

Editorial

Survivors of Neglect in a Narrowing World

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On 11 May, here in Tromsø, Divya Rao and I spent the day at a symposium we had organized, *Hierarchies of Earth: Caste, Indigeneity, and the Politics of Land, Life, and Ecological Futures*. We asked who is counted as fully a person, whose knowledge is treated as knowledge, and whose exposure to harm is considered worth attending to. Maya Sunde Singh spoke about the deliberate narrowing of civil society space for Dalit and Adivasi communities in India. It was not easy to hear this from the considerable safety of a Norwegian university. In the corridors, people spoke mostly about which field sites and questions remained workable. We had adapted to the narrowing so gradually

that we now remarked on it mainly among ourselves. We ended with Moumita Sen and Saptarshi Mandal's film *A Necessary Demon*, about an Indigenous movement in eastern India that reclaims a figure described as a demon in Hindu mythology as an ancestral king: accepting the name and refusing what it was meant to imply. Sen calls this mythopolitics.

Four days later, Chief Justice of India Surya Kant was widely reported as referring during a Supreme Court hearing to some unemployed young people who turned to media work or RTI activism as “cockroaches,” and to those who attacked the system as “parasites of society.” He said the following day that the comments

had been misquoted and were directed only at people entering professions with fake degrees. Whatever the intended scope, the reported words had already traveled. On 16 May, Abhijeet Dipke, a former Aam Aadmi Party social-media volunteer, asked online: *What if all the cockroaches come together?* Within days the Cockroach Janta Party existed, with a website calling itself the *Voice of the Lazy & Unemployed* and millions of followers. On 17 May, volunteers in insect costumes cleaned trash from the Yamuna riverbank.

Anyone who had seen Sen and Mandal's film would have recognized the maneuver. A demon becomes an ancestral king; a cockroach becomes proof



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that the neglected can survive. The movement did not remain online. By June it was organizing protests over the leaked national medical entrance examination and the government's decision to void the results and order a retest. On 25 July Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan resigned, and the movement stood down after the government accepted its demands, including compensation for the families of students who had died by suicide after the leak was discovered and a retest ordered. The movement counted twenty-one such deaths, though the number has not been independently verified. I do not want the comic register of the movement to obscure them.

India was not the first. In Bangladesh in July 2024, Sheikh Hasina asked whether quota benefits should go to “the grandchildren of Razakars”—and protesters heard it as a name applied to them. Three weeks later she had left the country. A later UN investigation estimated that as many as 1,400 people were killed between 1 July and 15 August. Nepal followed in September 2025, as our previous issue recorded. The #NepoBaby hashtag had been borrowed from Indonesia; seventy-four people were dead by 22 September; and a Discord poll helped establish former chief justice Sushila Karki as the protesters’

preferred interim leader before the president appointed her. I am wary of making these episodes into a single pattern. Each involved young people with narrowing prospects and governments that did not take them seriously until they were in the streets. Beyond that, the resemblance is thin. Whether the fearlessness lasts is another matter, and here I have no confidence at all.

I had not planned this issue around any of that. But these events clarify what HIMALAYA should do. The journal began in 1972, and more than half a century later it remains a place for historically grounded work on the Himalayan region and its diasporas. This is Volume 45, Issue 1 (Summer 2026). Its cover reproduces Tenzin Nyima Bhutia’s photograph of a mural by the late Michael Shen in Kalimpong’s Mary Mother of God Church: Mary seated on a lotus, with St Peter’s Basilica and the Kalimpong church below her. Several contributions speak, across a century, to the question that the controversy inadvertently raised: whose work is visible, and who is treated as a burden.

Ambika Rai and Bibhusha Rai report on the बाउको धुरी छैन (*Bāuko Dhurī Chhaina; Father Has No Roof Over His Head*) exhibition held in Kalimpong in February, which brought photographs from the Royal Geographical Society’s archives back to the region

where the men in them had been recruited. Their subjects are the porters, cooks, interpreters and *sardars* of the early Everest expeditions. In the British record, where they appear at all, they are often ledger entries. Ang Tsering Sherpa worked on Everest expeditions across four decades and took in the children of porters who did not return. His family recall him putting it plainly: “We went to earn money. No one had the ambition to climb Everest.” The title is what his wife told their children about their absent father. A *dhuri* is the ridge of a roof, and to be without one is to be without shelter, permanence or rest. I leave the two vocabularies—heroic exploration and paid work—beside one another.

Prince Tomar stays with labor of this kind, a generation on and considerably further west. His account of road building in Ladakh follows the making of a modern border frontier through the hands that cut and maintain it—hands that have remained largely invisible in national discourse and scholarship. He proposes *eventfulness* as a way of reading daily routines that appear mundane but are also acts of border-making. Two field poems from Nubra and Khardung form part of the method.

Geoff Childs, Sienna Craig, Tashi Tsering Ghale, Tashi Wongdi Gurung, Yungdrung Tsewang Gurung, Kristine

Hildebrandt, Ritar Lhakpa Lama and Sonam Lama work with three decades of Nepali census data from Tsum-Nubri, Manang, Mustang and Dolpo. They ask what happens to a place when its young people leave. Several of these communities receive migrants even as they lose their own children, so a valley's ethnic and linguistic composition may change considerably without its headcount falling much. Of the factors they consider, road access appears to matter most.

Anna Szymoszyn, of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology at the Polish Academy of Sciences, has followed young people from Mustang and Dolpo for almost two decades, from boarding schools in India and Kathmandu into adulthood. She calls her method ethnography "from the inside": she has been a teacher and volunteer in their schools and, for some, a legal guardian. Her article traces the transcultural identities they have built, and asks what happens when young people conclude that their society cannot make room for them and leave.

Two further contributions have little to do with any of this, and I recommend them without apology. Seyiechonu Kera documents the pottery of Khuzama village among the Angami Nagas. I should say, having been careless about this elsewhere, that the

Naga areas of the Indo-Myanmar borderlands are not straightforwardly "Himalayan," and that Naga readers are right to insist on the distinction. The craft was practiced almost entirely by women and is now in the hands of a few aging potters. Kera learned it from an eighty-eight-year-old potter, and her photographs of extraction, pounding, slab-building and firing form a remarkably full record of a tradition that may not outlive its present practitioners.

Tenzin Nyima Bhutia and Pawan Rai, whose subject supplies our cover, write on Kalimpong's Mary Mother of God Church. With its tiered roof, painted woodwork and Mary in a *chhupa*, it resembles a Buddhist monastery so thoroughly that Tibetan Buddhist visitors sometimes circumambulate it with prayer beads, taking it for a *gumba*. They read the church as both a contact zone and a sacred space. The mistaken identification matters: sacred form may travel more readily than the meanings attached to it.

Finally, the issue includes five book reviews, among them one on Michael Hutt's translation of Buddhisagar's *Karnali Blues*, with responses from both translator and author. Our book review editor, Zezhou Yang at the National University of Singapore, commissioned and assembled the section single-handedly.

The journal owes him more than a line in an editorial.

The symposium gave me a frame I had not expected to need within the week: many political arguments in South Asia turn on the assignment of names—demon, Razakar, cockroach, parasite—and on whether the people named accept the terms or hand them back. Less comfortably, we had spent a day in a warm auditorium above the Arctic Circle taking stock of what could no longer safely be researched or said, then gone to dinner in a mood of quiet accommodation. In the same week, people with immeasurably more to lose stopped making that calculation. I do not offer this as a rebuke to colleagues whose caution is rational; I share it. But many of the people whose labor built the roads, carried the loads, fired the pots and filled the archives were barely counted at all. A generation that heard itself described as vermin has decided, with some style, to count itself. Whether that holds through the autumn is a question I expect we will return to in these pages, and precisely the kind of question HIMALAYA should keep open.

Michael T. Heneise
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