

4. Traditional Coping Strategies

The traditional measures for handling the biophysical and related constraints and harnessing the opportunities in mountains, although neither highly productive nor very effective in today's context, were able to support a sustainable lifestyle in the circumstances of low population pressure on mountain resources. The potentially poverty-promoting conditions, such as availability of limited and low productivity and low payoff-options, were met by focussing on subsistence-oriented but stable agriculture and option maximisation through diversified, interlinked land-based activities (crop, livestock, forestry, etc), a high degree of resource/product recycling, and collective sharing. The constraints imposed by the low-carrying capacity of resources (reflected through unsuitability of land-intensive practices and the low physical and economic input absorption capacities of land) were managed through resource upgrading (e.g., terracing), dependance on low-cost locally available and locally-regenerated resources, and complementary use of land-intensive and land-extensive practices. Detailed evidence of these aspects has been collected by different scholars (Jochim 1981, Hewitt 1988, Guillet 1983, Jodha 1992, and Allan et al. 1988).

However, the subsistence orientations of agriculture and related activities did not produce sufficient surplus for reinvestment or for infrastructural development. This induced the people to focus mainly on primary sector activities with very limited secondary (processing) and tertiary sector (trading) activities. This, in turn (partly due to the lack of physical and market linkages), resulted in the system becoming a semi-closed economy with limited 'niche'-based petty trading and external linkages; mainly through migration and transhuman, which did not need a high level of communication infrastructure. Under these need-based external linkages (without infrastructural support), mountain communities usually suffered unfavourable terms of exchange. In the absence of requisite levels of investment, relevant technologies, and infrastructure, mountain 'niche' were rarely harnessed on large, commercial scales, except, say, for the auctioning of timber by feudal rulers for revenue (Jochim 1981 and Guha 1989).

From the 'poverty' perspective in the context of subsistence economy, mountain communities in the past seemed to have sustained themselves (and growth in many cases) despite all of the abovementioned constraints. Besides supply-oriented measures (e.g., diversified, resource-regenerative practices, recycling) institutional means for managing pressure on the resources (e.g., regulation of the intensity of resource-use, collective sharing) were the important factors behind the sustainable survival of the people (Sharma and Partap 1993). Thus, based more on circumstantial inferences than on hard quantitative data, one could suggest that poverty was not a key feature of traditional mountain communities.

However, most of the above mechanisms facilitating sustainable survival (or the absence of stark poverty) in the past involved a high degree of diversification, land-extensive production practices, and greater social discipline for resource-use regulation, collective risk-sharing, etc. These practices are less feasible in the context of today's changed demographic and institutional environment (Jodha 1991). Moreover, through their side effects, both market and State interventions, in their respective ways, have not only added to the demand pressure on mountain resources but have also marginalised the folk technologies and the role

of community sanctions regarding resource use. The net result is the unsustainability of past survival systems and the accentuation of poverty conditions in mountain areas (Jodha 1991).