

Report

Report on बाउको धुरी छैन (*Bāuko Dhurī Chhaina*; Father Has No Roof Over His Head) Photo Exhibition in Kalimpong, India

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Figure 1. Exhibition visitors read details from Ang Tsering's logbook.
Photo: The Confluence Collective.



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Figure 2. Viewers looking at photographs. Photo: The Confluence Collective.

From 21 to 27 February 2026, a photo exhibition titled बाउको धुरी छैन (*Bāuko Dhurī Chhaina*; Father Has No Roof Over His Head) was held at the Industrial Park in Kalimpong, India. It was organized by the Confluence Collective, a group of photographers and researchers from the Darjeeling–Sikkim Himalayas, in collaboration with the Royal Geographical Society, the UKRI Arts and Humanities Research Council, the University of Lancashire, and the Deutscher Alpenverein (German Alpine Club). It was also part of The Other Everests (2021–2024), an interdisciplinary research project re-examining the legacy of the British Mount Everest expeditions (1921–1924) on their centenary.

The stories of the people from the Himalayas who dedicated their lives and labor to aid colonial rulers to navigate the highest peaks in the world have long remained hidden. Their narratives, rarely spoken or written and almost erased from history, are now being unearthed. The photo exhibition बाउको धुरी छैन (Father Has No Roof Over His Head) sought to

recover such stories, rarely shared with the wider public. The exhibition not only showcased photographs of the early Everest expeditions but also presented a year of research. Throughout 2025, the Confluence Collective engaged with the families of laborers who had worked in the expeditions, conducting interviews with family members they were able to trace across the Darjeeling Hills. Through recollections of memories and shared stories of their fathers and great-grandfathers, the team pieced together fragments of history that photographs alone could not reveal. Meeting the families of these forgotten Himalayan laborers added another dimension to the exhibition. It became not only a story of those who journeyed into the mountains, but also of the people and places they left behind. Driven by economic precarity, these men departed their homes with no certainty of return, leaving behind parents, wives, and children who endured a state of constant waiting, uncertain whether their sons, husbands, and fathers were alive, injured, or lost to the mountains.



Figure 3. A spectator viewing Ang Tsering's section. Photo: The Confluence Collective.

The exhibition shares the stories of two Himalayan expedition members. Shri Ang Tsering Sherpa (1904–2002), was born in Thame, Nepal, and migrated to Darjeeling in 1920 in search of a livelihood; he was a twenty-year-old porter on the 1924 Everest expedition. He returned to Everest three further times (1933, 1952, and 1960) but never summited, out of deeply held religious conviction. In 1934 he joined the German Nanga Parbat expedition, which ended in disaster. Having suffered severe frostbite to his feet and spent more than a year in hospital, he stopped climbing for almost two decades, resuming only in 1952 and continuing as a *sardar* (expedition foreman) until the age of sixty-nine. In 1954, he was part of the Daily Mail British Joint Yeti Expedition in Nepal, accompanied by his eldest son Dawa Temba (1934–2001), who is also featured in the exhibition. On this expedition Ang Tsering found what were taken to be yeti tracks, for which he received a reward of 100 Nepalese rupees. He was highly decorated, receiving the German Red Cross and the Himalayan Club Tiger Medal among other honours.

His life as a mountaineer was nonetheless shaped by altitude, risk, and responsibility. Several accounts describe him adopting the children of porters who had died, and supporting others in the profession. For him and for many other local men, climbing was not an ambition but a livelihood: a dangerous and relentless profession undertaken to sustain families at home. His family members shared that Ang Tsering used to say, “We went to earn money. No one had the ambition to climb Everest.”

Another story is that of Shri Chheten Wangdi, an interpreter on the 1921 Everest expedition. Wangdi was born in Darjeeling and later settled in Pedong, Kalimpong. He was fluent in English and in several Tibetan dialects and was an alumnus of Calcutta Boys’ High School. He had an illustrious career, having served as a Captain in the Tibetan army and then the Indian army, stationed in Egypt during World War I. After the expedition he taught Tibetan in the Delhi School of Foreign Languages and established Pedong’s first flour and grain mill. Chheten Wangdi is also said to have



Figure 4. Students observing Chheten Wangdi's photographs. Photo: The Confluence Collective.

been involved in aiding the recognition of Tibetans as Indian citizens, according to his family, around the time of Independence, he helped organise a delegation to Delhi to petition Jawaharlal Nehru for Indian citizenship for Tibetans who had arrived in India before Independence. The family recalls that the delegation's request was subsequently approved. Remarkably, he was among the few non-European collaborators paid at par with his English counterparts, a rarity at the time. His story is a blend of intellect and cultural negotiation, highlighting the often-overlooked local expertise that made the Everest expeditions possible.

On the exhibition's opening day (21 February), members of both families were in attendance. Ang Tsering Sherpa's daughters, Daki Sherpa and Phur Diki Sherpa, were present with their family, alongside Chheten Wangdi Bhutia's grandson Pintso Bhutia and his wife Doma Lhamu Bhutia, as well as their great-grandsons Phelgay Bhutia, Rabgay Bhutia, and Hoiser Bhutia, who also attended with their families. After the ribbon cutting,

the family members walked through the exhibition, recounting memories of their relatives. This was followed by a *tsampa* (roasted barley flour) and butter-tea making activity led by Phur Diki and Doma Lhamu, which team members and the audience later joined. The activity drew attention to the importance of *tsampa*, which sustained laborers through long expeditions. Family members of Shri Ang Tsering and Shri Chheten Wangdi also shared personal memories.

On 22 February, a talk and discussion were led by Pema Wangchuk Dorjee, senior journalist from Sikkim and co-author of *Khangchendzonga: Sacred Summit*. His lecture, titled The Sacred Dimensions of Khangchendzonga, highlighted the contrast between local understandings of mountains as sacred beings and the dominant colonial narratives of conquest and discovery that shaped early Himalayan expeditions. It offered a counterpoint to imperial histories, inviting the audience to reflect on traditions of reverence that continue to shape life in the Himalayan region.



Figure 5. Family members of Ang Tsering and Chhete Wangdi inaugurate the exhibition. Photo: The Confluence Collective.



Figure 6. The family members of Ang Tsering and Chhete Wangdi. Photo: The Confluence Collective.



Figure 7. Talk on 'The Sacred Dimensions of Khangchendzonga' by Pema Wangchuk. Photo: The Confluence Collective.



Figure 8. Talk on 'Migration and Labour in the Eastern Himalayas' by Ambika Rai. Photo: The Confluence Collective.



Figures 9 and 10. Scenes from the 'Myriad Ways of Seeing: Exploring Local Mountaineering Labour through Photographs, Objects, and Stories' workshop by Bibhusha Rai and Ambika Rai. Photo: The Confluence Collective.



Figures 11 and 12. Visitors interacting with the exhibition. Photo: The Confluence Collective.



Figures 13 and 14. Visitors walking around the exhibition at nightfall. Photo: The Confluence Collective.

On 24 February, one of the present authors, Ambika Rai, a researcher and Assistant Professor at Sikkim Manipal University, gave a talk titled Migration and Labour in the Eastern Himalayas. This session examined the historical trajectories of migration in the region, with particular focus on labor migration from Nepal to the Darjeeling Hills. It revealed how colonial projects drew Nepali inhabitants to seek employment within the colonial economy in the Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalayas. The talk concluded with an interactive discussion with the audience.

On 25 February, a workshop was conducted by both the authors, Bibhusha Rai, a PhD scholar alongside Ambika Rai. Titled 'Myriad Ways of Seeing: Exploring Local Mountaineering Labour through Photographs, Objects, and Stories', the workshop engaged more than eighty students from Kalimpong's schools and colleges (Scottish Universities Mission Institution, Government High School, Central School for Tibetans, Rockvale Academy, Dr. Graham's Homes, Paramount School, Narayana School, Cluny Women's College, Albella Boys Home, Pranami Balika Vidya Mandir, and Army Public School). Participants explored the lives of porters, guides, interpreters, and animals involved in early Himalayan expeditions through a guided walkthrough of the exhibition. Each student then selected a photograph that resonated with them and responded in writing, in drawing, or both. The workshop concluded with a post-card-writing activity, inviting participants to write letters to the Himalayan laborers, an animal, or even to the mountain itself. The Confluence Collective intends to publish a zine based on the outcomes of the workshop.

The exhibition was unprecedented: for the first time, photographs long held in the colonial archives of the Royal Geographical Society were made accessible to the people of the Himalayan region from which the expedition laborers were recruited. Through this project, audiences encountered the often-forgotten history of labor migration in the Eastern Himalayas.

Laborers—porters, cooks, interpreters, and sardars were brought to the forefront, offering a perspective largely absent from colonial writings. These men bore the physical burdens of British expeditions, and their local knowledge shaped routes and made summits possible, yet they were seldom given due recognition. This exhibition marks an important step toward that recognition, even as many hidden and overlooked stories of the Eastern Himalayas remain to be uncovered.

The exhibition's title, बाउको धुरी छैन (Father Has No Roof Over His Head), originates from a family memory passed down through generations. Ang Tsering Sherpa's wife, Passang Diki Sherpa, would tell their children that their migrant father had no roof over his head, as his work kept him far away in the high mountains. In Himalayan culture, the *dhuri* is the roof ridge, the backbone of a house. To have none is to live without shelter, permanence, or rest. The exhibition seeks to preserve the collective memory of Himalayan laborers, asserting that the true backbone of Everest history was not the summit but the porters who bore the burdens, the interpreters who bridged words and worlds, the sacred mountains they honored, and the families they left behind.

For more details about the project visit:
<https://www.theconfluencecollective.com>

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