

Title: Introduction

Author(s): Kavita Pai

Name of the Publication: Transarea Journal

ISSN: 3107-7080 (Online)

Volume Number: I

Issue Number: 2

Month and Year: Autumn Issue (October), 2025

Page Number: iii–iv

Publisher: Somaiya Vidyavihar University

Introduction

The term ‘heritage’ refers to the cultures, traditions, material remains, and intangible knowledge of a particular society. In modern discourse however heritage is linked more often than not to the nation-state. The projected past and the future aspirations of the nation are enshrined in museums whose comprehensive narratives belie a history of erasure. Ideas, peoples, belief systems, and ways of life that are excluded from the mainstream narrative, when transformed into exotica, achieve hyper-visibility through tourism. The globalised world has brought the hunt for unexplored frontiers, once a privileged pastime, within the reach of the middle class. With the surge in heritage driven tourism, entire societies have capitalised on the boom, museumising themselves for easy consumption.

While climate change, unsustainable development, and tourism are bringing about rapid changes in communities unequipped to deal with them, there has never been a better time paradoxically for heritage and conservation related activities. Tourism, the very cause of much of the danger posed to fragile regions like the Himalayas, is also the driver of change in these parts. Needless to say, conservation efforts undertaken with an eye on the paying customer can only remain cosmetic, causing more harm than benefit. The commodification of heritage has swept more fundamental questions under the carpet such as—what is heritage and who defines it? How do individuals and communities negotiate their heritage? How does heritage discourse mediate ownership and belonging in a local community, or for that matter, the nation? How are conflicts on heritage, its conservation or preservation, mediated? Given a plurality of ‘authentic’ heritage claims, what are some of the actual and ideal modes of resolution?

These were some of the questions posed to participants in the first conference of the Centre for Himalayan and Mountain Studies held in Dehradun from January 6 to January 7, 2025. Further, scholars, researchers, and activists were invited to engage with the contested heritage of the Indian nation, particularly the narratives casting the Himalayas as its geographical and metaphorical crown. How do nationalist imaginings differ from other articulations of ‘Himalayan Heritage,’ if there is such a thing? How does the lens of the nation-state obscure trans-national ways of inhabiting and making sense of the borderlands? How do these liminal zones marked by hybridity, effected through trade, migration, war, and displacement, challenge any uncomplicated notion of Himalayan heritage?

The broad theme of the conference thus was the manifold ways in which individuals and communities negotiate heritage, identity, and citizenship. This was the prism through which participants were invited to reflect on their own research, whether in the field of biodiversity, forest and wetland conservation, man-animal conflict and adaptation, land laws and land rights, transhumance, language and literature, oral history, religion and society, material conservation and restoration, alternative/indigenous medicine, livelihood generation, geopolitics, environment, sustainable development, health and nutrition, policy and governance, or tourism.

A total of fifteen papers were presented at the conference some of which are being published in this special issue of the journal alongside a couple of invited articles. The entire proceedings of the conference are slated to appear soon in a volume jointly edited by Dr. Lokesh Ohri of Humanities Himalaya, co-convenor of the conference, and Kavita Pai of the Centre for Himalayan and Mountain Studies, Somaiya Vidyavihar University, Mumbai.

The conference would not have been possible without the support of the UNESCO Category 2 Centre at the Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun, to whom we extend our gratitude.

Kavita Pai

Guest Editor

Special Issue—Negotiating Heritage, Identity and Citizenship in the Himalayas

And,

Assistant Professor

Centre for Himalayan and Mountain Studies,

Somaiya School of Civilisation Studies,

Somaiya Vidyavihar University, Mumbai–400077.