

PANI, PAHAR

WATERS OF THE HIMALAYAS

This exhibition is based on our work on the changing patterns of land-use and development in the lower Himalayas of India and Nepal, and on how environmental and social changes are impacting the ways in which small towns throughout this region source and distribute water.

In recent years, there has been a reduction in the availability of sufficient quantities of clean water for household use, due to a number of factors: changes in rainfall patterns; pressure on land-use; depleting groundwater reserves; and growing consumption demands, as migration and settlement patterns change across the Himalayas. Our work has tried to understand the connections between changes in land-use and management, which impact on the water bearing capacity of catchments in these mountainous regions, and the availability of water for a variety of users, including those living in the growing numbers of small towns, as well as more established uses for rural agrarian communities. The interdependence of people and ecological processes across these dynamic landscapes creates a complex and fascinating context in which we seek to understand the challenges of sustainable development, and associated tradeoffs in relation to the lives and livelihoods of those who inhabit this beautiful, and fragile, region.

This exhibition presents four themes that became visible across the six small towns where we worked: change and transformation around water **SOURCES**; the growing visibility and rapid pace of **URBANISATION**; the ebbs, flows and characteristics of **SEASONALITY** that affect both social and ecological systems; and, the ways in which physical, social and political **INFRASTRUCTURES** are being built, transformed and consolidated at this time of rapid change.

Throughout the mountains, people are leaving rural areas in search of better access to basic services, markets, education and job opportunities, especially as agriculture-based livelihoods become increasingly precarious. Existing towns in this region, established as colonial hill stations, have also seen increasing seasonal pressure due to growth in domestic tourism. Across the hills, these movements of people are resulting in changes in demand for water, and greater concentration of demand in small towns and urban settlements. To keep pace with these changes, there is a need for investment in reliable and resilient infrastructure. Governments and donors have prioritised large scale infrastructure, such as pumping stations, hydropower facilities, and piped networks to supply water, and these systems are gradually replacing localised, communal practices of water gathering and distribution. As these new forms of water infrastructure develop, who gets water, how, and on what terms is also changing, with the poorest households often most vulnerable to the risks of being excluded because of scarcity, and the costs of modern provisioning systems.

The availability of water in these environments has always been highly seasonal, with greatest demand usually occurring at the height of water scarcity, in the summer months (which is also peak tourist season in the hills). During the monsoon, the sheer quantity of water falling within very short periods of time frequently results in severe localised flooding events and often-catastrophic landslides, that disrupt the hills' connectivity and threaten the lives and homes of its inhabitants.

Our research views towns as integral parts of a socio-ecological system, where urban demand and development has its counterpoints and consequences in rural spaces, amongst upstream communities, and forests, agriculture and wider ecological systems. These lenses allowed us to identify the difficult choices and tradeoffs that are required as part of planning for urbanisation and water provisioning in these spectacular mountainous regions. This exhibition showcases some of the compelling images which narrate these stories of dynamism and change, and we look forward to your engagement with the sites - and sights - of our work.

We worked in six towns: **Palampur** and **Rajgarh** in Himachal Pradesh, and the colonial hill stations of **Mussoorie** and **Nainital** in **Uttarakhand**, all in India; and in **Dhulikhel** and **Bidur** in Nepal.