore, raises questions about the ecological, social and financial viability of such dams. As an alternative to big dams, the possibility of micro-hydel projects is being explored in certain areas. Micro-hydel projects generally have a generating potential of less than 20 Mw of power and the scale of such projects is lesser compared to big dam projects. Therefore, it is assumed that micro-hydel projects have lower ecological and social impacts, because a micro-hydel project neither involves the creation of a large submergence zone nor entails the displacement of people. However, the viability of micro-hydel projects needs to be critically looked into because a huge concentration of micro-hydel projects in a small, fragile ecological zone could have the same impact as that of a big dam. Currently, 350 micro-hydel projects have been sanctioned in the mountain state of Himachal Pradesh which has a total area of only 55,673 sq.km. This could have devastating ecological consequences for this fragile Himalayan state. Similar trends can also be observed in the Eastern Himalayan state of Sikkim, an area of only

7096 sq.km, and this will have grave consequences for hill communities in all these regions. Ensuring water for agricultural purposes is no longer a priority of the State and there are no institutional mechanisms for benefit-sharing of these projects with local communities.

Two interesting points which came up through deliberations at the meeting is the process of decommissioning dams and militarization of areas in the name of such development projects. It is of critical concern that costs of breaking down or maintaining a dam which has been decommissioned is more than what it took to construct it. Once dams are decommissioned, they remain as structures which have a permanent impact on the local ecology. At another level, many of these projects often face stiff opposition from local people and civil society groups. Once these projects are cleared and sanctioned, especially in border areas and the conflict-ridden North-Eastern region of India, the State deploys the army in the name of protecting these project sites of “national interest.” The presence of the army leads to further tensions and unrest amongst the people in these areas. The politics of big dams and big development projects thus has many aspects that need to be critically understood and analysed.

The politics of water takes on another dimension if one looks at the potential scope of conflict that exists not only amongst communities within the nation but also amongst different States with regard to the sharing of water. Inter-State water-sharing and international river sharing agreements are critical areas of concern and the resultant conflict arising out of water could be detrimental to the lives of people across the Himalayan region and even the non-mountain communities. The issue of one single natural resource of the mountains – water, thus has several dimensions which need to be critically reflected upon to ensure the interests of Himalayan mountain communities.

## Land

### Critical Concerns

- Shrinking of fertile cultivable land in the mountains
- Pressures on mountain land through developmental activities such as mining
- Degradation of land quality through developmental activities
- Weakening of traditional institutions of land management
- Land alienation

The issue of land and mountain communities' rights over the use of their territory was another crucial question which came up for much deliberation at the meeting. Land in mountain areas is being increasingly exploited to meet the demands of development projects, leading to the dwindling of cultivable land. This has resulted in massive out migration of people from the mountains to the cities. Leasing out cultivable land to many small shareholders or large tracts of land being owned by a single cultivator leads to land alienation amongst the farmers in the hills, which is a great concern for the mountain communities. Chemical fertilisers are being used to optimise land productivity given the fact that land is fast dwindling, which has its own ecological consequences. Chemical fertilisers eventually destroy the cultivability of land and this has serious long term ramifications for the people in the mountains as mountain people do not have access to much fertile land in any case.

Mining is creating huge pressures on land in the mountains. Hill communities in the Himalayan belt are witness to the indiscriminate mining of their territories by the State and other mining companies which have made inroads into the mountains in a big way over the last decade or so. These mountain areas are rich in limestone, uranium and numerous other minerals which have become the target of mining companies, overriding the interests and rights of the local people, and also the most elementary environmental concerns.

In the 1980s, mining of limestone in Uttarakhand led to an organised people's movement which resulted in the ban on mining in few areas like the hills of Mussorie in the Garhwal region of the state. However, once Uttarakhand attained statehood, the ban on mining was revoked to a certain extent. This is reflective of the complicity of the State and the mining lobbies. Over the last few years, the judiciary has been ruling in favour of the mining companies undermining the rights of local communities. This nexus between the executive and judicial central and local powers and the local contractors who lease out mountain territories to these mining companies is a grave cause of concern. Mining also adversely impacts farmlands. This has been seen in the North-Eastern region of India where mining has destroyed vast stretches of fertile farmland. In the state of Meghalaya, there are huge deposits of limestone, which are a necessary raw material for the cement industry. The hills of Meghalaya have been mined to meet the demand of the cement industries in neighbouring Bangladesh. Another pertinent aspect which was highlighted through discussions on the issue of mining is the fact that there are no mountain-specific laws for mining in the country. This is a policy concern and people from different hill communities of the Himalayan region should demand for specific laws which would ensure and protect people's rights and health in the light of the pressures created by mining on their land.

The question of land and land rights of the hill communities in the North-Eastern region of the country are quite distinct and these issues need to be specifically understood keeping in mind the general pattern of land ownership in these areas. Many participants of the Sai Ropa meeting discussed the issue of land and land rights of the hill communities in the North-East. North-East India is a predominantly tribal area and most of this area falls under the VIth Schedule of the Indian Constitution which guarantees certain rights and privileges to the tribal population of the area, especially with regard to control of their land. In Meghalaya, for example, the

owner of a plot also owns the sub soil and the mining resources it contains. Hundreds of small land owners themselves exploit the limestone or coal. The working conditions in these mines are very dangerous and extremely low wages are paid to the workers who come from neighbouring villages. Since these mine-owners are not able (or willing) to provide their employees with the minimum requirements of health or education, the conditions of these workers are very poor and the death rate is extremely high.

Most of the land in North-East India is owned by the community – specifically by tribal clans who have historically inherited certain portions of land. The land belonged to the community and the rights of people were guarded by traditional institutions of local governance. These traditional institutions were set up and administered by the local tribal population. The central and state regulations were generally subordinate to these local and customary laws of the area. However, the powers of the traditional institutions are gradually weakening as most of the land is now controlled by a small section of the tribals. This small section constitutes the extremely privileged class of what is called – the “tribal elite”. This tribal elite is being pandered to and encouraged by the State as a ploy to gain a certain degree of control over land and its resources. The tribal elites have also allowed indiscriminate development activities like mining etc. to be carried out in community land as they stand to gain huge personal profits through such deals. Any development activity is generally undertaken only with the consent of this small group of people, undermining the rights and privileges of others members of the community.

In the VIth Schedule area of Meghalaya, the indigenous tribal institutions have insured certain mechanisms for land management among local farmers. However, over the years, these institutions have been weakening owing to internal politics and external pressures. Agricultural or forest land is being bought by rich tribal city-dwellers who invest either in tea plantations or in dairies, piggeries and poultry farms, thus changing the traditional patterns of land ownership. Intermingling and marriages between tribal and non tribal people, pressures of migration, inter-tribe conflicts have also contributed to the divisions of the available community land. All these factors have led to land alienation amongst the local farmers who now have to work as wage labourers or take on lease a patch of land which originally belonged to them. This situation of extreme land alienation amongst the general tribal population requires critical reflection.

Thus generally it has been seen that everyone is trying to control the natural resource of land in one way or the other. The State is trying to create power centres, either in terms of encouraging the elite or by supporting the mining groups through the judiciary to gain control over land. It is trying to optimise the economic potential of land to earn revenue, benefiting only a small section of the population. The laws are increasingly being interpreted in favour of “developmental interests,” exhibiting a disturbing change in the attitude of the judiciary which seems to override public interest issues and undermine concerns of basic human rights.

## Agriculture

### Critical Concerns

- Strengthening of traditional forms of cultivation
- The use of external seed varieties over local seeds
- Promotion of organic farming suitable to mountain ecologies
- Strengthening of marketing networks for hill farmers

The primary issues confronting agricultural practices in the Himalayan region, as they emerged in the Sai Ropa meeting, were to do with the strengthening of traditional farming practices like shifting cultivation, the utilisation of a variety of existing local seeds and the use of farming techniques which are suitable for the mountain terrain and could ensure the long-term sustainability of the soil. This was important in the light of the paucity of agricultural land in most mountain areas and the central question around which most discussions were framed was how to optimise production for hill farmers keeping the fragile ecology of most mountain areas in mind. Most mountain communities have evolved systems of agricultural practice and production in accordance with the quality of land and the availability of other critical requirements like water. It was felt at the Sai Ropa meeting that there was a need to strengthen these systems and use modern scientific inputs to augment the existing agricultural outputs in these areas.

Traditional farming techniques like shifting or “jhum” cultivation have been practised in many areas of the Himalayas, specifically Nepal and the North eastern region of India. Shifting cultivation has always been the subject of intense debate between advocates of this kind of cultivation and the scientific community in general. This debate has revolved around the efficacy of this system with relation to consequent ecological and soil degradation that this kind of cultivation leads to, the loss of forest cover and the drying up of groundwater. Advocates of this system have however critiqued these notions about jhum and there have also been several scientific studies in the Himalayan region which have established the efficacy of this system and its suitability for the terrain in this region. Farmers who practice such cultivation have been following environmental-friendly techniques that facilitate regeneration of forest cover and replenishment of the nutritional value of the soil. The burning involved in preparing jhum plots for cultivation is also controlled to avoid the destruction of important soil nutrients and vegetation. However, the practice of jhum, as it exists today, is not without its share of problems. In jhum, farmers clear forests in a particular patch of land at the beginning of the dry season, leave the cut vegetation to dry on the spot and burn it at the end of the dry season, in order to manure the land. Then, they use it to grow crops for a period of one year. Every year, they move on to cultivate another patch of land, leaving the previous patch fallow in order to rejuvenate it. When the vegetation has reached the state where the produced ashes will allow for a sufficient crop, the farmer returns to the first patch of land so that the total land under cultivation does not increase. As long as the population is not too numerous (generally speaking, the density should not exceed 10 inhabitants per square kilometre), this system is fully sustainable as it conserves the bio-diversity (plants and animals) and nourishes the population. Furthermore, in terms of productivity of work, it is by far the most productive form of agriculture.

Unfortunately, in various parts of the Himalayan region, because of the increase in population and the diversion of a big quantity of cultivable land to perennial cropping (very often cash crops), the length of the fallow has decreased to a point where the cycle has come down to three to five to seven years. This does not enable a natural regeneration of the vegetation in a particular area. Hence, the fertility of the soil is not restored and this leads to a decrease in production, which in turn forces the farmers to expand the area under cultivation. But since

new forests cannot always be included in the jhum cycle, the fallow time in existing jhum plots is reduced more and more, leading to further decrease in the land fertility affecting the productivity of jhum. This is a very critical issue, since the agricultural system is not sustainable anymore and also because it has ramifications for the larger ecology and biodiversity of an area. Given this, it becomes very important to look for ways to increase both the productivity of the land and of the work.

In Nepal, to address this problem of limited land and shrinking jhum cycles, jhum farmers are being encouraged to adopt agro-forestry and mixed crop farming on their jhum plots. While this has increased the productivity of a particular plot in a single year, it has also helped to address the problem of soil erosion which was a common feature of single crop farming which was practiced in jhum plots previously, especially where jhum cultivation was being practiced on steep hill-slopes. The application of scientific inputs can therefore, serve to strengthen these traditional systems and it was felt by some representatives from the North Eastern region that the Government needed to be more supportive of these kind of practices and frame policies which could promote the interests of jhum farmers. It was also felt that the marketing networks of jhum farmers needed to be strengthened, where it was possible to create accessible markets, so as to ensure that they get a fair price for their produce.

In parts of the North Eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh, shifting cultivation is very critical for some people who live in very interior areas, where accessibility to markets is very difficult. In some parts of the Himalayas, the nearest road head or town could be a few days walk from the village and given this scenario, it is very difficult to market agricultural produce. Therefore, it does not make economic sense for a farmer to grow cash crops. Cash crop markets are generally controlled by the non-local population as well. Jhum cultivation, on the other hand, can provide 20-30 crop varieties of food grain, vegetables, fruits and spices for the subsistence of a farmer and his/her family. This is very important for people living in interior areas because essential food supplies do not generally reach these areas through channels like the market. It is therefore necessary to understand the larger social context within which these practices are placed before critiquing these systems on the basis of their suitability for particular environments.

Along with the emphasis on strengthening traditional farming practices, the suitability of local seeds for mountain topography was also stressed upon at the meeting. Given the scarcity of good quality agricultural land in most hill areas, traditional seed varieties which enrich the soil with nutrients are being used by some farmers in the Western Himalayan state of Uttarakhand. The Beej Bachao Andolan (Save the Seeds Movement) in the Heval Valley of Garhwal has been actively propagating the use of organically grown traditional local crop varieties in an attempt to address the loss of agrarian diversity in these mountain areas. This is seen as the answer to the failure of imported seeds and chemical fertilizers, which have had several detrimental effects on the soil and in the long run, on the health of people. Furthermore, even in accessible areas, the introduction of expensive chemical fertilisers is not an economically viable option and in any case, mountain areas cannot compete with low-land agriculture in terms of productivity. On the other hand, agricultural production of the mountains is renowned for its high nutritious value. Organic agriculture is a cheaper option and can prove to be more profitable for farmers, provided appropriate manure is used and natural pest control techniques are identified, investigated, developed and widely propagated. Nevertheless, to counter the Government's policy of propagating water-intensive cash crops because of their high market value, there is a need to create markets for these traditional seeds and crop varieties. Only a small percentage of farmers in this region have the wherewithal to practice the cultivation of traditional organic crops as the local markets for these crop varieties are very limited. Farmers often do not get proper rates for these crop varieties in these local markets. The demand for indigenous crops comes mostly from urban or foreign

markets but the scale of production of these crop varieties is inadequate to ensure good financial returns for the farmer. It is important to upgrade this scale of production so that farmers can draw adequate benefits from local or outside markets, and this could encourage them to practice this form of cultivation to a greater degree.

The experiences of organic farmers in Meghalaya in the North Eastern region of India, although more efficacious, are also fraught with several challenges. About 133 farmers in a particular region of Meghalaya have obtained organic certification for their farms. These farmers practice eco-friendly ways of farming by growing traditional crop varieties of high nutritional quality, meeting water requirements through rainwater harvesting and using organic manure instead of chemical fertilisers. The emphasis in this practice is to preserve and enhance traditional and indigenous knowledge and to direct this knowledge towards maintaining the genetic diversity of the agricultural system and its surroundings. However, there is still a need to augment these systems through the incorporation of scientific and technical inputs that could help traditional farming knowledge to adapt to current agricultural practices. Although certain organic products have been given certification by the National Programme for Organic Production, there is a need to expand market opportunities which can lead to more farmers adopting organic techniques of farming.

## **International financial institutions**

### Critical Concerns

- Threat of IFI investments through developmental projects in mountain areas
- Appropriation of natural resources through IFI investment
- Non-people centric nature of IFI-funded development projects
- Conditionalities of IFI investments and loans
- Complicity of the State with IFIs

International Financial Institutions (IFIs) very often pose serious threats to the ecological, social, economic and cultural life of mountain areas, if the mountain communities are not able to impose their own terms and conditions for their presence in these areas. In the past few decades, large scale investments have been made in the North Eastern region of India by various IFIs and monetary agencies in development projects like big dams, construction of roads, power sector reforms, urban development projects, tourism and natural resource management projects. In this context, the role of IFIs was discussed at the Sai Ropa meeting in order to throw light on the adverse impact and the threat that some such institutions are posing for the mountain populations in the region.

The North Eastern region of India is seen as a potential site for foreign investment because of the strategic location of the region as a corridor connecting India to the rest of South Asia. Numerous dams are being planned in Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim on the big rivers that flow through these areas like Siang and Teesta. Many IFIs like the World Bank, Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) are funding the construction of big dams in these mountain regions which will have huge negative impacts on the ecology and landscape of these areas along with causing massive displacement of local populations. The entry of IFIs has not only led to the privatisation of natural resources such as water, but has also led to unbridled appropriation of land and forests belonging to indigenous people and even to the State. This is happening in the case of the ADB-sponsored NESRP and Bengal Corridor road projects & the ADB-initiated South Asian Sub Regional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) tourism project. A World Bank Natural Resource Management programme in reality is aimed at tapping into and maximising profits by exploiting the potential of the natural resources in the North Eastern part of India

This commoditisation of natural resources is taking place at the cost of the local communities losing all control over their immediate environment. In Arunachal Pradesh alone, 182 dams have been commissioned and all these projects are being funded by the World Bank. The mountain people are being pushed out of their own land in the name of development and the big agencies are offering various incentives like creation of new jobs, possibilities of developing employment and tourism opportunities to the local populations in order to appease them and buy their consent. Given the topographical composition of proposed project sites, the viability and life of dams in these areas is suspect and may be limited to only a couple of years. Despite this, the North Eastern region of India is being projected as the potential “power house” of the country and attempts are being made to dam rivers as mighty as the Brahmaputra. A plan for the exploration of petroleum in this river is also in the pipeline.

IFIs in the region are also attempting to diversify their activities into sericulture and communication in an attempt to create the illusion of undertaking welfare activities that are beneficial to local communities. A few participants at the Sai Ropa meeting explained how such programmes are aimed at weakening and usurping community management and control over their resources. In order to create an illusion of carrying out pro-people development work, the IFIs are adopting a language that could appeal to the local people. These are a subterfuge for the actual repercussions that these big projects have on mountain lives. Thus, in

the name of poverty reduction, upliftment and modernisation of backward areas, insidious, hidden agendas are being pushed which benefit only a select few.

State complicity with these agencies is also apparent in the way in which social unrest and public protests against such projects are being quelled. Military forces are being deployed in large numbers to curb civil society dissent and this is leading to ruthless violation of human rights of mountain populations which is an issue of major concern. Even though the facade of carrying out Environmental Impact Assessment Reports and surveys is maintained by these agencies, public opinion is bought and people are coerced into agreement through corrupt means. Mechanisms of maintaining public accountability and transparency are either non-existent or fashioned in a manner to suit the investors, thus leaving the local people completely ignorant of the actual social and ecological costs that these big projects will incur. At the meeting, several participants expressed the need to create more public awareness about the entry of various IFIs in particular regions. They also felt that governments should evolve systems of checks and balances whereby all vital information related to international projects could be made public so that people are in cognisance of the advantages and disadvantages that such enterprises might entail. The civil society groups could also help by collating and disseminating information on various IFI activities among people who are likely to be impacted by the entry of such projects. Cells could be formed which could prepare a simple, comprehensible note on pros and cons of such projects and try to form an informed public opinion to influence a pro people approach to such projects.

On the other hand, in very remote and destitute areas of Extreme Western Nepal, The Poverty Alleviation Fund, funded by the World Bank, was presented at the Sai Ropa meeting as being an example of a viable utilisation of the money provided by IFIs. In this programme, it is claimed that the decisions are entirely taken by the local communities on their own criteria. The REDP initiative in Nepal was also quoted as another example of a positive impact of such programmes.

Although everybody agreed upon the necessity to be extremely careful while dealing with outside funding agencies, whether big or not, and that IFIs are more often harmful than beneficial to the mountain populations, the discussions held at Sai Ropa showed that there is no real consensus inside WMPA Himalaya over the issue of the possible acceptance of funds from the IFIs, which is a very critical one and must stay on the agenda.

## Energy

### Critical Concerns

- Addressing the increasing energy demands in the mountains through alternative energy
- Judicious use of abundant natural resources in the mountains for energy generation
- Creating community participatory models of energy generation programmes
- Creating livelihoods through community-based energy programmes
- Ensuring equitable distribution of benefits through community-based energy programmes

How does one meet the energy requirements of a mountain community? There is already extreme pressure on the availability and usage of non renewable sources of energy like coal and petroleum. Given this pressure, the focus has shifted towards harnessing the potential of natural sources of energy like wind, water and solar energy. These natural sources of energy, though available in abundance need to be utilised judiciously in order to optimise the benefits that the mountain communities can derive from them. Some participants at the Sai Ropa meeting discussed a few community based initiatives and programmes that have managed to create livelihoods for communities by harnessing renewable natural sources of energy. Over usage of forest resources (like fossil fuel) to meet energy demands of mountain communities could have a long term detrimental effect on the mountain ecology. It is in this context that the need for developing renewable energy sources becomes even more important.

The use of renewable natural sources of energy ensures a pollution-free environment, and is ecologically and socially a more viable option for people across the globe and especially for the mountain communities of the Himalayas. Though the harnessing of renewable natural sources of energy may initially pose challenges in the form of high investments and specialised technological know-how, certain initiatives in the Himalayan region have demonstrated how it is possible to use accessible, low cost technology for energy generation. Programmes run by organisations in different parts of the Himalayan region such as SECMOL in Ladakh, REDP in Nepal and AVANI in Uttarakhand have created community-based energy harnessing models which have helped overcome the costs and difficulties of harnessing renewable sources of energy. These community-based programmes are sustainable in the long run and are exemplary of optimum utilisation of available sources of energy. For example, a small-scale community-centric system of power generation or a micro hydel project is any day a more viable option to generate electricity than constructing large dams or burning coal.

Most of these community-based energy harnessing programmes in the Himalayas have been carried out through community functional user groups where people from the community are first mobilised and then trained to harness such forms of energy. They are then encouraged to form a federation of their own to manage and run the programme. Through subsequent trainings, the entire management of the programme is eventually handed over to the community, which is the final goal of such an initiative. These programmes are always undertaken keeping in mind the social, economic and environmental aspects of development that is required and essential for mountain ecology. The responsibility of planning, implementation and eventual running of the programme lies with the community, though initially this responsibility is shared between the civil society organisation that initiates the programme and the community.

These community based programmes have also become sustainable models of development for mountain communities. These initiatives have facilitated other development programmes like credits and savings scheme and community-based education for the mountain communities. The entire community gets mobilised and participates in the implementation of these programmes and since people from the village are consulted and their consent is usually

sought in the running of such programmes, they become responsible to manage these programmes and hence the programmes rarely fail. The utilisation of energy has ensured an access to technology for the mountain communities and, consequently, allowed them not only to meet their basic needs, but also to diversify their income generating activities. Such Community Based programmes could also take the shape of a cooperative and this could be a profitable employment opportunity for the youth. In Uttarakhand, alternative livelihood models have been set in place through such community-based initiatives. The fact that the usage of such technologies helps in preserving the fragile biodiversity of the mountains and is the least polluting form of using energy is of course readily accepted today. One can state that the generation of rural energy through community initiatives has generated a strong social capital, the diversification of income generation activities for the communities and/or their individual members, the creation of employment opportunities as well as an optimal utilisation of natural resources amongst the mountain communities of the Himalayas.

However, there are a few critical factors that need to be looked into in the running of such community-based energy programmes. One such factor is the amount of energy actually required vis-à-vis the amount that is targeted to be produced through such initiatives. One must keep in mind that the energy which is produced through such programmes has to meet with the demands of the community but without under-utilisation or wastage of power. It is important that the energy that is produced should be put to multiple use, for example, during the day time when the household demand is not very high, the option of using this energy for other small-scale activities or industries should be explored. The financial and technical sustainability of such interventions should also be carefully calculated and analysed and it should be seen how such an investment can be made practically viable for a mountain community in the long run. The need for such projects should also be critically evaluated and they should be implemented only when a community feels it is imperative for itself to invest in harnessing renewable sources of energy to meet its power requirements. It is also important to see that there are strong regulatory processes to oversee the functioning of such projects once they are implemented, both technically and socially. Skill upgradation and training of community members who are responsible for running these energy generation programmes need to be periodically conducted. It is also extremely important for all to question the failure on the part of the government to supply basic energy needs of a community, which has led to the emergence of such community-based energy initiatives. It is the responsibility of the State to cater to the infrastructural needs of the community, but the fact that the State has not been able to do so, has led to a situation where people have taken it upon themselves to work out ways of meeting their energy requirements. Community based initiatives to harness natural sources of energy, available in abundance in the mountains, is reflective of this and numerous mountain communities living in the Himalayas have successfully managed to work out alternate viable ways of using such sources of energy through various community based programmes.

## **Livelihood**

### Critical Concerns

- Optimum and judicious use of natural resources to generate mountain livelihoods
- Creating localised, sustainable, people- centric livelihood generation programmes
- Encouraging traditional knowledge and know-how of mountain communities
- Organising and strengthening community-based cooperatives
- Community- based enterprises as suitable alternatives to check the out-migration of mountain people to the cities

Generating livelihood options for mountain communities through judicious use of natural resources is a critical issue. Mountains communities, the world over, are witnessing a large scale of out migration of people, to urban centres, in search of employment opportunities. Traditional practices like weaving, dyeing, crafts etc. that earlier served as a source of livelihood for communities, are dying a slow death. Ironically, the abundance of natural resources and traditional systems of knowledge that the mountain communities have had historically, are now being exploited by outside agencies for small, petty gains undermining the interests of local communities in the mountains.

However some significant enterprises that have emerged in the Himalayan region, based on principles of local, participatory and people centric models of livelihood generation were discussed in the Sai Ropa meeting. By encouraging traditional crafts and practices, optimising the use of natural resources without over-exploitation and by training skilled groups to organize themselves into effective, community- based cooperatives, such initiatives are trying to create sustainable and mountain friendly livelihood options for the local people. These enterprises have been employing innovative techniques of production and have used traditional practices to create diverse indigenous products ranging from natural dyed textiles in the Kumaon region of Uttarakhand to production of organic paper in Nepal. Such interventions have redefined these traditional practices as viable means of livelihood. They are not merely restricted to providing economic opportunities to the local population. They also take into account the social and cultural factors affecting the mountain communities like gender, caste prejudice and economic disparity and address these issues by adopting an inclusive and an egalitarian approach in their work practices. For instance in Nepal, where caste differences are stark, a community based organic paper industry project (located in the village of Lekhani, in Western Nepal) has managed to involve people from all castes as equal stakeholders thereby creating a strong and dynamic community management system, which has been able to use natural resources in an appropriate and judicious manner.. Similarly in Uttarakhand, AVANI (an organization working in the Kumaon region with artisans on weaving and natural dyes), has been encouraging and organising women's groups to take up cultivation of dye plants thus not only strengthening their earning capacity but also creating avenues for women members to emerge as strong social actors within their communities. Realising the importance and the necessity of creating employment opportunities for the rural youth in the mountains, such small-scale enterprises have also been training young people in various aspects of production, administration, management and marketing.

These community based enterprises emphasise the use of locally available natural materials and resources in an environment-friendly manner by using appropriate alternative technologies like solar energy and rain water harvesting. Training and skill enhancement of local communities at regular intervals, in both management and production aspects, is also an important factor. These enterprises envisage eventually handing over the control of the projects to the community and local groups are encouraged to organise themselves as registered cooperatives with a separate and distinct identity of their own.

Some civil society organizations are also working with specific workers and women groups with the objective of organising them into cooperatives which could emerge as a strong economic and political force in their respective regions. In the North Eastern region of India, tea workers cooperatives are being supported to carry out organic tea cultivation. The initiative of organising such tea cooperatives in Darjeeling (Sanyukt Vikas Cooperative) is significant in the light of the monopoly that the big tea companies enjoy in the area. Such monopoly benefits only the tea companies thereby denying any rights or benefits to the plantation workers. Workers' cooperatives like the Sanyukt Vikas Cooperative have emerged as an important entity over the years, challenging the hegemony of these powerful tea companies. Such cooperatives also ensure a high degree of control and management in the hands of the workers and are based on principles of fair trade. They also ensure equitable benefit sharing among community members irrespective of the existing caste or gender differences. The profits earned by such initiatives flow back into the community who are then able to use it for various welfare activities like building roads and schools depending on the needs of the local people.

Cooperatives have also been formed through self help groups that have emerged through micro-credit schemes in the North Eastern region of India. Women in villages are availing the facilities of low interest loans and other financial schemes to create livelihood options for themselves. In this light, women's cooperatives in the villages of East Khasi Hills, Meghalaya, serve as an inspiring example of how women's groups have been able to start successful small businesses like opening shops, poultry and piggery, using micro-credit loans. Some of these women's groups have now legally registered themselves as a cooperative and diversified into other, bigger profit making ventures.

There are many challenges and obstacles that such enterprises and initiatives are trying to counter. Community based enterprises require good local as well as outside markets, proper road connectivity to allow easy flow of goods and raw materials and stringent quality control measures. The enterprises that were discussed at the Sai Ropa meeting also expressed deep concern about the difficulties of tapping into local markets, and popularising the use and relevance of indigenous products within communities where they are produced. The production of indigenous products has to be done on a certain scale for them to meet the market requirements and compete with other similar products. The question of standardisation in production processes leading to traditional techniques becoming easily replicable, thus eroding the novelty of a community craft or practice, are also important to think about. Such enterprises also need to consciously emphasise on the judicious use of natural resources so as not to lead to over-exploitation or degradation of the mountain environment. Even though such enterprises are premised on social equality and justice and attempt to include the weaker sections of village communities, in reality reaching such equilibrium within communities remains a big challenge. In the case of Nepal, for instance, women, despite being in prominent positions in various civil society enterprises and movements, are struggling to expand the parameters of their personal empowerment and create gender parity in society. By creating livelihood options at a local level, these enterprises have managed to curb the migration of people from mountain areas to the city to a certain extent. Nevertheless, this remains a great challenge for these initiatives.

## Health & education

### Critical Concerns

- Women's reproductive health
- Female foeticide
- Inappropriate population control programmes
- Education systems unsuited for mountain communities leading to alienation
- Local and context-specific education alternatives for mountain communities

The status of health in general and the reproductive and sexual health of women in particular in the mountain state of Himachal Pradesh was discussed at length on the basis of a presentation made by a representative from Himachal Pradesh. The populist notion of Himachal Pradesh being a "model hill state" indicative of progress on all counts of development was critiqued on the basis of the status of women's health in the state.

Even though many population control programmes have been implemented in the state, the measures suggested through these programmes do not centrally take into account the question of women's health. For example, State programmes aimed at curbing the Total Fertility Rate are only directed towards population control and do not take into account the reproductive health of women. Such population control measures favouring small family sizes have led to a drop in the birth of female children in the state. Prevalent social and cultural factors like a male child bias amongst the hill community of Himachal Pradesh also leads to female foeticide, as a woman may undergo abortions till a male child is conceived. The advancement of medical technology has propagated such practices and today there is a "medico-technical assault" on women's bodies. Ironically, modern medicines and advancement of biological techniques have adversely affected women's health in the region. Consequently, children's health has also been negatively impacted leading to morbidity and a rise in malnourishment rates amongst children. Most of these factors affecting the health status of women in Himachal Pradesh go unnoticed and unacknowledged as figures indicative of development fail to highlight such anomalies. The poor health of women adversely impacts the family, community and even the economy at large as women constitute a significant work force amongst the hill communities. Issues regarding the health of women need to be thought about very seriously, as this is also linked with the well-being of future generations. The question of health, especially women's health is an extremely crucial factor in the development of mountain communities and it must be considered as one of the priority areas if one wants to speak of overall development of the hill communities, especially in the Himalayan region.

The other significant social issue which was critically evaluated and reflected upon at the meeting was the status of education amongst the mountain communities of the Himalayan region, especially in Ladakh – the remote mountain region in the North-western Himalayas. This issue was brought to the fore by a representative from Ladakh who presented an overall picture of the failure of the State sponsored education in Ladakh and the lacunae of the Government Education system. The kind of education that is practised at the moment and the modes of administering that education are distant and cut off from the lived experience of the people in Ladakh. This disconnect between the kind of education, the syllabi, the curriculum and the realities of the people living in a high mountain terrain like Ladakh leads to high failure rates amongst students and alienates the young people from their own cultural and social contexts. Extreme frustration also sets in amongst the young population which adversely impacts not only the economic productivity of the region but also leads to social malaise. To address this disjunction between the education practices of a State vis-à-vis local social realities, an alternative education system has been implemented which is closer to the

cultural character of the region and the local population. The curriculum, especially at the primary level is contextualised and localised, so that children adapt to an education system easily. It was said how such a system of education equips local people not only in terms of ensuring a degree of literacy but also helps socialise young people in tune with the social and cultural realities of the region. The use of community media forms, created and available locally were also suggested as a means to spread this message and create awareness amongst the larger population. Thus the question of contextualised education for the people of a high mountain region becomes crucial as education is directly linked to the development of human resource and once there is appropriate development of human resource, many other aspects of development could also be addressed. However, a few critical questions emerge in the propagation of such a system. First, this education experience should not remain an insulating experience as the idea of preserving a particular culture in the name of localised education could in reality be a regressive development. The question of what is a typically local cultural reality in an increasingly global world is arguable. Second, one should ask whether such a programme is able to accommodate the aspirations that such a system might create for the young people of the region. The third point to be kept in mind is how to ensure a balance between local and appropriate community-based knowledge and the demands of modern education. How can recommendations in education system be incorporated in government run schools, given the fact that they have pre-approved, state sanctioned syllabi. Thus it could be said that, in order to meet the increasing demand of human resource in a fast-changing world, human development strategies like the nature of education becomes very significant. It is important that more and more mountain people receive the right kind of education.

One should be cautious of people who have been educated outside and decide to come back to their roots (the mountains) to work amongst their own community in the mountains. Very often it could be the case that these people from the mountains who have had an education outside may be influenced by a market driven philosophy. If such people decide to come back and work in the mountains, one should be able to objectively discern that these initiatives are not driven by an outside ideology adverse to the long term interests of the mountain communities. These initiatives may end up replicating models used in the plains, such as corporate ventures which are solely geared towards making profit, which would not be suitable for the mountains. This was a significant point that was made at the meeting, a point of view which needs much critical evaluation.

## **Border trade**

### Critical Concerns

- Closure of cross-border systems of exchange for mountain communities in remote areas
- Supply of essential commodities through these systems
- Failure of the State to meet basic requirements of these communities
- Opening up of border trade for commercial purposes over-riding people's needs
- Maintaining stability of local economies through these systems

Another significant issue that was raised at the Sai Ropa meeting was the question of trade, specifically border trade amongst the hill communities living across international borders in the Himalayan region. Many communities living in China, India and other countries of the Himalayan mountain region share cultural and social affinities and have had trade links with one another in the past. But ever since international borders have become contentious issues amongst these countries, strict measures have been adopted to ensure what is termed as border security. This has subsequently led to the sealing of all economic and cultural ties amongst people living across the borders, and has adversely impacted the local economies and the social conditions of communities living in high mountainous areas of the Himalayas. This situation was emphasized through the presentation of the problems faced by the communities living in high border areas of the remote North-eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh.

Arunachal Pradesh is geographically closer to the mountains of Tibet than the rest of India. For centuries, these communities living in high border areas of this Indian state have had a steady supply of essential goods and commodities from Tibet. Systems of barter and other means of local exchange also existed, which mutually benefited people living on both sides of the border and this was the lifeline of people living in these areas. These two mountain regions are different with regard to their altitude and climate. Thus it was possible to share produce and items that did not grow in particular areas, complementing a barter of commodities based on the daily requirements of local populations across the border. But today, strict military vigilance is maintained in the border areas in order to curb entry of people or goods across the demarcated boundaries and this system of cross-border exchange has been officially closed, the repercussions of which are being borne by mountain communities on both sides.

What makes this situation grave for the people of Arunachal Pradesh than for other border populations facing the same problem are that, topographically, it is difficult to link the far-flung mountain regions of Arunachal Pradesh to the rest of India. Even though the Indian government is meant to ensure a steady supply of essential commodities through various public distribution and food security programmes, these only reach the urban or other accessible centres. Certain distant areas of the state are inevitably left out of this chain. People living in these interior areas generally do not have access to markets and it becomes very difficult for them to transport perishable goods and sell them. For such areas, their geographical proximity to border areas of Tibet could ensure the flow and exchange of essential items like oil, spices, rice and so on at affordable prices. Some representatives from Arunachal Pradesh at the Sai Ropa meeting felt that these regional, localised cross border trades should be permitted to meet the essential requirements of these mountain communities. This would also help them to create markets for their locally-grown produce, thus ensuring a means of livelihood. While the establishment of localised trade arrangements across borders are crucial to certain remote mountain areas, it is also important to ensure that the economic interests of local communities are protected. Factors such as market monopoly and competition from outside goods that could destabilise local economies need to be thought

through and specific interests of local trader groups must be considered before establishing these systems of cross-border exchange.

If one looks at the opening of the Nathula border in Sikkim in 2006, the old silk route to China, the weaknesses of trying to begin such trade arrangements become apparent. Regional border trade should keep in mind the requirements of cross-border communities so that basic essential commodities can be accessed by both populations with ease. Therefore it is important to seek consultations with people in order to determine the nature and kind of goods that such trade should allow, without adversely impacting local economies and keeping in mind their requirements. This new trade arrangement with China however overlooks these basic principles of equal and complementary exchange.

The arrangement of using Nathula as transit was done without any consultation with the people of Sikkim. Public consent was not sought and discussions around the nature of exchange or the kind of goods that would be facilitated through this trade were not held. Under this arrangement, the movement of 15 items from China and 29 from India are allowed. Rather than ensuring a trade in essential commodities, what this open border arrangement is leading to is an inflow of consumer goods from China like electronic items and shoes. These consumer items are cheaply priced thereby creating stiff competition for the Indian goods in Indian markets. Institutional checks and balances are weak and this is an issue of great concern among civil society groups in Sikkim. In the long run, this could have a negative impact on local economies. This is also being seen in Manipur, where a border town More, is the exchange point for goods between India and Burma. Particular essential commodities like rice which come from Burma are sold at a much cheaper rate than existing rice prices in Manipur. This is having a severe impact on the farming community in Manipur.

The opening up of border trade for people living in high mountain regions of the Himalayas is crucial. This is important not only meet the demands of daily living but also from the point of view of stabilising local economies and creating market opportunities and choices for mountain people in these remote areas.

## **Indigenous people & traditional institutions**

### Critical Concerns

- Preserving the identity of mountain communities
- How to recognise and ensure rights of indigenous people
- Indigenous people's rights over their territory and sovereignty
- Applicability of international laws and convention protecting the rights of indigenous people at the grassroots level
- Non recognition of the word "indigenous" in the Indian Constitution
- Conflict between the working of traditional institutions and the State
- Schisms within traditional institutions

One of the key concerns of mountain communities, cutting across cultures, is the question of preserving their identity in terms of "being from the mountains." This has become a challenge today given the onslaught of globalisation and concurrent pressures of modernity. A substantial percentage of people inhabiting the mountains across the world are indigenous communities who still largely subscribe to laws, cultures and ways of life as prescribed by the norms of their society. These communities still have their traditional institutions, through which they govern their existence and ways of being in the mountains. Maintaining this indigenous status is increasingly becoming very difficult for the people of the mountains as almost all these communities are subject to laws of the land as citizens of a State. Alternatively they may not have a right to any privileges of being a citizen as their status, as defined by the Constitution of the State, could be ambiguous. Few States may have enacted provisions through which these communities have been granted privileges and a certain amount of autonomy to manage their territories and societies. However these may not always be enough as these privileges of autonomy often come in conflict with the rule of law as enshrined in the Constitution of a State. The question of preserving the rights of these indigenous groups becomes significant in the light of indiscriminate exploitation of mountain territories by State and outside agencies. Such measures impinge on the very survival of these indigenous groups, hence the relevance of international conventions and laws protecting the interests of these vulnerable groups, especially in the mountains.

In the backdrop of this debate, WMPA was keen to play the role of representing the concerns and issues of the indigenous people of the mountains, especially in the Himalayas. The question of who are the "indigenous" people of the mountains and what rights do they have and how can they be recognised as indigenous were issues that was presented at the meeting. International laws and policies which are designed to protect the rights of indigenous people as contained within certain international laws and conventions were discussed and presented. A representative from the International Labour Organisation (ILO) spoke about the ILO Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Populations, 1957 (No.107).

Under this convention, indigenous people have the right to determine their own development priorities, their autonomy practices and their livelihoods. These conventions act as a check and balance mechanism on Governments of various States to see that rights of the indigenous people are not violated. Most Governments are signatories of these laws and conventions and this makes them accountable to the international community. However, an important point to be considered is the distance that exists between international laws and people at the grassroots level. This happens primarily because the enforcement of these laws is very weak

In the Indian context, there is no legal recognition of "indigenous people" even though India is a signatory to the above mentioned convention. Such an anomaly exists, because there is no mention of the word "indigenous" in the Indian Constitution. India has about 4300 odd community groups defined as "tribal groups." The problem arises out of this nomenclature. If

these groups have already been defined as “tribal groups,” what would then be the legal status of these groups as “indigenous” groups? Thus even though, indigenous people in India can use any of the statutes of the convention to seek their rights, the Indian State cannot be held responsible for not meeting their demands. The Government’s interpretation of the word “indigenous” is crucial as it consequently decides if the Government is bound by the treaty or not. Seen in the context of India, the status and privileges of indigenous people, as defined by the convention, could apply to the entire Scheduled Tribe population while in the context of Nepal indigenous groups are already legally recognised as being indigenous. There are 59 janjati groups in Nepal who have been legally recognised since 2002.

Thus what is required is a sensitisation on the issues and rights of indigenous people. Training programmes should be conducted to build the capacities of the Government and non indigenous people so that there is no gross rights violation of the indigenous communities of the mountains. There is a need to be aware of the international frameworks that are available, so that mountain people could take advantage of these conventions. These could provide support for communities who are trying to empower themselves by making the best use of their resources. This was identified as a challenge that could be taken up by WMPA in some form or the other – to secure the rights of the indigenous mountain communities of the Himalayas.

While discussing the question of rights and status of the indigenous mountain population of the world, it also becomes imperative to examine certain existing traditional institutions that have successfully functioned and ensured the management of rights and issues of an indigenous community. A representative from Meghalaya spoke about the Traditional Khasi Institution of local governance locally referred to as the Dorbar and another representative from Nepal spoke about the status of the indigenous groups in Nepal and specifically about the different types of indigenous institutions that exist in the mountain areas of Nepal.

The issues that came up for consideration through the presentations are the following:

- Whenever, we talk of traditional institutions of local indigenous groups, one must be able to critically analyse the actual role of such institutions. The question of whether caste or class affiliations inflect the governance and justice systems of such institutions is an important point to think about in looking at the functioning of such traditional institutions. It was pointed out that in the case of Arunachal Pradesh there have been problems since the introduction of the Panchayati Raj Institutions in the state. Though local institutions were always effective in Arunachal Pradesh, the introduction of Panchayati Raj Institutions has created problems as now authority exists at many levels.

- Given that most land in Meghalaya is either ancestral land or is owned by the community, the extent of land alienation amongst farmers in Meghalaya and large scale deforestation and privatisation of community land is in itself contradictory. This is actually reflective of the loopholes that exist in traditional institutions today, where one section of the community is privileged over another. The general practice in Meghalaya is that the cultivation of community land by an individual for three years at a stretch entitles him to ownership of that land. Generally people have been registering this ownership of land and subsequently selling off their land. Deforestation has also been a consequence of this practice. Another reason is a dictate of the same institution which says that people from particular clans or villages generally cannot purchase land in other villages.

- Another critical issue is the role that the chief/head of the traditional institution plays in the decision making affairs of the institution. There might be a scope of politics and subsequent favouritism of certain people versus others. This also needs to be thought of and looked into critically. And the question of who earns royalty from State owned Forests are questions which need critical reflection.

•While speaking of the indigenous communities of Nepal, a representative from Nepal emphasised the need to classify the people from the mountainous regions of Nepal as indigenous and not to include all the tribes from the Terai region and other hilly tracts of Nepal. The different types of indigenous institutions that exist in the mountain areas of Nepal are very significant and one should critically understand these institutions and look at the present crisis of such institutions. However while it is absolutely imperative to recognise the rights of these indigenous groups, one should be careful in organising indigenous people's groups on the basis of their primordial affiliations. This could lead to communal disharmony rather than recognising rights of diverse sets of people. This has been seen in Sikkim, where numerous indigenous groups associations have organised themselves on the basis of primordial identities leading to communal disharmony rather than a recognition of their special status and rights. Even in Nepal numerous segregated groups have emerged, seeking privileges and rights from the State. However, the struggle is to work out a single National identity for the indigenous groups of Nepal and ensure land rights and secure other citizenship benefits and privileges that all Nepalese citizens are generally entitled to.