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THE CREATIVE MOUNTAIN ECONOMY

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The Indian Himalayan Region (IHR)

The Indian Himalayan Region (IHR) consists of 11 Indian Himalayan states with the hill district of Darjeeling and Kalimpong, which comprises of almost 40 % of the Indian Union. The Indian Himalayan Region (IHR) and its ecosystems are of critical global significance. 76 percent of India's hill districts fall within the IHR States.

The entire geographical area of these states is mountainous, and the average forest cover is 65 percent. This region is inhabited by a large population of over 65.57 million constituting more than 172 of total 573 Scheduled Tribes of India who depend on agriculture and its allied services as their primary sources of livelihood. Agriculture, for the mountain communities is not just a means of livelihood but rather a way of life where a number of cultural practices revolve around it.

80% of the states in the IHR shares international borders through various important trade passes with the worlds largest economy China and South East Asia.

The Creative Mountain Economy in the Indian Himalayan Region- Post Covid

"We are not growing at par with the economies of the other states in India."- Kiren Rijju, Union Minister, Home Affairs, Government of India at the first North East Investors' Meet, January 2017

With the present economic slowdown and uncertainty due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, we are on the brink of a another Industrial Revolution where creative industries and localised economy will play a key role is India being self sufficient and self reliant. These creative industries and activities particularly in the mountainous states of the Indian Himalayas can infuse human centred development, fuel job creation, innovation and trade while at the same time promoting social inclusion, cultural diversity and environmental sustainability.

One of the viable, feasible and desirable sectors to propel the creative economy in the mountains is the handmade sector. The potential of transforming geographically and culturally rooted crafts skills in Sikkim into an appropriate creative industry can generate employment for thousands in the rural sector. 60% of household handlooms in the country is based in the NER. Every 4th household in the NER has some handloom activity in the country.

Unfortunately, this journey and the rich database of handmade- the handicrafts, handlooms and the master crafts-persons contributions has not been documented and recorded so far. Since most of the master crafts-persons are no more there and some are old, most of the traditional knowledge are disappearing and needs to be urgently documented.

Craft products today in India particularly in Sikkim have to compete with the technologically and economically evolved productions hubs like China and a well planned research strategy and facility is urgently required to be ahead of the competition.

Besides the crafts potential in states like Jammu and Kashmir all the way to the state of Tripura, we also share similar problems in most of the schemes of the central government.

The problems also are one of the key factors why most of the mountain community had to resort to creative ways of problem. Covering an area of 25 per cent of earth's land surface, mountains and hills play a vital role in providing resources and ecosystem services. Mountains provide 60-80 per cent of freshwater amongst other essential ecosystem services while holding over one-tenth of the world's population.

Mountains are also an outstanding region, hosting a quarter of terrestrial biodiversity and nearly half of the world's biodiversity hotspots. Impact and actions in the mountains would directly affect nearly 1.2 billion people living downstream, and indirectly 3 billion people are affected as they depend on the mountains for essential resources such as food and energy.

Besides the COVID pandemic situation, the world is already facing adverse impacts of climate change, a shrinking resource base and growing populations, mountains have invited a renewed attention towards them. As an extremely fragile area, early indicators of climate change are evidenced in the mountains as is visible in receding glaciers, loss of snow cover, diminishing resources, and increasing frequency of natural disasters making mountain populations and their livelihood conditions extremely vulnerable. On the other hand, globalisation, economic growth, a growing population, changes in lifestyle and the demands associated with it are increasing the stress on the sensitive mountain ecosystems.

With far reaching impacts, safeguarding mountain ecosystems, developing resilience in mountain areas and ensuring appropriate management strategies cannot be overstated. In India, 10 mountain, 2 Union Territories and hill states constitute almost 20.3 per cent of the total land mass of the country. As per the Provisional Census Totals (Census of India, 2011) approximately 4 per cent of the Indian population live in the mountain states of Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Union Territories of Jammu & Kashmir, Ladakh and the hill districts of Assam, Tripura and West Bengal. Each of these regions is also home to a rich diversity of people, cultures and biodiversity and holds essential resources to sustain populations living downstream from them.

Growing unemployment among youth in the mountains also indicates the failure to utilise the talent pool for development of mountain regions. The problems of livelihood are further accentuated with the inadequate economic recognition given to traditional systems that have sustained communities in the mountains through generations. As such, building and retaining capacity and skills within local mountain communities and more importantly creating security for these skills assumes immense importance to combat the growing challenges post COVID-19.

The Creative Mountain Economy is a model proposed by Echostream, a design initiative based in the Indian Himalayan state of Sikkim, to integrate the aspirations of the communities living in a fragile ecosystem with various manifestations of development and values proposed by the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

This paper investigates into those values and those qualities that the mountain communities hold important to a life set by responsibilities as custodians of the Himalayas to unlimited imaginations of a curious mind.