SHARED FUTURES CONCLAVE

GANGTOK
4-5 DEC 2025

DIALOGUE ACROSS RESEARCH, POLICY, AND PRACTICE IN THE SIKKIM-DARJEELING HIMALAYA

CONCLAVE BOOKLET

Reading Himalaya Research & Policy

SHIV NADAR INSTITUTION OF EMINENCE DEEMED TO BE UNIVERSITY DELHI NCR

CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE FOR HIMALAYAN STUDIES

DG Reading Room Resource and Education Foundation

SIKKIM UNIVERSITY

Concept Note

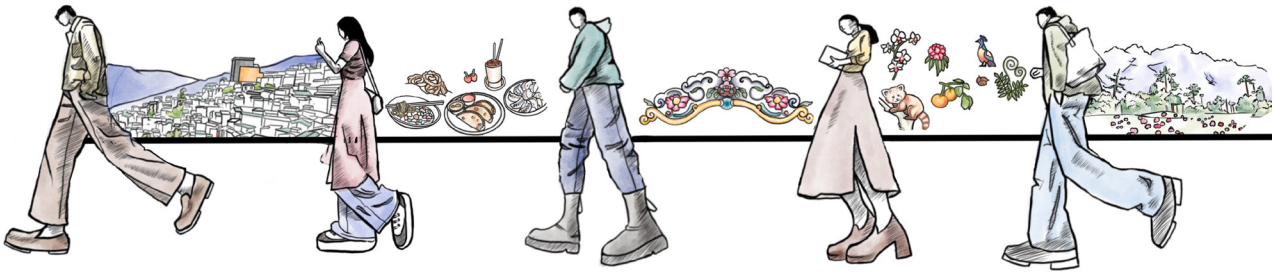
The Sikkim-Darjeeling Himalaya is a region defined by its unique cultural and political history, distinctive geography, environmental challenges, and complex socio-economic dynamics. Despite the richness of its knowledge and experience, researchers, practitioners, government institutions, communities, and policymakers often operate in separate networks, with limited opportunities for meaningful collaboration or sustained dialogue across sectors. There is a pressing need for an inclusive and grounded platform where diverse actors—including community members, researchers, policymakers, media, and youth—can engage in critical and solution-oriented conversations.

The Shared Futures Conclave seeks to bridge these gaps by fostering cross-sectoral engagement across research, policy, and governance. It aims to create an immersive space to explore urgent regional themes, including climate change, environmental and ecological challenges, urbanisation, migration, and youth aspirations. The event will also provide opportunities for local voices to shape regional narratives and policy, while supporting networks and collaborations among emerging research scholars.

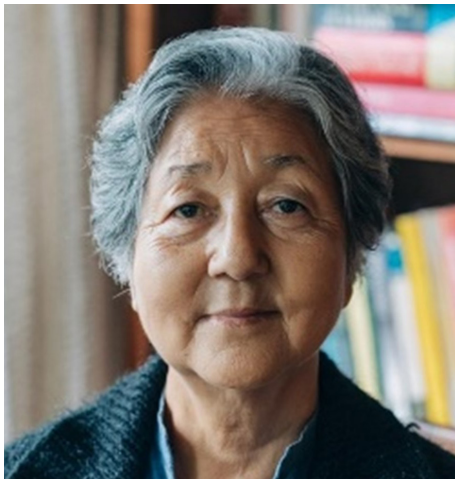
The Conclave will feature three immersive workshops, a photo and art exhibition, and displays of literature and crafts from the region.

The Shared Futures Conclave is a collaborative effort, jointly organised by:

1. Reading Himalaya: Research and Policy
2. Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Shiv Nadar University, Delhi NCR
3. Geography Department, Sikkim University



FOREWORDS



Prava Rai
Founding Director
Dumigaon Reading Room Resource and Education Foundation (DGRRREF)

The "Shared Futures Conclave" is a commendable initiative led by the Reading Himalaya Team with the support of Shiv Nadar University. The Conclave brings together diverse perspectives on the critical issues that beset our region. The urgency cannot be ignored any longer. This coming together to brainstorm and share and look for solutions to the growing problems that threaten our environment, livelihoods, culture and economy is the way to go. To bring researchers, academics, practitioners, media persons on a platform of this kind is unique and we must all make the most of this opportunity to share and work towards ways to mitigate our region's existential problems.

Professor Rajat Kathuria
Dean, School of Humanities and Social Sciences
Professor, Department of Economics
Shiv Nadar University, Delhi-NCR

The Shared Futures Conclave brings together diverse actors committed to shaping a more inclusive and resilient future for the eastern Himalayas. The Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies at SHSS is profoundly pleased to support this critical endeavor of fostering collaboration between policymakers, researchers, community representatives, and emerging scholars. The Centre aims to strengthen knowledge exchange and encourage innovative responses to regional challenges. Our commitment to a resilient future demands that we actively address one of the most pressing needs of our time-gender parity. This is not merely a matter of social justice, but an imperative for generating effective, sustainable, and equitable solutions. The Centre's involvement in this initiative reflects its commitment to advancing research on the Himalayas and researchers from the Himalayas amidst the local, regional, and global churn. We recognize that the challenges facing the Himalayan region—from climate change vulnerability and resource scarcity to infrastructure development—are fundamentally intertwined with issues of inclusion and representation. I warmly welcome all participants—policymakers, researchers, community representatives, and emerging scholars—and look forward to the conversations and collaborations that this Conclave will generate.

FOREWORDS

Sohel Firdos, PhD
Professor and Head
Department of Geography
School of Human Sciences
SIKKIM UNIVERSITY

The Sikkim - Darjeeling Himalaya is considered as one of the richest biodiversity zones and possesses vast stores of clean and renewable energy, perennial rivers and high rainfall. Much of the water comes from glaciers, but they are melting at alarming rates due to climate change triggered by global warming. The adversarial impacts of such processes have resulted in Glacial Lake Outburst Flood (GLOF) leading to loss of life, property and infrastructure in recent times. There are also concerns about the possible impacts of climate change on agriculture and other commercial activities of the region, which is critical for livelihood and economic security of the people. The region's vulnerability and resilience to climate change can be affected by factors such as infrastructure, limited agricultural production, water supply and health. However, one of the major strengths of this region is the traditional knowledge, built on diversity and innovation of the local communities which needs to be supported to build resilience and coping strategies. Given this backdrop, Shared Futures Conclave 2025, organised by Reading Himalaya, is going to be a promising event by pulling together diverse conversational formats such as roundtables, workshops, photo exhibition, short film exhibition and stalls. The event is inclusive both in content and participation, considering that academics, civil society, government organisations, film makers and exhibiters will be on the same platform, sharing thoughts and charting future course of action for the betterment of environment and society in the region. The Department of Geography, Sikkim University is delighted to be on board for this exemplary groundbreaking initiative!

PROGRAMME

DAY O (Dec 3, 2025) [1 pm - 4 pm]	
Workshop #1	
The promise of mental health care and support in the Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalaya.	1 pm – 4 pm
DAY 1 (Dec 4, 2025) [8:30 am - 5 pm]	
Registration	8:30 am onwards
Welcome and Introduction • Welcome and Introduction to the Conclave by Reading Himalaya • Address by Dr. Rajat Kathuria, Dean, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Shiv Nadar University • Introduction to the Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies, Shiv Nadar University by Dr. Devendra Kumar • Welcome address by Dr. Sohel Firdos, Head of Department, Geography Department, Sikkim University	9:30 am - 9:50 am
Key-note address **Dr. Smriti Basnett**, Senior Consultant, Sikkim Commission on Glacial Hazard Department of Science and Technology, Government of Sikkim	10:00 am-10:30 am
Break	10:30 am – 10:45 am
Panel 1 **Too little, too late?** **Climate, Environment & Disasters** **Panellists:** • **Mr. Tashi Chopel Lepcha** (Government of Sikkim) • **Dr. Avantika Thapa** (Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and Environment) • **Dr. Lakpa Tamang** (Calcutta University) • **Ms. Abriti Moktan** (Pennsylvania State University) **Discussant: Dr. Mona Chettri** (Reading Himalaya)	10:45 am –12:15 pm
Group Photo **Lunch**	12:15 pm – 1:15 pm
Workshop #2 **The waste crisis in the Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalaya** Facilitated by **Priyadarshinee Shrestha**, Zero Waste Himalaya and Roshan Rai, DLR Prerna	1:15 pm – 3:15 pm
Break	3:15 pm - 3:30 pm
Panel 2 **Development or Disaster?** **Tourism, Urbanisation & Infrastructure** **Panellists** • **Mr. Niranjan Kapil** (Urban Development Department, Government of Sikkim) • **Professor Shrawan Acharya** (Jawaharlal Nehru University) • **Ms. Priyadarshinee Shrestha** (Zero Waste Himalaya) • **Mr. Dawa Sangpo** (Yambong Ecotourism Committee and Sanctuary Asia Mud on Boots Project) **Discussant: Dr. Debolina Kundu** (National Institute of Urban Affairs)	3:30 pm - 5:00 pm

PROGRAMME

DAY 2 [9:00 am to 5:15 pm]	
Roundtable: Tipping Point Himalaya **Panellists** ● **Dr. Debolina Kundu** (National Institute of Urban Affairs) ● **Dr. Rinan Shah** (Shiv Nadar University/Reading Himalaya) ● **Dr. Sangay Lachenpa** (Sikkim University/Shiv Nadar University) ● **Prof. Sohel Firdos** (Sikkim University) ● **Dr. Sunita Pradhan** (Ashoka Trust for Research in Environment and Ecology) **Discussant: Dr. Teiborlang Kharsyntiew** (Jawaharlal Nehru University)	9:00 am – 10:30 am
Break	10:30 am – 10:45 am
Panel 3: Hope vs Hustle **Youth Aspirations & Challenges** **Panellists:** ● **Mr. Abhilash Kumai** (Eastern Himalayan Foundation) ● **Dr. Nancy Lhasungpa** (Nar Bahadur Bhandari Government College, Gangtok) ● **Ms. Aparajita Rai (IPS)** (Superintendent of Police, Kalimpong) ● **Ms.Timsong Lepcha** (Reading Himalaya) **Discussant: Dr. Binayak Sundas** (Centre for Himalayan Studies, North Bengal University)	10:45 am- 12:00 pm
Group Photo	
Lunch	12:00 pm – 12:40 pm
Workshop #3 **Crafting Representation** Workshop facilitated by **Dishant Pradhan**, FLAME University and Dr. Nirvan Pradhan (Narasinha Dutt College, University of Calcutta)	12:40 pm – 2:40 pm
Break	2:40 pm – 2:55 pm
Panel 4: What gets told **Media, Memories & Representation** **Panellists** ● **Dr. Anisa Bhutia**, Indian Institute of Management- Kozhikode ● **Ms. Jenisha Singh** (University of Kalyani) ● **Ms. Nangsel Sherpa** (The Pomelo Collective/KREA University) ● **Mr. Nirmal Manger** (Journalist, The Sikkim Chronicles) **Discussant: Mr. Pema Wangchuk**, Summit Times	3:00 pm – 4:45 pm
Break	4:45 – 5:00 pm
Closing Remarks and Thanks	5:00 pm – 5:15 pm

Panel 1: Too little, too late?

Environment, Climate & Disasters

The Eastern Himalaya faces growing pressures from climate change, fragile ecosystems, and recurring natural disasters. Floods, landslides, and shifting weather patterns are already reshaping lives, livelihoods, and infrastructure—demanding urgent and coordinated responses. Communities are urged to "adapt", yet institutional and public adaptations to these challenges often tend to be short-term, temporary, and ad hoc — overlooking the experiences of those most vulnerable to environmental risks, both human and non-human.

The deeper questions remain unsolved: How can we balance ecological fragility with development pressures? Whose knowledge and priorities shape climate responses — scientific models, community wisdom, or political expediency? This session explores the intersections of environmental change, risk management, and development in the Eastern Himalaya, asking whether the region can continue to absorb the ecological costs of "progress," or whether it is time to fundamentally rethink what resilience and responsibility mean in the mountains.

Panel 2: Development or Disaster?

Tourism, Urbanisation & Infrastructure

The Eastern Himalaya is at a crossroads. Expanding road networks, hydropower projects, and growing towns are hailed as signs of modernisation, yet they are also accelerating deforestation, landslides, water shortages, and waste crises. Tourism is marketed as a driver of opportunity, but it often strains fragile urban systems and pushes communities into precarious forms of work. Rapid urbanisation, in particular, raises pressing questions: Who benefits from new infrastructure and expanding cities? Who bears the risks of overcrowding, inadequate planning, and collapsing ecosystems?

This session confronts these contradictions head-on: Is development in the Himalaya a pathway to prosperity, or a slow-moving disaster in the making? Panellists will discuss the trade-offs, blind spots, and uncomfortable truths behind current development models.

Panel 3: Hope vs Hustle

Youth Aspirations and Challenges

The youth of the Eastern Himalaya are caught between soaring ambitions and harsh realities. While education, migration, and emerging job markets fuel hope, many young people face unemployment, social inequality, and limited opportunities—pressures that contribute to high rates of drug abuse, mental health struggles, and suicide. Additionally, migration, precarious work, and limited access to decision-making further deepen exclusion, particularly for young women and marginalized groups. This session brings together government officials, researchers, and practitioners to discuss the tension between ambition and survival, local realities and global expectations, and the gaps between policy promises and lived experience. The discussion will challenge whether current interventions genuinely empower young people—or whether the "hustle" of making ends meet is eroding hope, health, and future prospects in the region.

Panel 4: What gets told?

Media, Memory & Representation

What gets remembered—and what is erased—in the stories told about the Himalaya? From news media and social platforms to films and documentaries, all forms of media shape narratives, influence public perception, and impact policy. Yet these narratives are rarely neutral: local voices, women's experiences, and marginalized communities are often sidelined or erased, while dominant perspectives—commercial interests, or viral trends—define what counts as visible, and whose stories are silenced? This panel interrogates the politics of representation and the power dynamics embedded in storytelling. The discussion will examine whether inclusive, gender-sensitive, and locally grounded media can serve as a tool for social justice, accountability, and cultural survival—or whether structural, political, and technological pressures continue to erase the voices that matter most.

Roundtable Discussion

Tipping Point Himalaya: Negotiating Shared Futures

The roundtable discussion will explore critical environmental and social issues facing the Eastern Himalaya, emphasizing interconnections and solutions.

The Eastern Himalaya is at a pivotal moment, facing a convergence of environmental and socio-economic pressures. Rapid urbanisation, climate change, and evolving patterns of resource use are reshaping communities and ecosystems alike. Water scarcity, waste management, biodiversity loss, and human-wildlife conflicts are no longer isolated issues—they intersect in complex ways, impacting livelihoods, food security, public health, and social stability. These challenges are deeply intertwined with local social structures—ethnicity, caste, and cultural practices which shape access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making. These are further complicated by the geopolitical location of the Sikkim-Darjeeling Himalaya, which defines the form and trajectory of development in the region.

This roundtable will delve into these challenges by examining the interconnectedness of ecological and human systems: how urban expansion affects water and waste infrastructure, how conservation initiatives must align with community development, and how security and governance play into sustainable resource management.

The discussion will underscore that addressing any one challenge in isolation is insufficient; only through holistic, collaborative approaches can the Eastern Himalaya navigate its tipping points and negotiate shared futures that balance development, ecology, and cultural heritage.

Workshop #1

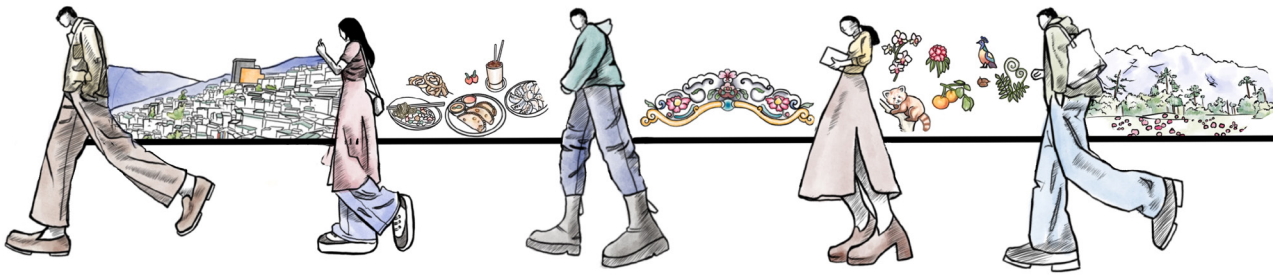
The Promise of Mental Health Care and Support in the Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalaya.

What does mental health mean in our Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalaya? What is the language we use and how do we express it in our social geographies, class, caste, privilege, and power?

The Mental Health Act of India 2017 promises- "to provide for mental healthcare and services for persons with mental illness" and goes on to state that "Every person shall have a right to access mental healthcare and treatment..." What does this mean in our resource starved region that is socio-ecologically fragile and marginalised?

These questions will be explored in a discussion-based manner in "The Promise of Mental Health Care and Support in the Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalaya" workshop. The conversations will be built on the lived experiences of the participants, which will contextualise mental health, care and support beyond a clinical understanding and narrative. They will expand the understanding and narrative of mental health and contextualise it in the landscape and lived experience of the participants. It will critically analyse gaps to evolve key research questions for the region that will inform policy and practise.

The workshop will be facilitated by Priscilla Giri, Mental Health Team Lead, DLR Prerna, along with her team.



Workshop #2

The Waste Crisis in the Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalaya

We are living through a waste crisis, yet our everyday narrative is not reflective of the importance, urgency and complexity of the crisis. Waste is still looked at as a material, visual, aesthetic, and an end-of-life management issue, with emphasis largely on citizen behaviour. We fail to recognise the complexities of waste, especially plastic, that threaten our health and planetary well-being.

Mountains, with the terrain and dispersed populations, further challenge waste management systems. Tourism and defence infrastructure spreads waste to remote borderlands with no clear inclusion in policy and practice.

The "Waste Crisis in the Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalaya" will address waste from a complete lifecycle perspective asking who bears responsibility. Production and existing systems along with manufactured consent and demand, consumerism and the role of media will be critically examined. Notions of "clean" and "swachh" will be discussed to understand why the crisis continues with existing policies and practices. .

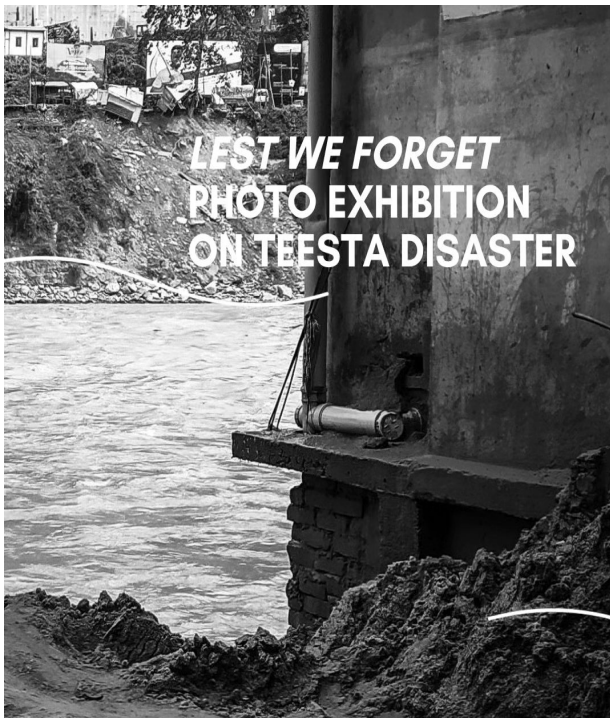
While a global perspective will be drawn upon, conversations will be grounded in the local experiences that will enable participants to critically analyse the politics and intersectionalities of waste enabling pathways for critical research to generate solutions that are real, sustainable and zero waste.

The workshop will be facilitated by Priyadarshinee Shrestha (Zero Waste Himalaya) and Roshan Rai (Zero Waste Himalaya), and DLR Prerna.

PHOTO EXHIBITION AND ARTWORK

1. Lest We Forget: The Teesta Disaster (Darjeeling Himalaya Initiative)

On October 3, turbulent waters of the GLOF (Glacier Lake Outburst Flood) from the South Lhonak glacier, located at 17,300 feet above mean sea level, crashed into the already brimming reservoir of the 1200 MW Sikkim Urja Dam in Chungthang, North Sikkim. The dam was quickly overwhelmed and burst, releasing a wall of water 10-15 feet high. This deluge surged over the Teesta valley, devastating everything along its 162-kilometer path from the glacier to NHPC Teesta Low Dam Project (TLDP) III at 27th Mile in Kalimpong district.



The catastrophic floods downstream claimed several lives and left hundreds of homes, important roadways, and settlements destroyed, disrupting the lives of thousands of people who live along the Teesta River.The photo exhibition documents the disaster event which has left a lasting scar on the landscape and communities who faced the brunt of the disaster.

2. Aman Pradhan is a charcoal artist whose work delves into emotion and spirituality. Through the simplicity and rawness of black and white, he explores the unseen—capturing moments of stillness, struggle, healing, and introspection. His pieces are designed to encourage viewers to look beyond the surface and connect with their inner selves on a deeper, spiritual level. His artwork is showcased @_esthetic_charcoal.

3. Suveksha Pradhan is an artist from Sikkim. She works as a full-time artist, painting commissions, murals, and other things. Suveksha believes that art should be a part of everyone's life and that it should be inculcated and nurtured in children from the region. She has participated in five national and one international exhibitions till date.

PHOTO EXHIBITION AND ARTWORK

4. Nirvan Pradhan is from Rimbick, Darjeeling and currently works as an Assistant Professor at Narasinha Dutt College, University of Calcutta.

His photo exhibition illuminates how economic expansion devours untouched lands, transforms them into hubs of extraction, and discards them as depleted ruins once their value is exhausted. The exhibition turns its lens to the abandoned tea estates of Darjeeling, where colonial-era investments once sculpted rolling hills into vast plantations. Today, these once-thriving sites stand as "capitalist ruins" (Tsing 2015), their infrastructures crumbling under neglect and disinvestment. Managers have fled, devaluing the land and stranding workers amid decaying relics that whisper of past exploitation and fragile futures. This visual narrative probes the afterlife of abandonment, revealing how capitalist frontiers' collapse reshapes communities and environments, while inviting reflection on salvage, survival, and the seeds of renewal in the shadows of empire.

5. Shivam Darnal Shivam Darnal is an educator and photographer based in Darjeeling, India. With over a decade of experience in education, he integrates storytelling and visual literacy into classroom learning and community-based workshops. His practice engages with photography, oral histories, and interdisciplinary art forms rooted in the Eastern Himalayas. He has facilitated and participated in several photography workshops, including Photo Kathmandu, Angkor Photo Festival, and The Confluence Collective. His work has been exhibited at Serendipity Arts Festival, Egaro Photo Festival, and the Angkor Photo Festival, among others. Recent projects include In Her Footsteps: Women's Oral Archive in Eastern Himalayas (2023) and Home (2025).

SHORT FILMS

Daante Katha - Dishant Pradhan

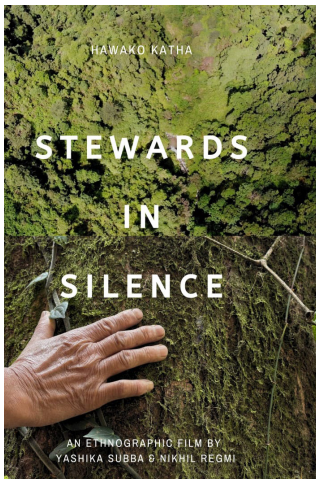
Set in the forests and mountains of Darjeeling, Dante Katha is an experimental mixed-media retelling of folktales from the Eastern Himalayas. Seen through the eyes of a girl whose little brother has recently gone missing, this film chronicles her fantastical encounters with various mysterious characters along the way. 'Dante-Katha' literally translates to 'oral storytelling' in Nepali. The film reimagines stories and dying traditions from the region, to uncover narratives of geopolitical significance, lost in time.

The film premiered at the Kathmandu Triennale 2077, and has been screened at various spaces including the Dharamshala International Film Festival, London Himalayan Film Festival, and Artist's Cinema – Jaipur Center for Art (2025), and is also the winner of the Melo Film Fest, Darjeeling 2024.

Dishant Pradhan is an independent filmmaker from Ghayabari, Kurseong whose work explores the intersections of culture, storytelling, and place. He is currently a faculty member of Design Department at FLAME University, Pune,

Steward in Silence - Yashika Subba and Nikhil Regmi

Steward in Silence' is a short ethnographic film that follows a mother and daughter whose ancestral stewardship of a nearby forestland in the tea gardens of the Darjeeling Himalaya spans generations. They might not speak of environmental crises in scientific terms, but know the native forest intimately. This deep ecological knowledge shared between people and their land and environment, is regarded as the most sacred and secure space from the local



perspectives Despite this connection, they remain excluded from land ownership and decision-making. This film captures how indigenous communities navigate changing ties to land, culture and lived environmental struggles in the Himalaya.

Yashika and Nikhil are creative collaborators.

Yashika Subba is from Kharsang/Kurseong, she likes exploring places, people, and their interconnectedness with nature. Her work reflects an indigenous connection to the Eastern Himalaya, which continues to fuel her curiosity. She believes that visual storytelling can deeply move audiences, not only through imagery but also through the emotions and reflections that linger long after the film ends. Currently a Ph.D scholar (Anthropology) at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Dhanbad, she works on climate change and the experiences of mountain communities.

Nikhil Regmi is a Darjeeling-based video editor who loves telling stories about people and moments. His work spans ad films, documentaries, and a variety of projects across India. Deeply curious about how technology and creativity shape the world, he enjoys being part of a space where he can bring stories to life through the visual medium.

Stalls

Rachna Books, Gangtok, will showcase a curated selection of books on the Eastern Himalaya and works by authors from the region.

ATREE Gangtok will host a stall featuring products such as soap, honey, and other locally made items crafted by community members and self-help groups (SHGs) from Panbu, Sittong, and Dzongu. Proceeds from the sales support women's livelihoods in these areas.

PANELLISTS

Abhilash Kumai

Abhilash Kumai, a Senior Program Manager from the picturesque hills of Kalimpong, is deeply passionate about education and people development. With a background in Sociology from Calcutta University, he began his journey in 2016 through the Teach For India Fellowship, which revealed the transformative power of education to him. Over the years, he has worked as a teacher, coach, consultant, and trainer, and has held senior management roles that strengthened his belief in empowering people and teams.

Abhilash's work has taken him across Northeast India, where he has collaborated with schools, teachers, and education leaders. Currently, he leads the Trailblazer Fellowship at the Eastern Himalayan Foundation, nurturing resilient young changemakers. Beyond work, he creates social media content and conducts street interviews—efforts that keep him connected to people's stories and perspectives.

Abriti Moktan

Abriti Moktan is a PhD candidate in the Department of Ecosystem Science and Management at Pennsylvania State University. She is part of the WEF nexus cohort and the Environmental Policy Goddard Chair Group. Her research interests lie in environment and development, water security, biocultural conservation, and traditional ecological knowledge. For her PhD thesis, she is studying community-conserved sacred groves, their relation to water security, and the adaptive capacities of local communities in the Eastern Himalaya's complex social-ecological systems.

Prior to this, she worked as a research associate at the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE), Gangtok. She completed her master's degree in Environment and Development from the School of Human Ecology at Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University, Delhi. She is passionate about research on mountain ecosystems and the local communities inhabiting these regions.

Anisa Bhutia

Anisa Bhutia is an Assistant Professor at Indian Institute of Management, Kozhikode (IIM-K). She was previously a Post-Doctoral Fellow at Aarhus University (Anthropology) and has received her PhD from Tata Institute of Social Sciences (Mumbai). She is an anthropologist from Kalimpong, and her research elaborates on trade networks, markets, infrastructure (roads, railways etc.), colonialism, frontiers and the history of people and places. She is the recipient of prestigious fellowships such as Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD), Inlaks, Fulbright, and Rajeev Gandhi National Fellowships for her Master's and Doctoral studies.

PANELLISTS

Avantika Thapa

Avantika Thapa is a conservationist passionate about building pathways for people and wildlife to thrive together. At the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE), her work explores how Himalayan communities navigate life alongside wildlife and how this lifestyle can be sustained in the face of rapidly changing value systems and environments. She has worked with the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI), contributing to biodiversity research and ecological documentation in the Himalayas.

Her fieldwork has often taken her to high altitudes, where she has lived with resident communities to understand the challenges of sustaining livelihoods in the face of climate change and interactions with wildlife species. For her doctoral studies, she studied the ecology of Himalayan pheasants, and as a Coexistence Fellow, Avantika focused on equally emphasising the coexistence in human–wildlife conflict — highlighting the role of equity, justice, tolerance, cultural values, and shared stewardship in conservation. Her work brings together science, community voices, and policy to reimagine conservation in ways that are inclusive and resilient. Beyond research, she is deeply committed to amplifying mountain perspectives and ensuring that conservation conversations reflect the realities of people living closest to wildlife.

Aparajita Rai

Aparajita Rai is the first female Indian Police Service officer from Sikkim and a senior public servant currently serving as Special Superintendent of the Intelligence Branch, West Bengal Police. An alumnus of Tashi Namgyal Academy, Gangtok, and a postgraduate in law from Calcutta University, she secured an All India Rank of 358 in the Civil Services Examination and joined the IPS in 2013. Earlier with a rank of 769 she served with the Indian Defence Accounts service from 2011-2013.

Beyond her professional commitments, Aparajita is a keen runner and a hands-on mother to her one-and-a half year old daughter, with whom she resides in Siliguri.

Binayak Sundas

Binayak Sundas is the Director of the Centre for Himalayan Studies, University of North Bengal. He is also the Founding Director of the Chaya Foundation, an initiative dedicated to education, environment, and community development in the hills. He holds a BA in History (Hons) from St. Stephen's College, Delhi University, and an MA, MPhil., and PhD from the Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University. His research explores the history, environment, and cultural traditions of the Eastern Himalayas. Through initiatives like the "100 Libraries Campaign," he promotes grassroots learning and cultural exchange.

Dr. Sundas is also the creator and host of the podcast Himalayan Stories, which documents lived experiences and oral histories from the region. His writings have appeared in My Republica, The Quint, and The Statesman. Combining scholarship, activism, and storytelling, he works to foster a deeper, more connected understanding of the Himalayas and its people.

Dawa Sangpo

Dawa Sangpo Bhutia is from Chongri, a peaceful village nestled in the mountains of West Sikkim. Growing up in a traditional yak herding family, his early life was deeply connected to the natural rhythms of the mountains. Yaks were not just animals to them; they were family. Living close to nature taught him the importance of respecting and protecting our land, forests, rivers, and culture.

As a photographer and filmmaker, Dawa captures the beauty and spirit of his homeland, sharing stories that inspire others to appreciate and protect this fragile environment. He also runs a travel company focused on trekking, ecotourism, and adventure tourism, promoting responsible and sustainable travel that supports local communities.

Dawa leads the Yambong Ecotourism Committee, a team of passionate young people from his village who work to promote environmental conservation and responsible tourism. He is involved with the Royal Enfield Responsible Tourism project, WWF Sikkim's Snow Leopard Conservation, and Sanctuary Asia's Mud on Boots project. Through these efforts, he strives to protect our traditions, empower local communities, and conserve the unique heritage of Sikkim for future generations

Debolina Kundu

Debolina Kundu, Director of the National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA), has over 30 years of professional experience in the field of development studies. She has worked as a consultant with the ADB, LSE, IIDS, UNDP, UNFPA, UNESCAP, KfW, GIZ, Urban Institute (Washington), and East-West Centre (Honolulu) on issues of urbanization, migration, urban development policies, municipal finance, social protection, governance, and exclusion. At NIUA, she is leading several projects supported by UNICEF, the World Bank, UKRI, KFW and the Government of India.

She is a member of various committees formed by the central and state governments, including the Fifth Delhi Finance Commission. She has several articles published in books and journals. She recently co-edited a book on New Drivers of Division: Urbanisation and Spatial Inequality in Africa and Asia (Springer) and is currently working on a Handbook on Urbanisation in the Global South. She is Chief Editor of journals - Environment and Urbanisation, Asia (SAGE) and Urban India (NIUA). She was Co-Chair of the Task Force on LiFE, Resilience, and Values for Wellbeing under the G20 Think Tank initiative.

PANELLISTS

Dishant Pradhan

Dishant is currently a Faculty member of the Design Department at FLAME University, Pune, + an independent filmmaker whose work explores the intersections of culture, storytelling, and place. His debut experimental short, Dante Katha, reinterprets folk narratives from the Himalayan region with the aim of preserving and retelling them for contemporary audiences. The film has been screened at several international platforms, including the Dharamshala International Film Festival, the London Himalayan Film Festival, and the Kathmandu Triennale.

Alongside his film work, Dishant has directed over fifteen music videos that document and amplify voices from the Himalayan hills. His current research and creative practice focus on documenting local + indigenous narratives across both traditional and contemporary cultures. He is particularly interested in how youth communities engage with and reshape emerging urban subcultures — reflecting broader transitions in identity, belonging, and creative expression within the region.

Jenisha Singh

Jenisha Singh is an Assistant Professor of English at Sagardighi K.K.S. Mahavidyalaya, under University of Kalyani. She is also pursuing her Ph.D. in English from the School of Letters, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar University Delhi. She specializes in folklore and cultural narratives, and is pursuing an ethnographic study of the Kami cultural narratives in the Eastern Himalayas for her Doctoral research.

Lakpa Tamang

Lakpa Tamang is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Geography, University of Calcutta, Kolkata, India. He received his Ph.D. degree in Geography & Applied Geography from the University of North Bengal. With expertise in applied fluvial geomorphology, he has published 1 book and more than 20 research papers in journals in various international and national journals based on his research in the Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalayan region. Currently, he is working on projects on geoconservation in the Darjeeling hills, funded by ICSSR, and a riverine habitat study funded by NMHS.

PANELLISTS

Mona Chettri

Mona Chettri is a researcher and co-founder of Reading Himalaya, a research and policy consultancy focussing on the eastern Himalaya. She is also a Senior Research Fellow (Adjunct) School of Arts and Social Sciences, Monash University. She received her PhD from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, and has worked as a post-doc in the Netherlands, Denmark, and Australia. She is the co-editor of Development Zones in Asian Borderlands (2021) and author of Constructing Democracy: Ethnicity and Democracy in the Eastern Himalaya (2017), both published by Amsterdam University Press.

She has published widely on borderlands, gender, environment, and development in various academic journals. Mona is also the Series Editor of the Eastern Himalayan Series (Rachna Books and Publication) and co-editor of Beneath Magnolia Skies: Women's Writings from the Sikkim and Darjeeling Himalaya (Zubaan Books). Her current research focuses on gender, environment, and urbanisation in the Sikkim-Darjeeling Himalaya, India.

Nancy C. Lhasungpa

Nancy C. Lhasungpa is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology, Nar Bahadur Bhandari Government College, Gangtok. Her research centers on the broader social determinants of health and well-being, with a particular emphasis on mental health, social stigma, substance abuse and addiction, alongside her academic interests in social problems, gender, culture, and migration. Her current work explores social determinants of low fertility rates. She regularly contributes to local publications and digital platforms on contemporary social issues.

She is also actively involved as Coordinator of the Monthly Screening for Mental Health at NBBGC, an initiative under Suicide Prevention Action Network (SPAN), Department of Health and Family Welfare, Government of Sikkim.

Nancy holds a M.Phil and a PhD from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, and a double Master's in Sociology and International Relations from Delhi School of Economics and the University of Aberdeen, UK, respectively. She is particularly interested in interdisciplinary approaches that bridge sociological inquiry with public policy and community development.

Nangsel Sherpa

Nangsel Sherpa (she/her) is currently at the Centre for Writing and Pedagogy, Krea University. She has completed her M.Phil at the Department of Sociology, Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi. Her research focused on the Tibetan community in exile in India, examining how ideas of citizenship, nationalism, and gender are being reimagined and transformed across generations.

Nangsel is also the co-founder and editor of The Pomelo: Exploring Himalayan Voices, a digital platform dedicated to documenting, archiving,

and sharing narratives from across the Himalayan region, and has consistently worked toward centring underrepresented voices, particularly those of women and marginalised communities. With a strong interest in interdisciplinary and regionally grounded scholarship, her academic and creative practices often intersect, focusing on gender, migration, and minority rights.

Niranjan Kapil

Niranjan Kapil is an Urban Planner with over thirteen years of experience in urban development, infrastructure management, and strategic planning. He currently serves as Urban Planning Expert with Gangtok Smart City Development Limited and as Project Manager-cum-MIS Officer for the Sikkim Integrated Urban Development Project, contributing to the Smart Cities Mission and Asian Development Bank–assisted initiatives.

Niranjan has led landmark projects including Gangtok and Namchi Smart Cities, Pakyong Mountain City Strategic Plan, AMRUT 2.0, CITIIS 1.0 and 2.0, the National Urban Framework, and the Gangtok Cable Car Project.

An alumnus of the School of Planning and Architecture, Vijayawada, with a master's in Project Operations from Amity University, he is also an Associate Member of the Institute of Town Planners, India. His work emphasizes sustainable, climate-resilient, and community-driven approaches tailored to the Himalayan region.

Nirmal Mangar

Nirmal Mangar is the Founder and News Editor of The Sikkim Chronicle, one of the region's leading digital news platforms recognized for its in-depth reporting, feature writing, and community-based journalism. Nirmal has over two decades of experience in print and digital media across Sikkim and the Eastern Himalayas and has previously served as correspondent and reporter for The Telegraph and Sikkim Express. He has contributed extensively to articles on sustainable development, youth affairs, and tourism, and is also known for hosting educational and cultural events.

Nirmal is the recipient of the Sikkim State Award for Journalism (2007), the Ram Patro Memorial Award for Journalism (2007), and Journalist of the Year (2023).

Nirvan Pradhan

Nirvan Pradhan is an educator from Darjeeling, West Bengal. He received his PhD from the Centre for Political Studies, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi. He completed his Bachelor's degree from the University of Delhi, and both his Master's and M.Phil from Jawaharlal Nehru University. He was also a recipient of the DAAD Scholarship, through which he studied at the University of Würzburg, Germany.

His research explores a range of themes, including decaying capitalist spaces, transnational labour markets, political ecologies, elections, infrastructural politics, and the health and safety of migrant workers. His writings have appeared in Himalaya: The Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies, Sikkim Express, Studies in Indian Politics andConfluence Collective. He has also published chapters in various books. He has presented papers in various national and international conferences in Europe and North America. He is currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at Narasinha Dutt College, University of Calcutta.

Pema Wangchuk Dorjee

Pema Wangchuk Dorjee is a journalist with over thirty years of experience in the print media. He is currently the Consulting Editor at Summit Times. He launched Weekend Review in Sikkim in 1999 and Sikkim NOW! in 2002. He has worked for Himal and Sikkim Observer, and co-authored, Khangchendzonga: Sacred Summit (1997), and The Birds Have Lost Their Way (2018).

Pema was awarded with the Y.N. Bhandari Award for Best Journalism in 2021.

Priscilla Giri

Priscilla Giri is a research administrator at DLR Prerna, leading the Tealeaf (Teachers Leading the Frontline) Mansik Swastha program in Darjeeling, India. In Tealeaf Mansik Swastha, mental health care is task-shifted to non-clinical providers such as teachers, parents and the community, in order to go beyond conventional methods of care to allow mental wellbeing at a community level.

With over eight years of experience working with schools and five years dedicated to youth mental health, she specializes in project design, implementation, and evaluation. She is directly responsible for training and supervising the conduct of mental health care in the Tealeaf program. She is also dedicated to overseeing the research component of the Tealeaf program and in incorporating the contextual understating of the existing systems in the Darjeeling Himalaya. She was also a member of the Mental Health Assessment Team, District Legal Service Authority, Darjeeling. She holds a master's in Medical and Psychiatric Social Work and has additional training in Narrative Therapy.

PANELLISTS

Priyadarshinee Shrestha

Priyadarshinee Shrestha is a core member of the Zero Waste Himalaya, which works across the Himalayan region to promote sustainable waste management policies and practices. She has been leading The Himalayan Cleanup since 2018, which has grown to become one of the biggest campaigns for the mountains against plastic pollution. She has worked with WWF–India's Khangchendzonga Landscape Programme (2007 to 2023), leading the organization's conservation work in the Sikkim-Darjeeling landscape, focusing on community-based conservation for red panda and snow leopard conservation, climate action, responsible tourism practices, and environment education. She was also part of the Indo-Swiss Project in Sikkim, working to strengthen local governance and decentralisation in the state (2002-2006).

Priyadarshinee is also a member of Integrated Mountain Initiative, a pan-Himalayan organisation working to foreground mountain challenges and issues. Since the last few years, she has been engaged under the Sikkim INSPIRES programme as part of the technical support team to the Rural Development Department, leading the work of drafting economic inclusion plans for women and youth for all districts of the state.

Roshan Rai

Roshan P. Rai is a development practitioner with DLR Prerna. With a special interest in participatory governance, his interventions have revolved around inclusions and equity in fair-trade movements in tea, conservation interventions, small farmer collectives, Samaj, and educational institutions.

He works with Zero Waste Himalaya, with a special interest in the intersections of plastic waste and food. Roshan is a member of the Darjeeling Himalaya Initiative and Integrated Mountain Initiative, advocating for mountain-sensitive policies and sustainability.

Rinan Shah

Rinan is a Postdoctoral fellow at the Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies, Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence, and an Associate at the Lakshmi Mittal and Family South Asia Institute, Harvard University. She is an interdisciplinary researcher with ten years of experience in environment, development, and sustainability studies. She studies water, mountains, governance, policy, institutions, and urban issues with a rights-based approach.

She is a contributing author to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Working Group II, Chapter 4: Water. Her works have been published in Mitigation and Adaptation Strategies for Global Change, Grassroots – Journal of Political Ecology, HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan

Studies, Water Policy and Conservation and Society. She is a guest Co-Editor of a special issue in Rural Landscapes: Society, Environment, History. She has published commentaries, policy analyses, reports, and popular articles.

She was a Postdoctoral Fellow at Harvard University with the Lakshmi Mittal and Family South Asia Institute (2023–2024). She received her PhD in 2023 from the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE), Bengaluru. She is an incoming Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Fellow at the School of Society and Environment, Queen Mary University of London.

Sangay Lachenpa

Sangay Lachenpa is a Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies, Shiv Nadar University, with extensive field experience, particularly of the Sikkim Himalayas. He also serves as a Guest Faculty at the Department of International Relations, Sikkim University, where he teaches International Relations theories. He holds a PhD in Chinese Studies from the Centre for East Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, specialising in China-India borderlands, sovereignty and development. His broad area of interest includes International Relations theories, border studies, Himalayan area studies with a focus on development, sovereignty, contests, and identity.

Shrawan Kumar Acharya

Shrawan Kumar Acharya is a Professor of Urban and Regional Planning at the Centre for the Study of Regional Development, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. He received his degree in Urban and Regional Planning from CEPT University, Ahmedabad, with additional specialization in Urban Management from the School of Public Policy, University of Birmingham and PhD from the Centre for the Study of Regional Development, JNU. He is a Fellow of the Institute of Town Planners, India.

He is the recipient of numerous international fellowships, including the UKNA Fellowship at the International Institute for Asian Studies, Leiden; Fulbright Fellow at Ball State University, Muncie and SHASTRI Fellow at McGill University, Montreal. His teaching and research interests involves Urban and Regional Planning and he is interested in understanding the urban and regional planning challenges and development issues in the eastern Himalayan region of Sikkim and Darjeeling.

PANELLISTS

Sohel Firdos

Sohel Firdos completed his doctoral degree from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, and is presently working as a Professor and Head of the Department of Geography at Sikkim University. His research is centred on the complex intersections between social, economic, and environmental issues in both eastern and north-eastern India.

His work, characterized by its intellectual coherence, follows a clear and logical trajectory from his foundational research on tribal economies in Jharkhand to his later, applied scholarship on sustainable development in the Himalayan region. His most significant contributions lie in his consistent focus on marginalized communities and the geographical dimensions of their experiences. He is a scholar who seamlessly bridges qualitative case studies with quantitative data analysis, providing a robust and multi-faceted perspective on phenomena such as socio-spatial exclusion, livelihood, migration, and resource management. His recent works have focused on evidence-based policy making for sustainable transitions in the eastern Himalayas.

Smriti Basnet

Smriti Basnett is an environmental scientist and glaciologist whose work bridges research, policy, and community engagement across the Himalayan region. Since July 2025, she has been serving as a Senior Consultant to the Sikkim Commission on Glacial Hazards, Department of Science and Technology, Government of Sikkim. In this role, she works collaboratively with the Commission's experts and Secretariat to advance its mandate — supporting consultations, strengthening coordination, and fostering national and international collaborations for GLOF preparedness and climate resilience.

Previously, Smriti served as Deputy Director of the Future Earth Global Secretariat Hub - South Asia at the Divecha Centre for Climate Change, Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bangalore, where she directed interdisciplinary programs promoting regional policy alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals.

Her scientific journey began in 2008 as a Junior Research Fellow with the Sikkim Glacier Commission (DST–Sikkim), followed by research roles at ISRO's Space Applications Centre, IISc Bangalore, and Sikkim University, where she contributed to establishing the Centre of Excellence on Water Resources, Cryosphere, and Climate Change.

Guided by a deep concern for both society and the environment, Smriti views science as a catalyst for transformation — believing that lasting change is achieved through collaboration, empathy, and integration across disciplines and communities. A UNESCO Project Co-leader and former Berkner and ICIMOD Fellow, she continues to champion research that transforms climate understanding into meaningful community resilience.

Beyond her professional pursuits, Smriti is deeply drawn to movement and expression — practicing Kalaripayattu martial arts, dance, music, and skiing. She finds balance and creativity through sports and the performing arts, which she sees as vital extensions of her engagement with nature, rhythm, and community.

PANELLISTS

Sunita Pradhan

Sunita Pradhan is a Senior Wildlife Ecologist at the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE), Eastern Himalaya Regional Office in Gangtok, Sikkim. She is a researcher and conservation practitioner with over two decades of experience in the Eastern Himalayas. Widely recognised for her pioneering work on the Red Panda, her research also encompasses other threatened species, highlighting diverse human–wildlife interactions.

These include hornbills and their dietary overlap with humans, and various mammals—bats and small mammals among them—in shared spaces of agroecosystems. Some of her other projects include long-term assessments of tourism in red panda habitats and zoonotic disease risks, such as Scrub typhus linked to small mammals. Her work on pangolins significantly highlights their coexistence challenges in the Kanchenjunga landscape. Combining field research, community engagement, and conservation storytelling, she works closely with local communities, government bodies, and conservation partners to promote coexistence and strengthen grassroots stewardship. Capacity building and student mentorship are her enduring commitments.

Tashi Chopel Lepcha

Tashi Chopel Lepcha is a bureaucrat in the Government of Sikkim, with extensive administrative experience across the state. Over his career, he has served in key roles including Block Development Officer, Sub Divisional Magistrate (SDM), Additional District Collector (Development), and District Collector (DC) in all districts of Sikkim.

He is currently the Secretary, School Education, Government of Sikkim. Tashi has significant experience in disaster management, having served as SDM Chungthang during the 2011 earthquake and as DC Pakyong during the 2023 flash floods. His wide-ranging experience reflects a deep understanding of governance, development, and crisis response in Sikkim.

Teiborlang Kharsyntiew

Teiborlang T. Kharsyntiew is a faculty member of European Studies in the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University. Before joining JNU, he taught in the Department of International Relations at Sikkim University, Gangtok.

In 2017, he was awarded a month-long Research Stay fellowship at the Otto-Suhr-Institute of Political Science at Freie Universität Berlin as part of the University Grants Commission, India and the DAAD, Germany's project on Indo-German Partnership in Higher Education. In 2022, he was awarded the EU Visitor Programme (EUVP) by the European Commission and European Parliament.

Besides teaching and research on European Studies, his research interests include issues related to India's north-eastern region. He holds an M.A. in Politics from JNU, and an M.Phil. and Ph.D from the Centre for European Studies, JNU.

Timsong Lepcha

Timsong Lepcha, from Passingdang in Upper Dzongu, North Sikkim, has completed a bachelor's degree in Sociology from Nar Bahadur Bhandari Degree College and a postgraduate degree from Sikkim University, Gangtok, East Sikkim. Passionate about research, fieldwork, and engaging with people from diverse castes and cultures, Timsong is in the early stages of a research career and has already gained valuable experience by working under professors on various projects.

In 2023, Timsong served as a Field Assistant for Dr. Govind Kelkar on the project Witch Hunts and Ritual Attacks: Culture and Capital Across Northeast. Timsong worked as a Field Investigator for Dr. Nancy Choden Lhasungpa on two projects: "Drug Abuse, Addiction and Rehabilitation in Sikkim" and "Unveiling Drug Abuse and the Role of Service Providers in Sikkim."

In 2024, Timsong worked as a field researcher on Reading Himalaya's "Gender-based Violence and Inequality in Sikkim" project. Currently, Timsong is working as a Research Assistant under Dr. Mona Chettri on a project examining climate change and vernacular architecture in Sikkim. Outside of research, Timsong enjoys painting, singing, reading novels, and sleeping.

ABOUT

Reading Himalaya: Research & Policy

Reading Himalaya is an independent Research & Policy consultancy and research subsidiary of DR Reading Room Resource and Education Foundation, based in Sikkim, India, focusing on society, environment, development, and politics of the Himalayan region. An all-women-led consultancy, founded in 2023 by researchers from Sikkim, Darjeeling, and Kalimpong, Reading Himalaya is committed to research-driven outcomes that strengthen and support communities, organizations, and institutions in the region. Reading Himalaya's core missions are to (i) generate research that is timely, relevant, and accessible to all (ii) build sustainable livelihoods through research, and (iii) strengthen research capacity in the eastern Himalaya.

DG Reading Room

The Dumigaon Reading Room Resource and Education Foundation (DGRRREF) is a not-for-profit company based in Dumigaon, South Sikkim. Registered as a Section 8 company under the Companies Act (2013) in September 2023, the Foundation is dedicated to fostering community engagement across the region. The Foundation aims to foster a culture of reading, reflection, and responsible citizenship among children and youth in Sikkim. Through a well-equipped community library and programmes rooted in literacy, the Foundation aims to strengthen language competence and spread the joy of reading among children, and is committed to working along with children, educators, artists, and researchers in our communities to build competence for social engagement and environmental awareness through literature, artistic expression, creativity and open dialogue.

Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies, School of Humanities and Social Sciences Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence

The Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies under the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence (SNIoE) is a research centre focused on the economy, borders and identities, the environment and regional geopolitics of the wider Himalayan region, including the Hindu Kush and the Karakoram. The Centre pushes for an approach to studying the Himalayas that crosses both national and disciplinary boundaries as well as engenders a three-way conversation between central and local governments, academia, and the people who live in the region. The Centre focuses on engaging researchers with niche or specialised interests in the wider Himalayas and identifying and creating a network of scholars in the field, both in India and externally, to support its work. This critical mass of scholars of and from the region redresses the longstanding neglect or asymmetrical representation of the Himalayas and beyond, in knowledge, discourse, and policy interventions.

Geography Department, Sikkim University

Sikkim University is a Central University located in Gangtok and Yangang, Sikkim, India. It was established in 2007 by an Act of Parliament of India. The Geography Department at Sikkim University was established in 2010. The Department strives towards blending theoretical knowledge with empirical analysis, anchoring itself in strong field-based research, especially on the Eastern Himalayas. The Department houses a high-end GIS laboratory for exposing the students to the art of spatial analysis. The faculty members are enthusiastic to share their understanding of the cryosphere, interactions between environment, society, and economy, political geography of North-east India, social-spatial exclusions, urban governance, and tourism geography.