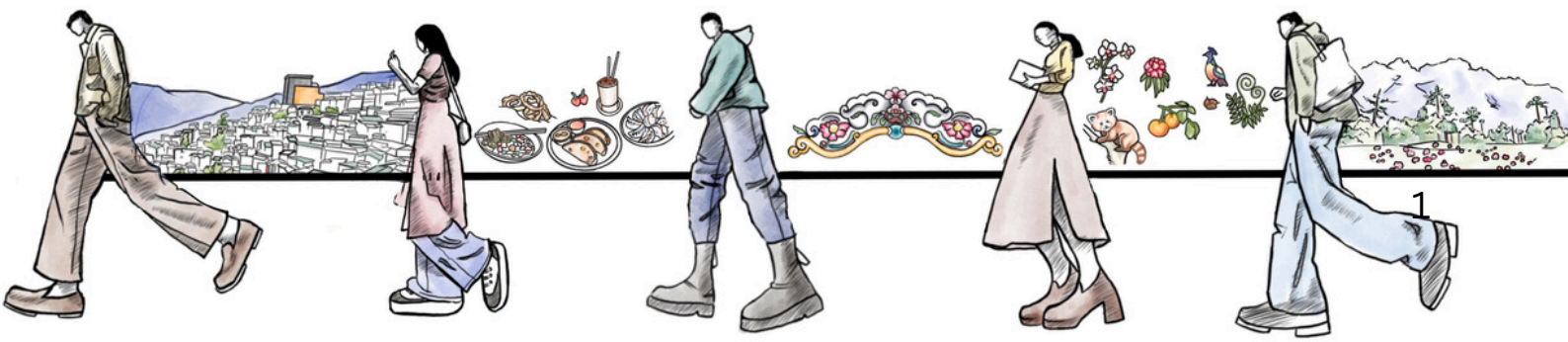


CONNECT. CREATE. CHANGE.

Reading
Himalaya
Research & Policy

SHARED FUTURES CONCLAVE 2025 REPORT



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Shared Futures Conclave 2025 was organised by Reading Himalaya: Research and Policy in collaboration with the Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies, Shiv Nadar Institute of Eminence, Dumi Gaon Reading Room Resource and Education Foundation, Sikkim and the Department of Geography, Sikkim University, in Gangtok, Sikkim, 4-5 December.

The Conclave welcomed over 400 attendees across two days, from the Sikkim-Darjeeling Himalaya and beyond. The attendees were a diverse mix of undergraduate and post-graduate students, researchers, practitioners, representatives from different government departments, and members of the community.

Dr. Smriti Basnett, Senior Consultant, Sikkim Commission on Glacial Hazard, Department of Science and Technology, Government of Sikkim, delivered the keynote address.

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 geopolitical imperatives and 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.

The Shared Futures Conclave was convened as a response to the pressing need for an inclusive, grounded space where diverse actors - community members, researchers, policy makers, media, artists and youth can engage in critical, in-depth, creative and solution-oriented dialogue.

The conclave brought together diverse voices to think across scales - local, regional and structural.

The Conclave was also successful in supporting travel and accommodation of eighteen undergraduate students from the Sikkim-Darjeeling hills and Duars, studying in colleges in the region, and as far as Hyderabad and Jharkhand.

Along with discussions and deliberations, the Conclave also offered a space for local artists, artisan and publishers through exhibitions and stalls.

The primary stakeholders of the conclave were:

- Researchers working in climate, development, environmental and social sciences, cultural studies, and urbanisation;
- Government officials (municipal, regional);
- Practitioners and civil society members involved in environmental justice, youth empowerment, urban planning, and tourism;
- Media personalities and communicators;
- Youth leaders;
- Students;
- Artists, filmmakers and other creatives.

The Conclave was designed as a space for free, open deliberations. The key objectives of the conclave were:

1. To lead cross-sectoral dialogue across research, policy and governance;
2. To create opportunities for local representation to shape regional narratives and policy;
3. Create networks and collaborations for emerging research scholars.

The Conclave identified three key spaces for cross-sectoral collaboration and growth:

- Increasing opportunities for mutual learning, dialogue and growth;
- Research-mediated engagement between community, government and practice;
- Closing the gap between youth aspirations and achievements.



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.

Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies, 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.

Dumigaon Reading Room Resource and Education Foundation

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.

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.

OUR STORY SO FAR

OUR MISSION

Reading Himalaya is an all-women-led consultancy focused on development, politics, and the environment in the Eastern Himalaya. Founded by researchers from Sikkim, Darjeeling, and Kalimpong, we are deeply committed to research-driven outcomes that strengthen and support communities, organizations, and institutions in the region.

At Reading Himalaya, we believe that the best social science research—methodologically rigorous, socially relevant, and accessible—can expand knowledge, empower communities, and advance equity and social justice. We are equally committed to fostering knowledge production in and about the region, especially by emerging scholars from the Eastern Himalaya.

OUR PURPOSE

Connect. Create. Change.

Led by researchers with over a decade of experience across academia, industry, and the nonprofit sector in India and abroad, Reading Himalaya provides a platform to connect Himalayan life and society through interdisciplinary research, create sustainable opportunities for researchers, and support work that drives meaningful change for communities across the Eastern Himalaya.

OUR AIMS

- **High-quality research:** Timely, relevant, and accessible to all.
- **Create opportunities:** Build livelihoods through research.
- **Empower local scholars:** Strengthen research capacity in the region.



Dr. Mona Chettri



Dr. Rinan Shah



Dr. Anisa Bhutia

THE CONCLAVE

IN NUMBERS

400

ATTENDEES OVER 2.5 DAYS

18

STUDENT STIPENDS
(TRAVEL + ACCOMMODATION)

OVER

100K

VIEWS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

5

PANELS

3

WORKSHOPS

5

ART DISPLAYS
+
4 STALLS

29

PANELLISTS FROM THE SIKKIM-
DARJEELING HIMALAYA

3

SHORT-FILMS



SHARED
FUTURES
CONCLAVE
Connect. Create. Change

TESTIMONIAL

“

Attending the Shared Futures Conclave, organized by the Reading Himalaya team was a deeply enriching experience for a climate professional like me. For a first-time event, the conclave was able to hold space for young researchers, students, writers, practitioners, and senior professionals equally. I also appreciated the participation of community voices who came together to reflect on the many interconnected challenges faced by the Eastern Himalayan region.

What stood out mostly for me was the diversity of perspectives in the room and across the various panels organised between the two days. Conversations moved seamlessly between responsibilities and rights of the people in the region, the fragile ecology, healthy discussions between researchers and government representatives, along with some interesting sessions on design. Additionally, key discussions between tourism, water and waste and their impact on the ecosystem were held in a thoughtful manner with a place-based solutions approach.

For me personally, the Conclave took me back to memories of a schoolgirl in Gangtok while also reinforcing the importance of listening to the lived experiences of people working on the ground across the Eastern Himalayan region. The opportunity also presented meeting amazing writers and stalwarts doing amazing work in the region. Events such as this are vital for creating more spaces around nurturing dialogues across disciplines, as I left with a renewed sense of urgency, hope and need to contribute towards the collective work happening in the entire region. ”



TEESTA MUKHERJEE

Environment & Development Consultant

CONCLAVE THEMES

The Shared Futures Conclave was organised around current challenges pertinent to the Eastern Himalaya. Thematic thoughts, ideas, and questions were reflected across different moderated discussions, workshops and exhibitions.

Environment, Climate and 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. 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? Can the region continue to absorb the ecological costs of ‘progress,’ or whether it is time to fundamentally rethink what resilience and responsibility mean in the mountains?

Tourism, Urbanisation and 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. Is development in the Himalaya a pathway to prosperity, or a slow-moving disaster in the making?

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. Do current interventions genuinely empower young people—or whether the ‘hustle’ of making ends meet is eroding hope, health, and future prospects in the region?

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? Can inclusive, gender-sensitive, and locally grounded media serve as a tool for social justice, accountability, and cultural survival—or will structural, political, and technological pressures continue to erase the voices that matter most?



Welcome Address

Professor Rajat Kathuria
Dean, School of Humanities and
Social Sciences,
Shiv Nadar University
Delhi



Keynote Speech

Dr. Smriti Basnett
Senior Consultant,
Sikkim Commission on Glacial Hazard
Department of Science and Technology,
Government of Sikkim

PANELS



Panel 1

Too Little, Too Late? Environment, Climate, Environment and Disasters

Panellists:

Mr. Tashi Chopel Lepcha (Department of Education, Government of Sikkim)
Dr. Avantika Thapa (Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment)
Dr. Lakpa Tamang (Calcutta University)
Ms. Abriti Moktan (Pennsylvania State University)
Discussant: Dr. Mona Chettri (Reading Himalaya)



Panel 2

Development of Disaster? Tourism, Urbanisation and Infrastructure

Panellists:

Mr. Niranjana Kamil (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: Prof. Debolina Kundu (National Institute of Urban Affairs)





Panel 3

Hope vs Hustle: Youth: Aspirations and 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, University of North Bengal)



Panel 4

What gets Told: Media, Memory & Representation

Panellists:

Dr. Anisa Bhutia (Indian Institute of Management - Kozhikode)

Ms. Jenisha Singh (University of Kalyani)

Ms. Nangsel Sherpa (The Pomelo Collective and KREA University)

Mr. Nirmal Mangar (The Sikkim Chronicle)

Discussant: Mr. Pema Wangchuk (Summit Times)



Roundtable

Tipping Point Himalaya: Negotiating Shared Futures

Panellists:

Prof. Debolina Kundu (National Institute of Urban Affairs)

Dr. Rinan Shah (Reading Himalaya and Shiv Nadar University)

Dr. Sangay Lachengpa (Sikkim University and Shiv Nadar University)

Professor. Sohel Firdos (Sikkim University)

Discussant: Dr. Teiborlang Kharsyntiew (Jawaharlal Nehru University)



Connect



Create



Change



WORKSHOP #1 THE PROMISE OF MENTAL HEALTH CARE AND SUPPORT IN THE DARJEELING AND SIKKIM HIMALAYA

FACILITATED BY DLR PRERNA, DARJEELING

Taking an intersectional approach, the workshop engaged in thought-provoking, participant-led discussion on the prevailing discourse around mental health, contextualised against the social and cultural landscape of the Eastern Himalaya. The aim was to move beyond a clinical understanding of mental health and frame it within a language and structure that resonated with the participants.

The workshop was attended by a diverse group of participants comprising students, practitioners, and community members, who shared their perspectives openly, which allowed the discussions to flow naturally. The workshop introduced participants to the concepts of 'Thriving, Coping, Struggling' to identify the different stages of their own mental health, and the next steps that could be taken to improve their mental health.

The workshop highlighted mental health as a spectrum, normalised everyday emotional changes and encouraged people to talk more freely about how they are feeling. As the conversations unfolded, participants engaged in candid reflections on how gender, class, caste, privilege, and power shape people's mental health journeys and their access to care.

The discussions focussed on listening to and learning from different experiences, and creating a shared understanding of what meaningful and inclusive mental health support needs to look like in our region.

The facilitators also showcased DLR Prerna's TeaLeaF Mansik Swastha Program to illustrate how teachers and community members could become trusted frontline health supporters in places with limited resources but strong social ties. The participants reflected on the importance of context, past experiences, community ownership, and task-shifting as enhanced mental health support and care pathways in the region. The workshop was an important learning and sharing experience for a resource-strapped region that is simultaneously fragile and marginalised.



Testimonial

“

I learned a lot about how we interpret our own emotions and gained insights into how we should handle them according to various situations. Also, I realised how our privileges give us an undue advantage in terms of mental health and access to resources.

I found the session to be very useful, and felt the need for regular conduct of such sessions. I feel wider outreach for such initiatives. Comprehensive workshops spanning a full day in schools, colleges and universities could be planned for the future. In addition, more stakeholders can be consulted in the process of shaping content.

”

Tathagat G. Sharma
PhD Candidate
North Bengal University



WORKSHOP #2 THE WASTE CRISIS IN THE DARJEELING AND SIKKIM HIMALAYA

FACILITATED BY PRIYADARSHINEE SHRESTHA AND ROSHAN RAI, ZERO WASTE HIMALAYA

The workshop addressed the waste crisis in the Sikkim-Darjeeling Himalaya from a complete lifecycle perspective, to address the urgent and complex nature of this crisis and how it threatens public health and planetary well-being. The prevailing discourse also does not always include power, politics, and contextual recognition of the Himalayan environment.

The workshop looked at the socio-ecological perspectives of the waste crisis with specificities of the Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalaya and brought together spatial, social, economic and political issues that further challenge waste management systems in the region.

Conversations were grounded in local experiences, enabling participants to critically analyse the politics and intersectionalities of waste. The workshop offered interesting insights into participants' perspectives on waste and how waste was a concern for everyone. However, while the participants sought solutions to the waste crisis, their search did not include the personal, and did not go beyond what was visible; the waste crisis was largely perceived to be a crisis of mismanagement of waste.

Taking this understanding as a point of departure, the workshop focussed on the intersections of health, production, design, media, food systems, biodiversity, climate crisis and producer responsibility that are all implicated in the waste crisis.



Testimonial

“

The waste workshop was an integral part of the conclave. The responsibility of people in the region, especially young people, to critically understand waste is crucial for the future of the eastern Himalaya. The workshop created awareness of waste issues in the region, asked participants to consider their own practices, and proposed a number of specific solutions for waste problems and consumer behaviours.

It helped challenge the veneer of pristine mountain environments that are constantly promoted when Sikkim, Darjeeling and the rest of the eastern Himalaya are imagined, promoted, and sold. It also challenges the culture of consumption that permeates society across class, caste and ethnicity. The workshop raised the connection between tourism and waste, but did not shy away from putting responsibility on residents, too.

I came away from the workshop with a deeper understanding of the challenges of waste and consumption in the region. In particular, the images of garbage strewn down the mountainside outside Gangtok were particularly chilling, and continue to haunt me long after the workshop! ”

Professor Duncan McDuie-Ra, Monash University, Malaysia



WORKSHOP #3 FUTURE FRAMES: RETHINKING TOMORROW THROUGH VISUAL NEGATIVES

FACILITATED BY DISHANT PRADHAN, FLAME UNIVERSITY, PUNE AND DR. NIRVAN PRADHAN, NARASINHA DUTT COLLEGE, UNIVERSITY OF CALCUTTA.

This workshop investigated filmmaking as a speculative and critical methodology for reimagining the social, cultural, and ecological futures of the Eastern Himalayas. Workshop participants were introduced to the conceptual idea behind speculation and speculative thinking, and its impact/influence in our everyday lives.

Participants were guided through a process of inquiry that began with identifying contemporary issues and extended towards constructing visual propositions that challenge established ways of seeing and narrating. The workshop aimed to engage with the idea that absence, erasure, and contrast can serve as conceptual tools for generating new perspectives on the future.

The workshop combined reflective discussion with hands-on experimentation in film, positioning moving images as both a form of critical thought and a mode of creative projection. Participants engaged in creative group work that culminated in a short Instagram reel that dealt with different environmental, social and economic challenges as visualised by the respective teams.

The audience participated with enthusiasm, humour and energy to produce their reels, which also made them think about the future.

The workshop was successful in breaking barriers, creating new ways of communication and thinking, and really represented the spirit of the conclave - collaboration is the only way forward.



FUTURE FRAMES: RETHINKING TOMORROW THROUGH VISUAL NEGATIVES



Dr. Nirvan Pradhan



Dishant Pradhan

Testimonial

A Transformative Dive into Himalayan Futures

“

Engaging with 'Future Frames: Rethinking Tomorrow Through Visual Negatives' by Dishant Pradhan and Dr. Nirvan Pradhan was an eye-opening experience. This workshop effectively combined speculative filmmaking with critical thinking, encouraging us to address Eastern Himalayan concerns, which are often missing from mainstream academia, media or any other platform –environmental vulnerability, cultural transformation– with the 'visual negatives' approach. By turning 'visual negatives' into compelling opposites, we produced films that subverted mainstream discourses and nurtured alternative futures based on local knowledge, which is the need of the hour.

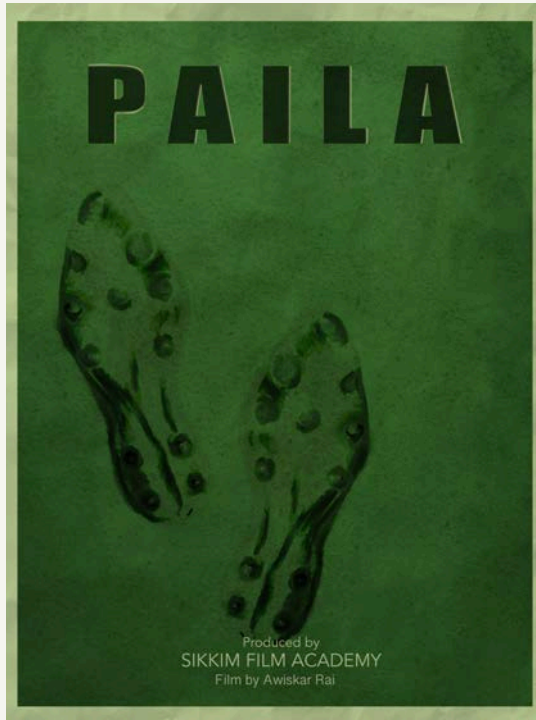
In the vast amount of knowledge produced everywhere, the global consumes the local; it's high time that we pause and try to connect the dots from the knowledge emancipating from the global dimensions to the local lived-realities.

The practical exercise, from issue-mapping to experimenting with filmmaking, encouraged intense introspection and teamwork. Conducted with Nirvana's boundless enthusiasm and chaotic energy, perfectly combined with Dishant's calmness, the workshop used moving images as a medium for both critique and imagination. I walked away with a short film and a fresh set of skills to reimagine tomorrow. A must-attend for anyone interested in visual storytelling and regional futures.”

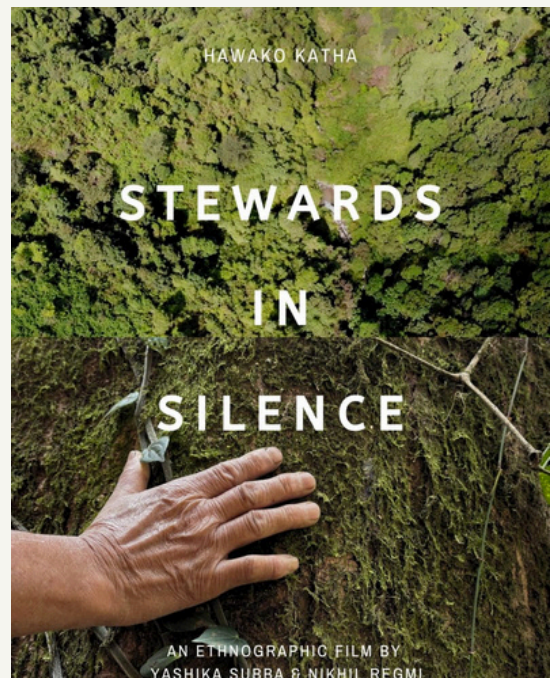


Sushma Subba, Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, Rabindra Bharati University Kolkata, West Bengal, India

DOCUMENTARY SCREENING



Paila
Aviskar Rai



Steward in Silence
Yashika Subba and Nikhil Regmi



Daante Katha
Dishant Pradhan

DOCUMENTARY FILM SCREENING

The film screening took place alongside the Future Frames workshop, giving participants a choice between the two. The film screening lasted over 90 minutes, and clearly vitalised the crowd. The screenings were also designed as a platform for films as well as filmmakers from the region; each filmmaker introduced the film prior to the screening, followed by a question-and-answer session with the moderator and the audience.

The discussion began with some of the technical elements: the equipment used, the locations, access, editing, and the reception of the films, particularly among the subjects featured in the films or the actors who took part. The aim here was to demonstrate how accessible technology can be used to tell visual stories, but also to stress the extraordinary amount of work that goes into filming, editing, sound, and other aspects of filmmaking.

The filmmakers were asked about their challenges with filmmaking, the process – from conceptualizing the idea to executing it. The audience had a number of questions, many of them on the specificities of the films, future projects the filmmakers are interested in, and larger themes that the films raised about the Eastern Himalaya.

The film screening was very well-received. It centred visual storytelling as a legitimate part of understanding the region, its futures, and for showcasing the voices of the region in front and behind the lens. The discussion with the filmmakers, particularly around some of the practical elements, allowed the audience to consider their own potential to make films, and their potential to tell stories visually that can narrate the present and future of the region.

The screening achieved parity for the visual medium with conventional expertise showcased in other Conclave sessions. Showcasing the work of young filmmakers offers an alternative to established voices in the region. Unlike legacy media, which relies upon well-established voices, and social media, which is diffuse and lacks craft, filmmaking requires dedication to an idea, execution, and circulation.

There is a burgeoning potential cohort of film-makers in the Eastern Himalaya, and creating a space for such expressions of stories about the region is a valuable opportunity, which we hope to continue to cultivate through future events.

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY EXHIBITION



Darjeeling Himalaya Initiative



Yojak Tamang



Suveksha Pradhan



Nirvan Pradhan



Aman Pradhan



Shivam Darnal

CROSS-CUTTING THEMES

Conversation, engagements and interactions during the Shared Futures Conclave raised numerous issues that cut across various discussion themes. The discussions helped distill key ideas and challenges across sectors to work towards a sustainable, equitable and just shared future.

Theme 1: Cross-border Entanglements

- The Eastern Himalayas are a strategic borderland, both from a security and environmental perspective. Despite being invisible or not often discussed, the border features prominently in what gets built, what gets preserved, who is allowed to come in, and how development is organised.
- International as well as regional borders play an important role in natural disaster management. Environmental challenges and disasters are often viewed from a state perspective, which limits cross-border adaptation, mitigation and relief strategies.
- Re-framing environmental challenges and natural disasters as trans-boundary issues is essential to better facilitate state-level and community-level responses.
- Borders also play a very important role in the rationale/ reason for infrastructural development in the region, like hydropower, railway and highways, which combine both security and ecology.
- Security discourses often tend to override local concerns around environment, livelihoods and culture. Infrastructural development has also often resulted in more environmental challenges for border communities.
- Regional borders also play a very important role, but are often neglected when considering different issues like illegal migration, unregulated housing, waste, natural resources, trade, drug trafficking, etc.

Theme 2: Shared Accountability and Responsibility

- Low levels of accountability—i.e. limited consultation, no record of decision-making, limited financial transparency—across government and in other institutions was a major concern for participants from across sectors.
- Low accountability leads to inequitable outcomes from development projects, urban growth, disaster relief, and environmental exploitation.
- Citizens feel that decisions are not made in their interests and that there is no accountability for bad decisions, policies or governance.
- Accountability goes beyond the government, and citizens themselves have to take more responsibility for their actions, including violating existing rules and laws.
- Citizens are also responsible for holding government and institutions accountable to achieve better development/relief/environmental outcomes.

Theme 3: Local Participation/ Local Data

- There is a lack of attention to local participation in development projects at the planning, implementation and operational stages.
- Various local groups, especially youth and minority groups, are disconnected from planning and implementation.
- Local data on community realities is scarce, and data that does exist lacks complexity, limiting effective decision-making and planning.
- Limited local data means limited understanding of the impacts of policies, schemes, and development projects.
- Lack of data also makes it difficult to attract the interest or attention of the government on certain issues.
- Without local participation and an array of local data, it is difficult to know whether anything is working and what future needs are emerging.

Theme 4: Limited collaboration between Policy and Practice

- Policy-making at the state level is often influenced by central -government schemes and budgets, which may not always reflect challenges faced at the state and community level.
- Limited collaboration between governance and practice can also exacerbate feelings of alienation from different policies that are implemented; community members do not feel invested, heard, or worse, lose faith in due process.
- This gap in collaboration is most felt as issues related to the environment, and the youth, especially around mental health, livelihoods, drugs and other social issues that are prominent in the region.
- Context-specific policies therefore, call for greater engagement between different sectors, and the recognition of practitioners and researchers as equal partners.

SHARED FUTURES CONCLAVE 2025 OUTCOMES

- **Meaningful cross-sectoral interaction and collaboration**

The Shared Futures Conclave was successful in creating a space for meaningful interaction and engagement across different sectors, and the local community. Representatives from each sector shared their thoughts, opinions and learnings candidly with each other. Panel discussions and post-panel interactions reinforced the need and importance of independent, non-partisan stakeholders like Reading Himalaya, and events like the Shared Futures Conclave in leading intersectoral collaborations.

- **Identifying local, context-specific challenges**

The Conclave was successful in creating a safe and participatory space, enabling panelists and participants alike to voice their thoughts and opinions. This resulted in identifying various concerns and challenges which were absent from current policies or were not being discussed in depth. Particularly, concerns around alienation of the youth from their culture, unemployment, environmental and social challenges as a result of urbanisation, impacts of infrastructural development, etc. These discussions will be vital in creating networks, and generating research and policy outcomes that are actually relevant for Himalayan communities.

- **Amplifying local representation on the Eastern Himalaya**

The Conclave was successful in amplifying the visibility and representation of researchers, artists, creatives and students from the region. The Shared Futures Conclave is the only event in the Eastern Himalaya which offered a unique discussion format that combined research, policy and practice, and one where all the panellists, artists and creatives belonged to the Eastern Himalaya. This will help generate recognition and confidence in local skills and capacity, across the community, and even nationally. The overwhelming interest and participation from across the region and the country, has also been vital in boosting recognition and confidence in the skill and capacity of researchers, practitioners, artists and different parts of the local government. This recognition will lead to more exposure, recognition and opportunities for researchers, practitioners, students, creatives, etc.

SHARED FUTURES CONCLAVE 2025

OUTCOMES

OUTCOMES FOR READING HIMALAYA

- Over 400 people attended the Conclave from across the region and from other parts of India. Participation highlighted public interest and engagement in discussions about social, economic, and environmental issues and ways forward.
- There is a clear need for events that can bring together participants from different sectors into a safe and productive space. The independence of Reading Himalaya is crucial to creating this space and facilitating discussions on the future of the region with those able to act.
- Reading Himalaya is a thought leader in this space, driven by the capabilities of its members, its social capital in the region, and the intellectual underpinnings to shape meaningful discussion rather than just activity.
- From the panels and discussions throughout the conclave, clear gaps emerged for meaningful research that can be taken up by Reading Himalaya on its own and in collaboration with other organisations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Reading Himalaya

- Ongoing quadripartite relationship between government, researchers, practitioners and community facilitated by Reading Himalaya.
- Creating regular spaces for interaction between different sectors, which may take various forms, including:
 - i. Annual or biannual conclave.
 - ii. Gangtok Policy Dialogue around key issues.
 - iii. Youth Summit /Conclave.
 - iv. Arts-based events to parallel more conventional research.
- Identifying new cross-border collaborations (regional) and across the Eastern Himalaya (e.g. Arunachal Pradesh, Bhutan).
- A collaborative space for people to contribute their knowledge and skills.

For Practitioners

- Work collaboratively with researchers and the community in identifying issues and evaluating policy and other interventions.
- Work collaboratively and critically with the government to identify and address challenges facing different communities in the region.
- Continue to represent the voices of communities across the region and ensure that underrepresented voices are heard.

For Government (municipal, district, state)

- Government to be more open to input from researchers and practitioners.
- Government to commission more local data and community participation, especially at municipal and district levels.
- Systematic integration of scientific data into planning, development, and assessment of social impacts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Shared Futures Conclave 2025 was a truly collaborative event, a testament to confidence in the vision of the conclave and the future of the Eastern Himalaya.

We would like to thank our friends, well-wishers and supporters for their financial contributions:

- Dr. Ruth Gamble, Australia
- KCL Narasimham, San Francisco, USA
- Professor Duncan McDuie-Ra, Australia
- Urvashi Chettri, Gangtok, Sikkim
- Nivana Shah, Bangalore, Karnataka
- Malcolm O'Toole, Australia
- Dr. Nirvan Pradhan, Kolkata, West Bengal
- Adarsh Chettri, Gangtok, Sikkim
- Cherysh Karuvely, Visakhapatnam, AP
- Dr. Tridibesh Dey, Netherlands
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WE THANK YOU

ANNEXURES

Panel Summaries

DAY 1

Throughout the Conclave, there was an active choice to bring together different groups of people to convene and discuss panel topics. We had representation from government, academia, youth, media and practitioners, bringing different sectors into conversation with one another.

Panel 1: Too Little, Too Late: Environment, Climate and Disasters

Panelists:

Mr. Tashi Chopel Lepcha (Government of Sikkim)

Dr. Avantika Thapa (Ashoka Trust for Research in the Ecology and Environment)

Dr. Lakpa Tamang (Calcutta University)

Ms. Abriti Moktan (Penn State University)

Discussant: Dr. Mona Chettri (Reading Himalaya)

The discussant, Dr Chettri, asked the panellists whether it is too late for us to engage with the questions of our environment, climate and disasters? Abriti Moktan elaborated on the multiple definitions of 'development' in Nepal and Darjeeling and the differences between urban and rural experiences. Along with the lived experience, we need flexible policy models that evolve over time and help us prepare for disasters. Traditional development language can block creative solutions, whereas grassroots dialogues can be more productive.

Dr. Lakpa Tamang elaborated on the fragility of the Himalayan region through three challenges: local data scarcity, environmental stress on rivers and water resources, and frequent disasters like landslides. Traditional development and policy-making have failed to account for lived realities in many parts of the region. Dr. Lakpa emphasized the need for locally grounded scientific institutions that can generate specific data. This would help better understand development needs and the impacts of development policies.

Dr. Avantika Thapa reminded us that we live in one of the youngest, most dynamic mountain systems. In terms of sustainable development, Dr. Avantika elaborated that sustainable building is possible, but it would require stricter rules, incentives and accountability from contractors and the government. And in regions like the Himalaya, where things are rapidly urbanizing, cultural change and aspirations often outpace policy implementation.

Tashi Chopel Lepcha mentioned that two weeks before the recent lake outburst, studies and early warning systems were already underway. But the biggest problem remained the lack of public awareness and urgency towards the possibility of a calamity. After the landslide, 500 houses along the river were destroyed, and yet reconstruction began in the same location, exposing the community to future danger. As such, public awareness and behavior are crucial for dealing with future disasters alongside government planning and responses.

Overarching Insights:

1. Localisation is key: Development programmes, policies and strategies should be polycentric, flexible and made in consultation with life on the ground.
2. Calls for a non-Eurocentric research methodology.
3. Data and Accountability Gaps: Better systems and processes are to be kept in place and monitored in real time to make substantial changes.
4. Human Factors: A better understanding of cultural beliefs is required through collaboration across sectors.

Panel 2: Development or Disaster: Tourism, Urbanisation and Infrastructure

This panel focused on the question: Is the dominant understanding of development based on Gross Domestic Product (GDP) enough, or do we need to rethink what development means? Is the rapid urbanization, infrastructure, and tourism taking place in the region a sign of development or a disaster waiting to happen? To discuss these ideas, four people from different domains of public life were invited to share their thoughts on this occasion.

Panelists:

Ms. Priyadarshinee Shrestha (Zero Waste Himalaya)

Professor Shrawan Acharya (Jawaharlal Nehru University)

Mr. Dawa Sangpo Bhutia (Yambong Ecotourism Committee and Sanctuary Asia Mud on Boots Project)

Mr. Niranjana Kapil (Urban Development and Housing Department, Government of Sikkim)

Discussant: Prof. Debolina Kundu (National Institute of Urban Affairs)

Debolina Kundu started the panel focusing on the idea of 'census towns' becoming more prevalent in recent years: towns with rural spaces with urban features. The distinction between urban and rural in the mountain towns cannot be established in clear categories.

Priya Shrestha mentioned that meaningful change in the hills depends on the questions: Where to build? How to build? Who decides? Such pertinent questions become important when we are trying to understand the 'invisible infrastructure' that exists, like drainage, soil stability, etc. Further, she elaborated how the homestay expansion raises questions as to who development is really for.

In connection with urban development, Niranjana Kapil suggests that disasters are both man-made and natural. There is a shift in planning from reactive to proactive, adding layers like environment, gender, and social impact to planning assessments. He also acknowledged the need for multidisciplinary detailed project reports (DPR) to better understand the needs of communities.

Dawa Sangpo Bhutia, shared the experience of new roads in his village. Roads bring connectivity but also creates social changes. For example, an increased flow of junk food and changing consumption patterns in his village. Furthermore, road connectivity created landslides due to poor surveying and construction.

Prof. Shrawan Acharya talked about the importance of the Teesta as one ecological zone. This kind of thinking can be extended to understanding the impacts of infrastructure, such as the railway being built to Rangpo, which will impact the entire region. A further point, urban development in Sikkim is controlled by the state government, whereas in Darjeeling, it is managed by the GTA with far fewer resources. Further, he mentioned that tourism is expanding into rural areas, leading to land alienation and other challenges.

Overarching Insights:

1. Connectivity is not the sole factor when a road construction takes place. What are the other impacts? A holistic approach to the unintended consequences of infrastructure development is necessary.
2. Ecological interdependence and addressing governance gaps: Fixing just one cause or one problem is not going to solve the region's challenges.
3. Transition from reactive to proactive: planners need to move from reacting to disasters to being proactive and thinking about different invisible infrastructures that are at place to help us in the future.

Roundtable: Tipping Point Himalaya

The session for the roundtable started with the fundamental question:
'Have the Himalayas reached a tipping point?'

These questions were contextualized through visible shifts in our everyday lives. The problems of urbanisation, questions of drying springs, water scarcity across the Himalaya, infrastructure development and disasters. With the news of floods and landslides taking place in both eastern and western Himalaya, showcases a tipping point that we are dealing with and the aftermath.

Panellists:

Prof. Debolina Kundu (National Institute of Urban Affairs)

Dr. Rinan Shah (Shiv Nadar University/Reading Himalaya)

Prof. Sohail Firdos (Sikkim University)

Dr. Sangay Lachenpa (Shiv Nadar University/Sikkim University)

Discussant: Dr. Teiborlang Kharsyntiew (Jawaharlal Nehru University)

Prof. Debolina Kundu discussed how Himalayan cities fit within the broader framework of urbanisation. Mountain towns lack the basic infrastructure to sustain the urbanisation that is taking place in these spaces. As mentioned in the Panel 2 discussion, there is a need to shift from reactive crisis response to proactive planning if towns are to sustain growth. Prof. Debolina Kundu also noted that capacity assessments rarely inform policy because growth is driven by short-term demands, not ecological limits.

Dr. Rinan Shah explored urban water conflicts in Darjeeling. The Darjeeling Municipality controls piped supply, but groundwater and springs often operate under informal ownership. The community springs are often 'donated' and governed by unwritten rules and maintained through local cooperation. Therefore, conflicts emerge at individual, community, and institutional levels. In further problematizing the notion of saving the Darjeeling's chronic water shortage, Dr. Shah raised a crucial point: 'how do we save what we do not receive'?

Talking about development, Dr. Sohail Firdos linked economic development to environmental degradation. Additionally, private vehicle use has exploded, which in turn creates pollution, congestion and pressure for our environment, contributing to new diseases and environmental hazards. Bringing all these points to the forefront, Dr. Firdos mentioned that growth models in the Himalaya need rethinking, stating that, 'if your solution creates a problem somewhere else, then you haven't solved anything'.

Drawing from his work in Lachen and the India-China borderlands, Dr. Sangay Lachenpa stressed that towns in Sikkim's border regions experience a constant sense of urgency, especially given that 'competition' with neighbouring countries leads to rapid development with little planning. The strategic importance of the towns in the Himalaya supersedes everything else. The Himalayas exist in a 'co-periphery within a periphery', simultaneously marginal yet geopolitically central. The security discourses of the Himalaya override local environmental and livelihood concerns, leaving little negotiation space for communities.

Panel 3: Hope vs Hustle: Youth Aspirations and Challenges

This panel discussed youth, focusing on the following questions: What are the aspirations of the youth? How are they making sense of the uncertain times that we are living in? What are the problems with regard to education and job prospects? What dilemmas are the youth facing?

Panel Members:

Mr. Abhilash Kumai (Eastern Himalaya Foundation)

Ms. Aparajita Rai (IPS) (Superintendent of Police, Kalimpong)

Dr. Nancy Lhasungpa (Nar Bahadur Bhandari Government College)

Ms Timsong Lepcha (Reading Himalaya)

Discussant: Dr. Binayak Sundas (Centre for Himalayan Studies, North Bengal University)

Timsong Lepcha mentioned that the youth feel their degrees hold little value. Government jobs are valued in society, but for many young people, they are seen as dreary and also scarce. There are not enough opportunities for the youth to explore their true potential. The employment opportunities in the private sector are also limited, and employment scarcity leads to disillusionment. The future requires youth to work together to find solutions on their terms.

Elaborating on the point of the higher education crisis, Dr. Nancy Lhasungpa mentioned how the youth are more qualified than ever but face unemployment. Degrees are disconnected from employability skills, raising questions of access, quality and value. Further, she summarized the findings from the 2019 AIMS, 'Magnitude of Substance Abuse in India.' Sikkim was among the highest in substance abuse indicators. The age of introduction is adolescence, and treatment often comes only in early adulthood.

Abhilash Kumai mentioned the point of stress and emotional issues among the region's youth. According to Mr. Abhilash, youth face a crisis due to financial pressures and a lack of guidance and mentorship. Without adequate guidance from within and outside the family, youth are more vulnerable.

Talking through the perspective of ambition, Aparajita Rai mentioned how ambition once had clearer pathways. She emphasized that clearing UPSC is not a measure of worth. She mentioned that the current shift towards digital social and consumer habits is harmful, particularly when it leads to drug abuse and other addictions.

Overarching Insight:

1. Push for Quality education that involves critical thinking and skill-based learning to help with the unemployment gap.
2. Presence of youth inclusion in decision-making would help turn the aspirations into reality.
3. Creating mentorship opportunities for young people through NGOs and other associations.
4. Ethical concerns around exams and jobs create disillusionment with the government systems.

Panel 4: What gets told? Media, Memory and Representation

The media plays a very important role across the region. Importantly, the question of who has access and which stories are told must be asked. With the mainstream media often ignoring the everyday problems of the Himalaya, other media provide space for conversations to flourish. This panel discussed the idea of representation, voice and power among different media.

Panelists:

Mr. Nirmal Mangar (Journalist, The Sikkim Chronicle)

Dr. Anisa Bhutia (IIM, Kozhikode/ Reading Himalaya)

Ms. Jenisha Singh (University of Kalyani)

Ms. Nangsel Sherpa (The Pomelo Collective/ KREA University)

Discussant: Mr. Pema Wangchuk (Summit Times)

Talking about the shift that has come in the mediascape, Nirmal Mangar, suggested that traditional journalism in Sikkim was stronger before digital corporatization. In the age of digital media, the focus is on prioritizing revenue, PR content, and virality. While the print media still upholds journalistic integrity, questions on gender, disability, and marginalized voices remain inadequately represented in digital media.

Elaborating on the point of representation, Jenisha Singh mentioned how Darjeeling's narrative has been channelled through the Gorkhaland Movement, but caste and class hierarchies are part of these narratives too. Further, she mentioned how it is the elitist groups that dominate discourse and even within the pro-Gorkha movements, while Dalit voices remain marginalized and layered representation is missing. Caste-based incidents that come to the front reveals how the hill society lives with deep biases that need to be acknowledged and addressed.

Nangsel Sherpa elaborated on how the idea of representation is tied to the idea of belonging. Her platform, “The Pomelo Collective”, explores the misfit identities and mixed heritage experiences, showing the ways representation is developed outside mainstream media. The media should not mirror the flawed societies that exist but must challenge dominant narratives that are in place.

Dr. Anisa Bhutia discussed the ways identities are fluid and intersectional in Kalimpong. There is no one identity or series of set identities for all people in the Himalaya. Further, elaborating on the representations of different communities and people, we hardly see the migrant population of the region represented in the media. Furthermore, the media often boxes communities into singular identities. But it is time for multiple narratives of Himalayan life to be at the centre stage of media, memory, and representation.

Overarching Insights:

1. Presence of multiple, mixed, fluid identities in the Himalaya needs to find space in the media.
2. Acknowledgement, representation and dialogue of the internal hierarchies that exist and the biases that we live with in our Himalayan society.
3. Paradox of digital democratization. On the one hand, we have access to digital media, but media now are run on the basis of TRP and virality. More media does not equate to more representation.