

December 2016

## Explorations of a Transforming Himalaya: Everyday Religion, Sustainable Environments, and Urban Himalayan Studies

Georgina Drew

*The University of Adelaide*, georginadrew@gmail.com

Ashok Gurung

*The New School*, gurunga@newschool.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

### Recommended Citation

Drew, Georgina and Gurung, Ashok. 2016. Explorations of a Transforming Himalaya: Everyday Religion, Sustainable Environments, and Urban Himalayan Studies. *HIMALAYA* 36(2).

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol36/iss2/9>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

This Research Article is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact [scholarpub@macalester.edu](mailto:scholarpub@macalester.edu).



---

## Explorations of a Transforming Himalaya: Everyday Religion, Sustainable Environments, and Urban Himalayan Studies

### Acknowledgements

The ERSEH initiative would not have been possible without the generous support of the Henry Luce Foundation and the Provost's Office of The New School in New York City. Special thanks are extended to Toby Volkman of the Henry Luce Foundation for her invaluable encouragement and intellectual engagement with the project's inception, development, and execution. Numerous scholars and professionals were also involved in sculpting and promoting the ERSEH initiative. Thomas J. Mathew made significant contributions to this effort and to sculpting some of the key points highlighted in this introduction. The remaining contributors are too abundant to mention in detail but ICI acknowledges and sends gratitude to everyone who took part in the planning sessions, research projects, and conferences that were linked with the ERSEH project.

# Introduction | Explorations of a Transforming Himalaya: Everyday Religion, Sustainable Environments, and Urban Himalayan Studies

Georgina Drew  
Ashok Gurung

This text serves as an overview of the Everyday Religion and Sustainable Environments in the Himalaya (ERSEH) project with an emphasis on the conceptual possibilities that motivate and sustain the initiative. The content includes discussion of diverse ways to approach categories such as 'Himalaya,' 'Everyday Religion,' and 'Sustainable Environments.' Particular attention is given to the potentials for integration and innovation that can emerge when examining the complexity of these categories in urbanizing Himalayan centers. We contend that there is ample scope to push new avenues of inquiry in the region by looking to the syncretic beliefs and practices that are emerging in these urban zones as they adjust to the influence of novel ideas, technologies, and markets. The text also provides an introduction to the investigations associated with the ERSEH project, the results of which are included in this special themed section.

**Keywords:** everyday religion, sustainability, urban studies, interdisciplinarity, Himalaya.

## Introduction

The Himalaya, like many other parts of the globe, are experiencing extensive ecological and social transformations. The degree and scope of change in the mountains that constitute the region vary significantly in ways that defy easy explanations or generalizations. Given that regional issues of ecology and social cohesion or tension have historically been influenced by religious beliefs and practices, the study of these changes means that the role of religion cannot be left aside. In efforts to examine how people respond to change in the region, then, a challenge arises: How do we understand the sources of influence for how people respond to new stressors and opportunities, and the implications that these stated concerns have for the pursuit of something akin to sustainability in the Himalaya?

The spirit of this question prompted a series of discussions from 2010-2013. The conversations were coordinated out of The New School's India China Institute (ICI) and led to the creation of a research project entitled, Everyday Religion and Sustainable Environments in the Himalaya (ERSEH). ICI's initiation of the ERSEH program was designed to harness the institute's track record of collaborative research endeavors that have drawn upon a large network of intellectuals and scholars. With the added counsel of Toby Volkman of the Henry Luce Foundation, our effort was to augment knowledge of context-specific religious understandings and fold them into discussions emphasizing environmental discourse and action. In

particular, we felt that engaging in research around the syncretic practices that constitute everyday religion would allow us to address a gap in understandings of how local communities negotiate their lived realities. As elaborated below, an emphasis on everyday religion seeks to point out the seeming contradictions between what people say they believe and the activities in which they engage (Ammerman 2007; McGuire 2008; Orsi 2012). This involves examining the eclectic beliefs and practices of people contending with the ordinary circumstances of everyday life, whose experiences are influenced by a range of meanings, perspectives, ideologies, and institutions.

Through a study of everyday religious practices, we hoped to understand how people negotiate the coexistence of different ideas and worldviews. The overarching aim was to enhance local communities' possibilities for navigating and contesting processes of transformation as they manifest across the Himalaya. A second goal was to engage as many Himalaya-focused scholars in this effort as was feasible since past work along these lines was often shaped by the work of international scholars and international organizations. Many of these scholars and organizations trace their intellectual roots to post-enlightenment European and North American centers. While there are an increased number of efforts that seek to engage with the work done by intellectuals and academics native to the Himalaya, past scholarship was at times complicit in overlooking the contributions originating from the region (Fisher 1985: 108).

What was remarkable about the initial phase of research design was the diverse backgrounds of people who converged and contributed to the development of this research idea. Many advisors and collaborators—Li Bo, Anil Chitrakar, Mark Larrimore, Mahendra P. Lama, Thomas Matthew, Anne Rademacher, Toby Volkman, and others—played a crucial role in conceptualizing and providing research orientation to the project. Although the project could have been housed under a number of disciplines, a large effort was made to approach the research topic in novel and interdisciplinary ways that could potentially add new dimensions to the study of how everyday life influences resource management in changing contexts. The interdisciplinary approach was important given the emphasis on the Himalaya, an amorphous geographic and geopolitical area with vast socio-cultural and ecological complexities.

In consultation with topical and regional experts, it arose that a research focus on water and waste, as opposed to forest or landscape management, might offer a particularly poignant lens for further investigations. In the course of our inquiry, it became apparent that an emphasis on water

and waste in the urbanizing areas of the Himalaya would allow for the exploration of multiple dynamic factors that serve as drivers of change. The linking of urbanization with water and questions of governance allowed us to connect seemingly distant topics; for example, perceptions of the religious purity and impurity of water and its relationship to waste management.<sup>1</sup> While our discussions produced many divergent opinions, it was clear that the drivers of change—especially around questions of urbanization (commented upon in detail below)—are key to understanding the quest for sustainability. With these motivations and inspirations in mind, and with generous funding from the Henry Luce Foundation and Provost's Office of The New School, ERSEH was launched officially. The papers comprising this special issue are products of the findings that have resulted from this initiative.

Overall, the motivation for the ERSEH project is based on the following assertions:

- The acknowledgement that everyday or lived religious practice is a vital area of inquiry in the dynamic Himalayan landscape where social, cultural, and religious boundaries are historically porous and novel forms are constantly produced;
- The awareness that everyday religious practices impact environmental resource management in ways that have been overlooked or marginalized as 'vernacular' by the scholars that focus on the environmental impact of the world's great religions;
- The insight that cities and urbanizing centers are key areas of investigation for the study of everyday religion and sustainable environments in the Himalaya;
- The conviction that nuanced interdisciplinary data, improved cross-country coordination, and enhanced academic and policy exchanges are needed to draw out new ways of addressing resource use challenges in the Himalaya.

### **Background: Research Design and Contributions**

Questions of the relationship between ecological and social change have prompted several investigations that are relevant for the current discussion. A number of studies from the northwestern Indian Himalaya have focused on the ways that people mobilize against issues such as deforestation due to various livelihoods concerns and religious beliefs about the value of those resources. This includes

studies that note the cultural factors that influenced forest protection in the famous ‘tree-hugging’ efforts of the Chipko Andolan of the 1970’s (Bandyopadhyay 1992; Haigh 1988) as well as in more recent forest revival movements (Agrawal 2004, 2005). Other efforts to understand how culture and religion influence environmental management have explored how the defense of natural resources can even more directly invoke religious beliefs, especially when the entities threatened are sacred water resources. This work includes examples from the Indian Himalaya (Alley 2014; Drew 2011, 2014) and the Nepali Himalaya (Rademacher 2011). Looking more broadly at a range of issues linking culture and environment in the Himalaya, an edited volume by Guneratne (2010) has examined these themes in a somewhat comparative trans-regional way while focusing on the prospects for environmental sustainability. When discussing such topics, scholars such as Metz (2010) are vocal that we have to extend beyond outdated models blaming Himalayan residents for ecological change, a much criticized postulate that was once called the Himalayan Degradation Theory.

While these resources provide examples and cautions that are a useful launching point, it merits noting that the scholarship highlighted (with the exception of Rademacher 2011) predominantly focuses on the trends observed in rural areas. What is often left out is the central role played by the urban centers of the Himalaya. This includes the ways that the metaphorical metabolisms of places such as Kathmandu are fueling land and water degradation in Nepal’s largest city, as well as in surrounding areas. Urban zones such as Kathmandu offer microcosms of study that illuminate the acceleration of ecological and social change as well as modifications to religious belief and practice. Given that these locations are to some extent co-constituted by their adjacent rural areas and all the socio-cultural nuances that are found therein, it seems that the older models of methodological and conceptual engagement merit expansion. The focus on socio-ecological transformation in urbanizing locales of the Himalaya portends to fill gaps in the exploration of novel cultural and environmental flows in the recently formed urban zones.

Within these burgeoning urban contexts, as noted earlier, the role of everyday religion oriented our approach. The project, which many of us referred to in text as ERSEH but in spoken terms as ‘ersay,’ had an at times uneasy engagement with the notion of everyday religion. To begin, there was the issue of what everyday religion might entail in practice as well as in theory. Also at stake was the question of what everyday religion might elucidate that could not, perhaps, be explained through the existing methods and

theories provided in Religious Studies or the Anthropology of Religion. Furthermore, in the application of everyday religion to environmental concerns, some commentators wondered if newer areas of investigation in the fields of Religion and Ecology or Environmental Anthropology would provide an adequate framework. These fields have placed attention on the ways in which various cultural orientations and religious teachings help to inform and guide the behavior of practitioners.

In addition to the consultations that took place in locations such as New York City, key members of the ERSEH team also undertook community-based consultations from 2010 to early 2013 in a range of Himalayan locations. As a result of these consultations, six sites of study were chosen. These included Darjeeling, West Bengal (northeast India); Gangtok, Sikkim (northeast India); Kangding, Sichuan (southwest China); Kathmandu (central Nepal); Shangri-la, Yunnan (southwest China); and Uttarkashi, Uttarakhand (northwest India). The six sites were key areas in which different research teams undertook studies examining the syncretic religious beliefs and practices of people contending with the ordinary circumstances of everyday life in the Himalaya. With the exception of the field site in Uttarkashi, the Primary Investigators for each location were scholars with cultural and linguistic heritage linking them to the geographic regions of study. The diverse locales, sociocultural traditions, and individual profiles of the team members enabled the research to highlight a mosaic of issues, themes, and religious phenomena that collectively attest to the staggering diversity of the Himalaya, as well as the overlapping problems that each of the chosen field sites engage. Common to each location is a need for sound water resource provisions and shared concerns for responsible waste management practices. Put together, the contributions provide a platform for knowledge sharing on the significance of everyday religion for environmental praxis that will ideally facilitate conversations and inspire future interdisciplinary investigations.

The commitment to public input on the project was demonstrated in a number of open events that ICI hosted on the urban campus of The New School. The degree of public engagement and opportunities for feedback on the project were perhaps most visible in a conference that marked the culmination of the project’s third year in 2013. From March 8-10 of that year, ICI hosted a conference that attracted over 150 participants interested in expanding conversations on the relationship between everyday religious practices and sustainability as they connect to the experiences of resource management in the Himalaya.

The first two panels of the conference featured eight presentations by core ERSEH research partners (Li Bo, Mukta S. Tamang, Laxmi Shova Shakya, Mahendra P. Lama, Roshan P. Rai, Liu Yong, Nyimatashi, Georgina Drew, Mark Larrimore, Thomas Mathew, and Cameron Tonkinwise). Each of the papers received feedback from discussants as well as the insights that came from comments and questions posed by audience members and those following the proceedings online in a live webinar. The points raised by conference attendees served as guides helping the authors revise and polish their contributions. The second panel featured invited scholars who have been engaged in researching similar themes independently of ERSEH. Their work was subsequently published in a 2014 volume of the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture*. By design, the conference was intended to bring these two groups together, to enable scholars to engage in dialogue, and to facilitate the sharing of research ideas around similar topics. The interdisciplinary and trans-regional exchange of information and perspectives helped enrich the debates and paper topics.

Before highlighting what each paper in this special themed section of *HIMALAYA* contributes, it is important to examine the three constitutive terms separately (Himalaya, Everyday Religion, and Sustainable Environments) in order to understand how they interrelate. These categories, set in bold italics below, will help contextualize the special issue contributions.

### ***Himalaya: Borders and Definitions***

Given the diversity of traditions and practices within the region, the Himalaya serve as an ideal laboratory and a focal point for the current discussion on the interconnectivity of belief patterns, cultural systems, and ecological change, which are key areas of global concern. The term Himalaya has very wide currency and a great range of connotations, from the scientific to the symbolic and mystical, with an array of professional and demotic meanings in between. The geological category Himalaya, referred to as the Hindu Kush-Himalaya for certain purposes, may ordinarily be presumed to have high definition and vivid boundaries. In climatic terms it forms the northern end of the sub-continental monsoon system that connects the Himalaya to the Indian Ocean. Geopolitically, the Himalaya is divided between Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal, and Pakistan, yet as a natural-social phenomenon it gives rise to processes that transcend these political and administrative divisions. This is why, on closer scrutiny, the category of ‘the Himalaya’ turns out to be more ambiguous

than is commonly supposed. While a restricted geological definition could limit the Himalaya to the 1500-mile-long mountainous formation created by continuing plate-tectonic activity, other disciplinary perspectives tend to have wider definitions based on human activity, habitation patterns, and migration flows. If we attempt to think of the Himalaya in terms of ethnic and cultural demarcations, one has to look at a range of interrelationships that link the high mountain ranges to the plateau on the north and the plains below the southern foothills (Hangen 2011). Given the difficulty in pinpointing the category, and in a departure from the standard academic formulations, our approach took an open-ended understanding of the boundaries and demarcations constituting the Himalaya.

The growth of interest in the Himalaya is due in part to the recognition that this ‘third pole’ and ‘water tower of Asia’ holds the third largest mass of ice on the planet and is central to the wellbeing of nearly two billion people whose livelihoods are threatened by glacial retreat and other impacts of global climate change. As studies of a more technical nature indicate, the Himalayan cryosphere exhibits climatic heterogeneity of a kind that does not permit wide generalizations about snow and glacier change (Rees and Collins 2006). Even glaciers in close proximity to each other, such as the Khumbu and Imja glaciers in the eastern Himalaya, can show noticeable variations of behavior (Byers 2007). This means that concerns about climate change in the Himalaya must acknowledge and attend to the variability that is found therein.

The impacts of climate change on the Himalaya have worrying effects that radiate out through its river systems. These impacts are made visible in rising temperatures, irregular precipitation, and glacial melt. Ten major rivers—the Amu Darya, Brahmaputra, Ganges, Indus, Irrawaddy, Mekong, Salween, Tarim, Yangtze, and Yellow Rivers—flow out of the Hindu Kush-Himalaya region. The projected environmental transformations thus threaten to dramatically alter the hydrological flows evidenced in the Mekong Delta, the Indo-Gangetic deltas, the Indus Delta, and the Irrawaddy Delta, among others. These drainage basins, accommodating almost half of the world’s population, will be subject to periodic flooding and drought, depending on the intensity of monsoon patterns and the extent of glacial retreat. As noted above, a body of site-specific research demonstrates an extensive amount of environmental variations within the Himalaya and argues that the magnitude of natural processes merits careful monitoring, observation, and interpretation. Such site-specific or event-specific research makes a compelling case for studying environments in the Himalaya on a smaller scale.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, these discussions and insights have inspired additional research projects that build on the work done as part of ERSEH. For example, ICI is currently developing a new multidisciplinary multi-year initiative—the Urbanizers—which aims to produce new knowledge and new understandings of the urbanizations in India and China, with a particular focus on inequity and sustainable livelihoods. Georgina Drew is now similarly focusing her efforts on a project centered in India’s capital of New Delhi to understand how urban metabolisms use, and exploit, upstream Himalayan resources. This work builds on the insights of the ERSEH project in its emphasis to identify the cultural values that shape resource management, including how the religious symbolism and sacredness of certain resources change as they move from rural to urban.

### **Everyday Religion**

A variety of definitions can be found to explain everyday religion in the academic literature, and scholars are engaged in a lively debate over its use as an analytical tool. As a collective of researchers, development practitioners, and academics we have explored these debates and their ramifications without settling upon one given definition or explanation for the applications of the term. Generally speaking, however, we are drawn to the focus on the religious creativity that the term indicates and the emphasis on the exploration of individual lives and experiences that the study of everyday religion entails. The approach acknowledges the role of religious texts, doctrines, and the teachings of religious leaders without assuming that these sources of guidance and inspiration are primary guides for daily conduct in the lives of devotees, practitioners, or the religiously eclectic (Ammerman 2007). Our exploration of the complexity of belief and practice evidenced by ‘ordinary’ people (McGuire 2008) who are not necessarily experts in any particular religion also attempts to integrate the influence of pervasive cultural forms such as market capitalism, development and modernization, and even concepts such as progress and modernity. In our formulation, an everyday religious studies approach examines the hybridity of forms and practices while acknowledging that any particular conjuncture is subject to fluidity and future transformations.

The emphasis we have selected reflects a growing trend in religious studies to engage and explore the domain of the everyday. This approach is in conversation with anthropological and sociological examinations of meaning making and practice in daily life. The renewed focus is to a good degree cautious about the term ‘everyday’ and aware that it can be problematic for its lack of precision,

inconsistent use, and occasional catchall employment (Orsi 2012: 150). When applied to religion, its inclusion can usefully signal an intention to move beyond the split between official, doctrine-based practice with vernacular manifestations of religious life. Since religion involves all of these domains and more, the emphasis on the everyday helps to overcome gaps in some scholarly approaches by focusing on the moments where daily practice and ‘grand schemes’ come together (Schielke and Debevec 2012: 2). Such practices, and the struggles for wellbeing implied by grand schemes, are dependent on a material base integrated within life-supporting landscapes filled with meaning, symbolism, and divinity.

To scholars of the Himalaya, the idea of examining the complexities of everyday religious lives may appear to be common sense and perhaps even well-trodden ground. In reference to Kathmandu alone, one thinks of the work of scholars such as David Gellner (2001) who note the multiple strains of religiosity that people identify with (leading to the difficulty of census taking for Patan Newars who might claim to be Hindu as well as Buddhist) or the work of Mark Liechty (2002) who explores the ways that secular values and the idea of becoming modern have influenced the tenor of religious belief and diminished caste observance. Aspects of the everyday religion approach overlap with such studies to the extent that they examine the experiences and religious worlds of ordinary people navigating a range of influences that include cultural practices, religious and/or social values, and material considerations. While other Kathmandu-based scholars such as Grieve (2006) directly explore everyday religion, we have found few studies to date that connect everyday religion to environmental sustainability (or, in our formulation, sustainable environments). We have uncovered even less scholarship that connects these two domains to life as it is lived in the contemporary, and urbanizing, Himalaya.

The field-based investigations that arose from the ERSEH project show that when everyday religion is used to understand people’s interactions with natural resources, new aspects of inquiry open up. While critics may point out that fields such as ethnobotany, ethnozoology, ethnomedicine and ethnoecology have already documented such insights through a focus on ‘traditional ecological knowledge’ (TEK), the existing contributions are often situated in rural areas or among indigenous people, whereas our efforts seek to engage the complexity of how different knowledge(s) are enacted, transmitted, and modified in urbanizing and modernizing Himalayan contexts. While rural to urban migrants bring what might be called TEK to burgeoning cities (and Cameron’s 2010

work on Ayurveda is insightful on this point), researchers can highlight more of TEK's application to the promotion of 'sustainable development.' There is also scope to explore in greater detail the points of tension through which TEK practices are contested, disregarded, or even abandoned through push-and-pull factors that might be better touched upon by a focus on everyday religion.

### **Sustainable Environments**

To the causal eye, the number-modifying 's' in sustainable environments may seem to be no more than an indication that the project engages multiple environmental resources, localities, and scales. This is, in fact, only part of the reason for the use of the plural. In addition to the nod towards the diversities of landscapes encountered, 'sustainable environments' also seeks to acknowledge that these entities are diversely perceived, understood, experienced, and interacted with by the practitioners of everyday religion. The aim of exploring 'sustainable environments' is thus also an attempt to enlarge the scale and scope of our cognition on the entities found in nature that add meaning to life. This includes the recognition that some of these entities may have sentience and agency. Such an approach has implications for how we envision the utility of the things and objects encountered in daily life and it includes a recognition of the diversities of local needs, knowledge(s) and know-how that people draw from when they decide to conserve, use, or exploit a particular resource (Campbell 2010; Drew 2012).

The distinct ways of approaching and speaking of natural resources are embedded in particular linguistic formulations. It is for this reason that the authors in this volume have endeavored to present the key terms used by interlocutors in order to keep the spirit of their expression within a situational or sociocultural context. Wherever translations are made, these are done in the service of cross-cultural understanding. While things are indeed lost in translation, we contend that the exploration of what is left out further expands the dynamism of the investigation. However, we also note that the application of relativistic terms and approaches poses a challenge for researchers, scholars, and scientists looking to sculpt environmental prescriptions based on 'objective' knowledge. If there is a particularly prominent domain that our project has sought to uncover, it is the subjective character of environmental knowledge and the beliefs and values that shape their use. This has perhaps been the largest and most sustained point of discussion in the many discussions, meetings, public events, and conferences associated with the ERSEH project.

Despite the cultural relativity for site-specific terms, beliefs, practices, and orientations towards diversely understood environments, we also acknowledge that these do not exist in a timeless vacuum. Ours is not a project of identifying, salvaging, or reinstating native beliefs and practices towards the environment. Rather, we recognize that many of the cultural formations and belief patterns enacted in the Himalaya have been subject to change and fluctuation over long years of migration, cross-cultural interaction, imperialism, and colonization. The decades since 1960 have seen a particularly rapid adoption of market capitalism and state regulation. These transformations weave tangible and intangible legacies into the fabric of everyday life from places as seemingly remote as Himalayan villages to more obvious centers of hybridity such as urban metropolises like Kathmandu.

Within the focus on cultural and economic change, there is evidence to suggest that some Himalayan residents have been quick to adopt a market approach that, at least in part, involves seeing natural resources as externalities. Due to this observation, some scholars have debated the extent to which notions of modernity have spread across the Himalaya resulting in what we might think of as 'regional modernities' (Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal 2003). It is important to note, however, that these hybrid ways of thinking, being, and acting in the world are not *fait accompli* once they have been adopted. Instead, what we see in the contemporary Himalaya—and in urbanizing centers in particular—is a continual interrogation of the limits of externalizing logics. These arguments are occasionally situated with a secular critique of the contradictions of capitalism, but they can also be set within reminders of the different ways of knowing and experiencing the world and its resources that were considered meaningful in past cultural formulations (Rademacher 2010, 2011) or in still-thriving religious traditions. It is within this context of critique and negotiation that the everyday religion framework is especially valuable.

Unlike the Himalaya, which has a longer historical employment as a category, academic notions of sustainable environments are relatively more recent and hence have both the advantages and disadvantages of being more definitionally fluid and of having far less of an established pedigree. Both environment and its corollary, environmentalism, are polyphonic and elastic terms whose ambit could be larger or smaller depending on perspective and purpose, reflecting the complexity of an entire field of systematic investigation, the magnitude of differences in understanding the scale of causes and effects and the degree of the disputes over the scope of the problems and



the nature of the solutions. The environment includes, but is not limited to, processes that occur at all the different scales of ecological interaction at the level of soil dynamics, vegetation and forest cover, landscape interactions and land use, and the exchanges of myriad biological entities. It incorporates interactions within and between the Himalaya-specific climatic, hydrological and cryospheric regimes. Increasingly, it also includes anthropogenic modifications of all kinds.

What then, at this level of open-ended environmental complexity in a geologically active and geomorphologically changing Himalaya, does sustainability mean? If there is no environmental steady state or equilibrium condition to provide the necessary coordinates for calibration, how are the parameters and thresholds of 'unsustainability' to be discovered? The emerging discipline of sustainability science offers a range of answers that simultaneously raise interesting philosophical questions about the science of sustainability and also indicate some broad procedures to improve its methods.<sup>3</sup> These conversations do not always provide a very clear or rigorous idea of what sustainability could mean. As a concept that acknowledges a modern human-induced crisis, the ideas of unsustainability and sustainability initially acquired prominence several decades ago through the document, *Limits To Growth: A Report To The Club Of Rome's Project On The Predicament Of Mankind* (Meadows et al. 1972).<sup>4</sup> The idea continued to gain prominence through further institutional reiterations put forward in various venues and in the more famous *Brundtland Report* of 1987. Particularly after the United Nation's environmental summit of 1992, the use of the word sustainability grew in frequency while somehow maintaining a sense of ambiguity. Despite repeated scientific attempts to provide it with an objective, value-neutral and scientific basis, its practical application on a global scale essentially entails political and ideological choices of one kind or another and provokes conflict between large-scale conservation schemes and the people adversely affected by them (Lélé and Norgaard 2003).

Despite the above disclaimers, there are indications, based on the fieldwork presented in this special themed section that a number of Himalayan residents are concerned about current and future environmental degradation. These concerns are often voiced in language that does not necessarily use the term sustainability but which nonetheless indicates worries for how future generations will survive in Himalayan regions subject to growing resource stress. While we are hesitant to equate this with the Brundtland Commission's (1987) definition of sustainability, which prioritizes the rights of future generations, it is nonethe-

less important to recognize that even as the definitions of the terms may be superficial and fluid, there remains a number of real threats and substantiated preoccupations in response to which people can act if they are not doing so already. This is not to say, however, that Himalayan residents are to blame for the disturbances to the planet's ecosystem; indeed, the evidence points in the opposite direction, indicating that many mountain people are the victims of the environmental pollutants emitted by the developed world. Regardless of the 'culprit', the reality is that the changes occurring in the Himalaya merit adaption regimes and efforts to promote resilience. Along with identifying the means and modalities for action, efforts such as the ERSEH project can help to pinpoint some of the ways that environmental programs can work with the cultural and religious sensibilities that are influential to the ways that people live day-to-day.

### Case Studies: An Overview

The descriptions and debates for each of the three organizational categories have shaped the process of research design, method selection, and data analysis for the articles in this special issue. Because of this, and due to the goals for the project established in the beginning of this introduction, the article contributions are wide-ranging and interdisciplinary in nature. The pieces are coherent in that they each address the complexity of daily life and the intersectionality of multiple religious and environmental themes in Himalayan landscapes.

In an essay that contextualizes the recent turn towards everyday or lived religion within Religious Studies, Mark Larrimore draws from the diversity of beliefs and practices in the Himalaya to help us see how the region challenges some mainstays of disciplinary thinking. Given that the idea of religion is narrow, modern, and Protestant in its provenance, the turn to the everyday sought to move beyond the initial project of searching for the essence of particular systems of religious belief towards seeing how it is practiced in everyday life. This turn posits the 'syncretic' as normal, making anti-syncretism itself a subject demanding further explanation. As he puts it, "Lived religion approaches... have no investment in the answers to questions like 'is X Buddhist?' or 'is Y Hindu?' if these are not questions being asked by someone on the ground." For Larrimore, the turn towards complexity opens up novel ways to understand the relationship between lived religion and everyday environmental practices, especially if one decides to focus on what he calls "resource use decisions." This approach allows for more nuanced considerations of how environmental decisions are made in everyday life.

The focus on resource use decisions also helps bring to light the practices of “constructing and sustaining worlds” that are marked by complex relationships between human and other-than-human entities.

Georgina Drew’s article aims to interrogate how religious practices emerge and adapt to new circumstances in Uttarkashi, Uttarakhand through which the sacred Bhagirathi Ganga flows (and which forms a part of the River Ganges) in India. Even as Uttarkashi remains an ever-important holy site or *tirtha*, it is at the same time deeply touched by commercialism and urbanization. This can lead people, and youths in particular, to question the role and utility of past practices that revered the local gods, known as *devta*, as sources of guidance in everyday life. These gods had proscriptions for conduct that are now being flouted, even though in some orientations the *devta* have the power to punish wrongdoers by withholding life-giving rains. Despite the potential repercussions, some youths are turning away from the religious practices enacted by their parents and grandparents because they face what they feel are the greater problems of unemployment, population increase, and lack of education and health services. These challenges can deter focus away from not just the local gods but also the proactive efforts to care for the ecological landscape that the *devta* command. Alongside these changes, people (and even the youth) continue to revere important, and increasingly polluted, entities such as the Bhagirathi Ganga as well as other Hindu deities. Drew shows how theories of practice can help explain why these older dispositions, or *habitus*, are changing as new socio-economic pathways emerge in ways that can appear to be contradictory but, in reality, are part of an overall effort at adaptation.

In the contribution by Mukta S. Tamang (with research assistance from Laxmi Shova Shakya), the connections that Kathmandu residents have with water resources is pursued from the perspective of personhood and life trajectories. To them, water brings together all domains of life including religion: it is a common good and ‘total social fact.’ Given water’s high levels of significance, they are concerned with how key turning points in a person’s life have brought them into a closer personal relationship with religious practices dependent upon water. Notably, many of the practices they observed continued to follow caste precepts, even amidst Kathmandu’s urbanizing and modernizing topography. That the water-related enactments of daily and postmortem purification take place amidst an increasingly market-driven and globally-intertwined Kathmandu sheds light on how people navigate issues of belonging and resource management amidst the city’s changing ecological, social, and religious landscapes.

Discussing the state of water resources in Darjeeling, Mahendra P. Lama and Roshan P. Rai are primarily interested in the challenges of urban water management that, under conditions of intensifying scarcity, have inspired decentralized social institutions to take action. In their focus on community associations known as *samaj*, which came into being in the colonial era to service migrant workers and tea pickers, they show how these collectives bring diverse groups of people together—even individuals who may be divided on issues of faith and language choice—around the need to access potable water. The *samaj* efforts are linked with historically significant practices that fostered the conservation of purified water, also known as *chokho pani*. In their campaigns, the *samaj* use strong religious symbolism but deal with a range of practical issues that relate to water provision and equitable distribution. Lama and Rai point out, however, that the activities coordinated by *samaj* are increasingly foiled by profit-seeking individuals, privatized water management practices, and centralized resource management programs. As a result, the *samaj* are forced to focus on very localized efforts that, while important, do not lead to systemic change.

Looking to a site in Yunnan Province of southwestern China, the submission by Li Bo takes a more temporally and spatially expansive perspective. Li Bo explores how the former tea trading town of Gyalthang was renamed Shangri-la in the late 1990s when the logging ban no longer permitted deforesting as a source of income. As such, a once desolate town was revived into a flourishing and famous tourist site through state-permitted efforts to promote its Tibetan cultural and religious heritage as a source of national and international interest. While tourism increased, ill-managed urbanization meant that there was a rise in untreated sewage flows. The pollution contaminated the protected Napa Lake site (where endangered black cranes feed) as well as underground water sources (leading to the death of fish and other organisms). At the same time, there was and is a passing away of religious traditions among urban Tibetan families who no longer send their sons to the temples to become monks. This results in disrupted transmissions of the religiously inspired prescriptions that in the past helped to foster ecological integrity.

### Synthesis and Research Implications

In the contemporary moment of concern for environmental and human resilience, the Himalaya prove vital as a space of inquiry since they are increasingly subject to the urbanization challenges that have reached a crisis point in the plains-based Asian metropolises. Taken together, the

case studies demonstrate how ordinary people navigate and adapt to change in urbanizing Himalayan centers. It is in such contexts that we see people responding to emerging resource challenges while simultaneously adjusting to rapid economic, social, religious, and political transformations. In the sites studied, the continuity of some rural beliefs and practices is visible, as is the influence of 'official' religious practices, although they do not always serve as primary guides for action. The everyday religion approach thus provides a way to look at the reach of vernacular, popular, and doctrine-based practices while also examining hybridity, syncretism, and the emergence of new religious and socio-economic forms in places such as Kathmandu, Shangri-la, Darjeeling, and Uttarkashi. In our orientation to the topic, everyday religion is not just a lens on 'indigenous' practices vis-à-vis nature; rather, it is also a modality for understanding how people respond to complexity in ways that can be creatively generative for both positive and negative resource management outcomes. The value in the approach comes from moving beyond a focus on canonical texts and the speech of religious leaders to examine how people actually live their lives rather than how they are supposed to think and act based on particular teachings.

As the ERSEH researchers found, however, these new cultural forms and practices are not always aligned with the concepts of 'sustainability' that are prominent in scientific or environmental discourse. What did arise were pressing concerns for environmental integrity. As a result, the ERSEH project served to document diverse approaches to the environment, especially urbanizing Himalayan environments, while highlighting different ways to think of, and address, the overarching goals of biophysical and social resilience that characterize 'sustainability.' The observations provided offer an aperture through which it is possible to understand the reasons for environmental degradation in religiously revered landscapes, as well as the ways that people are drawing from secular and religious discourses to amend or modify practices in ways that support biodiversity and ecological integrity.

In the end, the research on Everyday Religion and Sustainable Environments in the Himalaya suggests that more empirical data and interdisciplinary collaborations are needed that can examine how water shortages, water overabundance, and waste management challenges are linked with everyday beliefs and practices. Moving forward, the ultimate goal will be to build holistic and robust policy interventions that are compatible with, and sensitive to, the cultural and religious nuances found in distinct Himalayan locales. Ideally, examples from the region will demonstrate

how the variety of Himalayan sociocultural and religious practices can intermix to adjust to the challenges of development in novel and potentially ameliorative ways.

**Georgina Drew** is a Lecturer (Assistant Professor) in the Department of Anthropology and Development Studies at the University of Adelaide in South Australia. From 2011-2013, she served as a Postdoctoral Fellow at The New School's India China Institute. She is the author of over twenty publications and a forthcoming book about dams on the sacred Ganga.

**Ashok Gurung** is the Senior Director of the India China Institute and Professor of Practice, Julien J. Studley Graduate Program in International Affairs at The New School. He was the Principal Investigator of the Everyday Religion and Sustainable Environments in the Himalaya project. He is currently the Principal Investigator of a follow up project entitled "Sacred Landscapes and Sustainable Environments in the Himalaya Initiative."

The ERSEH initiative would not have been possible without the generous support of the Henry Luce Foundation and the Provost's Office of The New School in New York City. Special thanks are extended to Toby Volkman of the Henry Luce Foundation for her invaluable encouragement and intellectual engagement with the project's inception, development, and execution. Numerous scholars and professionals were also involved in sculpting and promoting the ERSEH initiative. Thomas J. Mathew made significant contributions to this effort and to sculpting some of the key points highlighted in this introduction. The remaining contributors are too abundant to mention in detail but ICI acknowledges and sends gratitude to everyone who took part in the planning sessions, research projects, and conferences that were linked with the ERSEH project. The authors additionally extend thanks to Marina Kaneti, who read and provided extensive feedback on the majority of the contributions to this special themed section. Finally, the authors express their sincere appreciation to Sienna R. Craig and Mark Turin for their encouragement and support of the ERSEH project, and for the considerable time and effort that they and their editorial team took to bring the project's insights to light in *HIMALAYA*.

in the maintenance of common wells, which used to be ritually cleaned in collective ceremonies that solidified social ties. During deliberations in Kathmandu additional conversations came to emphasize the role of water in daily life. For example, Naresh Bajracharya, a scholar of Newar Buddhism and the Director of Buddhist Studies at Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu, pointed out that for Newar Buddhists the day begins with water and the use of different types of water is highly regimented. Whereas ritually pure water was once mainly sourced at the centuries-old springs known as dunge dhara, people have now begun to think of potable municipal supplies as ritually pure. This has had an impact on in situ religious practices and it has reduced incentives for the public to defend the care and maintenance of dunge dhara. It was thus suggested that a potential study could identify the religious logics as well as the practical adaptations that lead people to adjust to the resource shortages, and centralized resource management practices, that one encounters in daily life.

2. For a detailed list of both kinds of literature see Ives (1989, 2004, 2012).
3. For critical discussions on the relationship between environmental science and sustainability see Neumayer (2010); Funtowicz & Ravetz (1991 & 1993); and Ziegler & Ott (2011).
4. The report, commissioned by the Club of Rome and prepared by a team of analysts from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology used a time-scale of 200 years from 1900 to 2100 to analyze the implications of the global economic system by examining the interactions of population, food production, industrial production, pollution, and consumption of non-renewable resources. It predicted a serious crisis of planetary proportion sometime in the 21st century in the absence of corrective measures.

---

## Endnotes

1. An important moment in refining the research focus came in 2011 when the core group of researchers met with scholars, experts, and community leaders in Kathmandu to gain a better understanding of how the research topic could be investigated in Nepal's capital city. At a roundtable meeting, environmentalist Anil Chitrakar enthusiastically encouraged the study and pointed out that he had already seen some of the dimensions of inquiry we were curious about at work in the Newar settlements of Patan, one of Kathmandu's southwestern districts. In particular, he noted that with the rise of centralized infrastructures the region has seen a decrease

---

## References

- Agrawal, Arun. 2004. *Environmentality: Technologies of Government and the Making of Subjects*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- . 2005. Environmentality: Community, Intimate Government, and the Making of Environmental Subjects in Kumaon, India. *Current Anthropology* 46 (2): 161-190.
- Alley, Kelly, Ryan Hile, and Chandana Mitra. 2014. Visualizing Hydropower Across the Himalayas: Mapping in a Time of Regulatory Decline. *Himalaya: A Journal of Nepal and Himalayan Studies* 34 (2): 52-66.

- Ammerman, Nancy. 2007. Introduction: Observing Modern Religious Lives. In *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives*, edited by Nancy Ammerman, 3-18. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bandyopadhyay, Jayanta. 1992. From Environmental Conflicts to Sustainable Mountain Transformation: Ecological Action in the Garhwal Himalaya. In *Grassroots Environmental Action: People's Participation in Sustainable Development*, edited by Dharam Ghai and Jessica M. Vivian, 259-281. London: Routledge.
- The Brundtland Commission. 1987. *Our Common Future: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Byers, Alton. 2007. An Assessment of Contemporary Glacier Fluctuations in Nepal's Khumbu Himal Using Repeat Photography. *Himalayan Journal Of Sciences* 4 (6): 21-26.
- Cameron, Mary. 2010. Healing Landscapes: Sacred and Rational Nature in Nepal's Ayurvedic Medicine. In *Culture and Environment in the Himalaya*, edited by Arjun Guneratne, 40-60. New Delhi: Routledge.
- Campbell, Ben. 2010. Beyond Cultural Models of the Environment: Linking Subjectivities of Dwelling and Power. In *Culture and Environment in the Himalaya*, edited by Arjun Guneratne, 188-203. New Delhi: Routledge.
- Drew, Georgina. 2011. Ecological Change and the Downstream Impacts of Glacial Melt: The Socio-cultural Implications of the Bhagirathi River's Decline. In *Water, Cultural Diversity, and Environmental Change—Emerging Issues, Sustainable Futures?* Edited by Barbara Rose Johnston, Lisa Hiwasaki, Irene J. Klaver, A. Ramos Castillo, and Veronica Strang, 203-218. New York: Springer.
- . 2012. Meaningful Waters: Women, Development, and Sustainability along the Bhagirathi Ganges. In *Gender and Sustainability: Lessons from Asia and Latin America*, edited by Maria Cruz-Torres and Pamela McElwee, 142-164. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- . 2014. Transformation and Resistance on the Upper Ganga: The Case of British Canal Irrigation. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 37 (4): 670-683.
- Fisher, James F. 1985. The Historical Development of Himalayan Anthropology. *Mountain Research and Development* 5 (1): 99-111.
- Funtowicz, Silvio O. and Jerome R. Ravetz. 1991. 'A New Scientific Methodology for Global Environmental Issues.' In *Ecological Economics: The Science and Management of Sustainability*, edited by Robert Costanza, 137-152. New York: Columbia University Press.
- . 1993. Science for the Post-Normal Age. *Futures* 25 (7): 735-755.
- Gellner, David. 2001. *The Anthropology of Buddhism and Hinduism: Weberian Themes*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Grieve, Gregory. 2006. *Retheorizing Religion in Nepal*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Guneratne, Arjun (ed). 2010. *Culture and Environment in the Himalaya*. New York: Routledge.
- Haigh, Martin. 1988. Understanding 'Chipko': The Himalayan People's Movement for Forest Conservation. *International Journal of Environmental Studies* 31: 99-110.
- Hangen, Susan. 2011. The Concept of the Himalaya as a Region in an Era of Identity Politics and Globalization. Presented on 28 October at the annual meeting of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota.
- Ives, Jack D. and Bruno Messerli. 1989. *The Himalayan Dilemma: Reconciling Development and Conservation*. London and New York: UNU: The United Nations University and Routledge.
- . 2004. *Himalayan Perceptions: Environmental Change and The Well-Being Of Mountain Peoples*. London and New York: Routledge.
- . 2012. Environmental Change And Challenge In The Himalaya: A Historical Perspective. *Pirineos. Revista de Ecologia de Montana* 167: 29-68.
- Lélé, Sharachchandra and Richard B. Norgaard. 1996. Sustainability and the Scientist's Burden. *Conservation Biology* 10 (2): 354-365.
- Liechty, Mark. 2002. *Suitably Modern: Making Middle-Class Culture in a New Consumer Society*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Meadows, D. H., Meadows, D.L., Randers, J. and Behrens III, W.W. 1972. *Limits to Growth: A Report To The Club Of Rome's Project On The Predicament Of Mankind*. New York: Universe Books.
- McGuire, Meredith. 2008. *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Metz, John J. 2010. Downward Spiral? Interrogating Narratives of Environmental Change in the Himalaya. In *Culture and Environment in the Himalaya*, edited by Arjun Guneratne, 17-39. New Delhi: Routledge.

Neumayer, Eric. 2010. *Weak Versus Strong Sustainability: Exploring the Limits of Two Opposing Paradigms*, 3rd ed. Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar.

Orsi, Robert. 2012. Everyday Religion and the Contemporary World: The Un-Modern, Or What Was Supposed to Have Disappeared But Did Not. In *Ordinary Lives and Grand Schemes: An Anthropology of Everyday Religion*, edited by Samuli Schielke and Liza Debevec, 146-161. New York, NY: Berghahn Books.

Rademacher, Anne. 2010. Restoration and Revival: Remembering the Bagmati Civilization. In *Culture and Environment in the Himalaya*, edited by Arjun Guneratne, 166-185. New York: Routledge.

———. 2011. *Reigning the River: Urban Ecologies and Political Transformation in Kathmandu*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Rees, Gwyn H. and David N. Collins. 2006. Regional Differences in Response of Flow in Glacial Fed Himalayan Rivers to Climatic Warming. *Hydrological Processes* 20: 2157-2169.

Schielke, Samuli and Lisa Debevec. 2012. Introduction. In *Ordinary Lives and Grand Schemes: An Anthropology of Everyday Religion*, edited by Samuli Schielke and Liza Debevec, 1-16. New York, NY: Berghahn Books.

Sivaramakrishnan, Kalyanakrishnan and Arun Agrawal. 2003. *Regional Modernities: An Introduction*. In *Regional Modernities: The Cultural Politics of Development in India*, edited by K. Sivaramakrishnan and Arun Agrawal, 1-62. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Ziegler, Rafael and Konrad Ott. 2011. The Quality Of Sustainability Science: A Philosophical Perspective. *Sustainability: Science, Practice And Policy* 7 (1): 31-44.

Zurick, David. 1999. *Himalaya: Life on the Edge of the World*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.