Traditional Ecological Knowledge of Mountain People
Foundation for Sustainable Development in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan Region

Editors
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Vir Singh

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“As a major ecosystem representing the complex and interrelated ecology of our planet, mountain environments are essential to the survival of global ecosystem…... The proper management of mountain resources and socioeconomic development of the people deserve immediate attention…”

Agenda 21, Chapter 13

To

The mountain farming communities

whose traditional wisdom, innovativeness, holistic world-view and vision enlighten the path to heal the Planet Earth
Knowledge is power. But mere knowledge is not power; it is only possibility. Action is power; and its highest manifestation is when it is directed by knowledge.

☆ Francis Bacon

Mountains are the islands in the sky. Their ecological contributions to the whole biosphere are life-sustaining and life-enhancing. Had there been no mountains on Earth, there would have been no river systems; and story of life, if it existed at all, would have been quite prosaic. Mountains have imparted new meaning to life; have contributed to the aesthetics of our planet, to the beauty of our cosmos. The Hindu Kush-Himalayan (HKH) Mountains constitute one of the most robust ecosystems of the planet Earth. Many of the environmental crises the planet earth is in the grip of are attributable to the very state of ‘ecological coup’ the HKH Region appears to be at the verge of. The HKH Region performs crucial ecosystem functions which are phenomenal for the whole globe. Any deterioration leading to retrogressive or disclimax state of the environment of the highest, the most fragile and the most sensitive mountain ecosystems of the Earth is naturally bound to phenomenally affect the global environment and, eventually, the biosphere.
A habitat bears its uniqueness owing to natural processes. When it is occupied by a human community, its uniqueness is also attributable to the human dimensions. Human species—the *Homo sapiens*—owing to its highly evolved anatomical, morphological and intellectual capabilities has brought about phenomenal changes on the planet Earth. The changes are conspicuously becoming catastrophic not only to the whole life but to the human race as well. Ushering in a state of catastrophic trend, however, is a recent phenomenon. It is largely attributable to the processes triggered by the conventional development paradigm in which nature and its functional units—the ecosystems—are regarded merely a commodity, means of economic growth and worth to be trampled upon. The current development paradigm, in essence, is life-diminishing and life-annihilating. The much talked about global warming and ominous climate changes are an evidence of the same.

Rapidly on-going liberation, privatisation and globalisation (LPG) processes have structured a new development paradigm. Regional specificities and specific ecological niches are being increasingly exploited and nature’s natural elements are being rampantly converted into commodities. Everything that comes or ought to come in our way is price-tagged. Marginal communities such as those inhabiting HKH Mountains, under such circumstances, are bound to be further marginalised. The traditional knowledge systems they have evolved over millennia will prove to be a straw in the wind.

The traditional knowledge systems nevertheless have been potent tools of the marginal mountain communities. These would help local people, as they have been doing for centuries, to heal and regenerate their natural resource bases, revamp their livelihoods built around specific natural resources and respond to the LPG processes.

There is no alternative to the traditional ecological knowledge and systems based on that. Dr. NS Jodha, one of the most celebrated mountain scholars currently with the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) based in Kathmandu, Nepal, in one of his works in the beginning of 1990s, revealed the fact that negative indicators or unsustainability indicators in mountain agriculture intensified in proportion to the institutional development intervention. This further unfolds the significance of
the traditional knowledge of mountain farmers, which is evidently much better and promising than the one pushed by public sector institutions. Haplessly, the traditional knowledge of the mountain communities has been grossly neglected. It has rather been labelled as a symbol of backwardness, unscientific and a remnant of the past. Development intervention initiated by external institutions has contributed to the irreversible erosion of community-based institutions and their knowledge systems.

Despite immeasurable loss to the traditional ecological knowledge, the systems built on the foundation of this knowledge excel over those being structured around LPG processes. The traditional knowledge is rooted into ecosystem realities, is enveloped in an eco-philosophy, holds reverential attitude towards nature and nature’s components, and embraces a world view of its own. Evolved by local people over millennia through trial and error, the traditional knowledge is futuristic. It is dynamic, not static. It is compassionate and caring. It is transcendental and evolves continuously and unceasingly in tune with time and space.

This volume is an effort to look into the pristine and also somewhat forgotten traditional knowledge systems in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan Region. Should the various articles collated in the volume contribute to check the erosion of people’s traditional ecological knowledge and further help restore and promote the systems based on this knowledge, the major objective of this work would be fulfilled. We would very much like to appreciate the contributors of the articles who have tirelessly worked with mountain people in remote areas and have tapped very crucial information for the contemporary world. Traditional knowledge should be regarded as a heritage of a community. Its protection, recognition and promotion should be an inherent element of a policy and development intervention in an ecozone.

Hats off to the marginal HKH communities who are exceptionally rich in their traditional systems and ecological wisdom and who have kept their traditions alive to date! Deriving inspiration from the past helps us ushering in a safe and sustainable future, a future that would blossom with vibrant humanity in harmony with biosphere. We hope the book we have edited would be helpful for the mountain scholars, policy makers, discipline professionals and mountain communities to delve into ecosystem realities and work
accordingly. We owe moral responsibility to cherish the values our past generations have conferred on us. It is also our pleasant duty that we enrich these values with inter-generational experiences and with new tastes of innovativeness and pass them on to the next generations.

Neelendra K. Joshi
Vir Singh
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Chapter 1

Traditional Knowledge Systems of Mountain Communities: Issues in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan Region

Nani Ram Subeti

Background

Traditional knowledge of mountain people refers to innovations and practices of local communities living in different corners of the world. Human wisdom is efficient to cope with survival strategies based on physical and mental contexts of their living. People gain experiences from daily practice of their survival strategies over the centuries. These experiences have automatically been converted into a knowledge system later on and adapted in the local culture. The traditional knowledge is transmitted orally from generation to generation by the means of stories, songs, folklore, proverbs, cultural values, beliefs, rituals, community laws, local language, and agricultural practices. Evolution process of the traditional knowledge starts from practical experiences where as modern knowledge starts from creation of a theory. Therefore, traditional knowledge has been developed from practice but not from a theory (Subedi, 2001).

Mountain communities are very rich in traditional knowledge systems. While different systems of Hindu Kush-Himalayan