

BRIEF OVERVIEW
OF THE WMPA'S HIMALAYAN REGIONAL MEETING
SAI ROPA HIMACHAL PRADESH 11TH-15TH OCTOBER 2006

The Himalayan Regional meeting of World Mountain People's Association (WMPA) was held at Sai Ropa, Himachal Pradesh from 11th to the 15th of October 2006.

The Himalayan chapter of the WMPA came into being with the first Regional Meeting held at Yuksam (Sikkim) in 2002. The very idea of organizing WMPA into region specific chapters was to be able to look at pan regional yet context specific issues so that one could see the points of convergence, similarity as well as distinctions between the different chapters as well as within the same region. In the light of this larger objective, the Himalayan Regional meeting was organized to highlight questions of socio-economic, political status as well as territorial management and rights of mountain people living in the Himalayas.

This Regional Meeting garnered strong representation from the **Himalayan region of Nepal and India spanning from Ladakh, North Western and Eastern Himalayas and the hill tracts of North East India**. 119 participants from the above regions were able to lend support to the meeting, through their presence. The varied profile of individual participants ranging from community representatives, NGO workers, activists and intellectuals contributed to the emergence of a pan Himalayan dialogue, which in itself is a unique feat.

The agenda of the regional meeting was conceptualised to address issues of:

1. **Natural Resource Management**- in order to throw light 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.
2. **To be able to identify and analyse intrinsic and seemingly extraneous pressures that impact lives of mountain people living in the Himalayas**- such as issues of out-migration, income generation, ecological sustainability, social inequalities, grappling with larger global pressures of national and international policies, multinational corporations and other international agencies which seem to pose a threat to the autonomy and local authority of indigenous mountain communities
3. **To understand and share traditional practices of mountain people which could be exemplary for others** –both technically and socially– and could be emulated in different contexts – for example use of natural dyes, forest produce, small craft practices, NTFP and so on. The intent of such an agenda was to know what is being practiced and learn who are the traditional actors (women, community and tribal organizations or social movements) responsible for the success and sustainability of these practices.

The meeting generated involved passionate discussions around certain concerns of the mountain people as the speakers presented an area/issue specific perspective culled out of their engagement with the local communities they work with. In order to arrive at a comprehensive work strategy for future action and advocacy, the meeting sought the formulation of five working groups, from within the representatives, to debate over the role WMPA could potentially acquire as a collective forum in the future. Thematically, the working groups discussed the following.

The question of internal structure, organization and functioning of WMPA. This group was formulated to chalk out a working forum of WMPA in the Himalayas and to see what kind of a structure this body would have and how this body would function to arrive at a practical and active Himalayan regional centre of WMPA in India and Nepal.

The issue of representation of the main functionaries of WMPA within this regional centre and how this representation could be sought with collective consensus and agreement. The group also debated over how to elect or nominate appropriate state/area specific community representatives so that pertinent issues and concerns of those communities are highlighted and do not remain peripheral or get subsumed by the predominant pan issues of the Himalayan region at large. For instance, within India regions of the North East, and within the North East, areas such as Sikkim and Darjeeling, might not be able to find affinities with the other states because of varying socio-political structuring, and hence the need to seek a separate and focussed representation from a varied and generic canvas of mountain people, was discussed at length.

To arrive at a collective action plan, the pressing issues of the mountain people were arrived at through intensive group discussions. Primary issues of health, education, caste, employment, natural resource management, right to information to larger concerns of politics of external/internal aid and protection and creation of sustainable livelihood practices in the mountain areas, were put on the table.

The issue of raising and generating funds for the Himalayan WMPA within India and Nepal were also taken up by one of the working group. It was felt by the participants that the question of sustainability and autonomy with respect to the implementation agenda of the regional WMPA must be given importance. Thus, at all stages, the forum must remain independent of any conditions that assisting funding agencies might wish to impose or co-opt. In order to do this, it was felt that WMPA should eventually work towards local fund generation, with the ultimate objective of involving community participation in the process as well.

The pressures that International Financial Institutions exert on the mountain communities through the funding of infrastructural and other development projects were also taken up as a topic to be debated over by one working group. The role of these IFI's were discussed in the light of how they pose a threat to the environment, community rights of control and management of resources, the apathetic nature of central and state governance, the abject vulnerability of communities being targeted and the impact of such neo-colonial politics on not just the mountains, but also the rest of the country.

In retrospect it would not be too presumptuous to say that the Sai Ropa meeting tried to and did manage to throw light on the constraints and pressures of contemporary Himalayas through the sharing and exchange of people living in these mountains as the meeting had community representatives and civil society members working in these parts for many years. The meeting also managed to critically analyse public policies of aid and how that hampers and threatens traditional lifestyles, the environment and the systems of governance in the mountain areas. Few interesting case studies of appropriate management of natural resource by the community and producer groups, systems of context specific educational models that have worked were also shared which helped one reflect and introspect on the relevance and functioning of state as well local institutions of governance.

The philosophy of WMPA initiating such a dialogue between members of the Himalayan communities as well as with all mountain people across the world is to be able to strive towards creating small yet worthwhile regional centres of cooperation and exchange which could facilitate development of regional products with local control and ensure that local communities are able to choose and decide for themselves without the constricting global pressures of a market driven economy. Furthermore, these centres would be a concrete place where to work out possible means of organizing and representing the Himalayan population so that they also manage to chart out their own suitable course of development and action.

The WMPA charter already states that Regional Centres of Co-operation and Exchange for the Himalayas will be worked out for two objectives:

1. To reinforce the technical abilities and innovative capacities of the producers (preservation and dissemination of traditional knowledge systems in production processes, support to the activities of research and development, training of the producers, information and exchange about dye materials)
2. To work out an institutional framework that would represent local organisations and communities to the local, national and international public institutions and funding agencies (proposals of adapted rules and regulations, definition of invitations to tender, harmonisation of the actions and pleas for a local governance)

The testimonies, debates and proposals resulting from the presentations and experiences of this regional meeting would be consolidated and systematised so that the same could be presented at the General meeting of WMPA. WMPA intends to push forth these proposals as recommendations to the states and governments of mountain communities through the international ministerial Conference that is slated to be held at Chamonix in France in the coming year in order to influence policy and design programs suited to the local contexts of varied mountain communities across the world.

