

Call for Papers

The Geological Turn in Himalayan Environmental History Workshop:

12–14 October 2026 | South Asia Institute Branch Office, Kathmandu, Nepal

About the Workshop

The South Asia Institute (SAI), Heidelberg University, and the Center for the Study of Knowledge, Materials, and Materiality (KaMM Center), Kathmandu, in cooperation with the Max Weber Forum for South Asian Studies (MWF), Delhi invite submissions from early-career researchers for a three-day interdisciplinary workshop on the 'geological turn' in Himalayan environmental history.

The workshop responds to a growing reorientation within the environmental humanities that foregrounds geological materials, forces, and processes, such as earthquakes, landslides, glacial retreat, erosion, toxic soils, contaminated waters, as active dimensions of historical and humanistic analysis. Rather than treating geology as a neutral scientific backdrop, this intellectual shift interrogates how geological formations and expertise have long shaped sociocultural realities, political imaginaries, and economic projects. Moving beyond the Anthropocene debate, the workshop asks how geological formations and expertise have shaped colonialism, state formation, religious practice, urbanisation, and environmental justice in one of the world's most geologically dynamic regions.

The Himalayas remain conceptually and empirically underdeveloped within the 'geological turn' literature. This workshop aims to change that, bringing together early-career scholars across the environmental humanities and the geosciences to elaborate a **'political geology' of the Himalayas** and establish a durable research network in the field.

Thematic Axes

The workshop is organised around five thematic panels. We particularly welcome papers that cut across disciplinary boundaries and speak to more than one axis.

Panel I: Colonial Geological Surveys and Knowledge Production in the Himalayas

How did colonial and postcolonial states, survey organisations, and corporate actors produce geological knowledge of the Himalayan region? Papers may address how coalfields, oil prospects, and hydroelectric sites were rendered legible through mapping and drilling; how survey practices differed across British India, the princely states, Nepal, and Tibet; and how local labour and expertise were acknowledged or effaced in official publications.

Panel II: Seismic Histories: Earthquakes, Sacred Geographies, and Disaster

How have Himalayan communities and states interpreted and remembered seismic events, from nineteenth-century shocks recorded in colonial reports and court chronicles to the 2015 Gorkha earthquake? Papers may engage historical, ethnographic, and geological perspectives, examining earthquakes as divine signs, expressions of subterranean animal agency, technical problems in building and infrastructure, or tests of state legitimacy.

Panel III: Cryospheric Change and Glacial Materialities in Environmental History

Papers in this panel historicise Himalayan glaciers, snowfields, and permafrost as historical and political actors, not only indicators of climate change but also objects of labour, mobility, and imagination. Contributions may draw on archival sources, oral histories, and scientific data to examine glacial retreat and advance, glacial lake outburst floods (GLOFs), snowline shifts, and changing river

regimes.

Panel IV: Toxic Geologies: Extractivism, Mining, and Environmental Damage

How do extractive activities in the Himalayas, from artisanal quarrying and gemstone mining to hydropower schemes and road construction, produce enduring geochemical and geomorphological transformations? Papers may address tailings, spoil heaps, blasted slopes, sediment-clogged reservoirs, and chemically altered soils as both geological records and lived experiences.

Panel V: Vernacular and Indigenous Geological Knowledge in the Himalayas

Papers in this panel centre situated ways of knowing earth materials, landforms, and subsurface flows arising from long-term engagement with mountain environments. Topics include ritual engagements with landslides and springs; geomantic practices guiding house siting and terracing; artisanal knowledge of stone, ore veins, or healing clays; and everyday habits for reading environmental change.

Methodological Scope

The workshop is explicitly transdisciplinary. We welcome contributions from historians, historical geographers, anthropologists, STS scholars, environmental humanists, geoscientists, and practitioners from NGOs and policy institutions. Methods may include archival research, ethnographic fieldwork, analysis of media and artistic representations, geological data and remote-sensing, and creative or experimental formats.

The Himalayan Geological Turn Network (HGTN)

A central outcome of the workshop will be the formal launch of the **Himalayan Geological Turn Network (HGTN)**, a durable community of early-career scholars and practitioners linking researchers based in Nepal, Bhutan, the Indian Himalayan states, the Tibetan/Chinese borderlands, Southeast Asia, Europe, and beyond. Planned HGTN activities include online reading groups, thematic working clusters, co-development of teaching materials, and joint conference panels.

Who Should Apply

This workshop is designed for **early-career researchers**, such as advanced doctoral candidates and postdoctoral scholars, working at the intersection of the environmental humanities, social sciences, and geosciences on topics related to Himalayan geology, environment, and society. We strongly encourage submissions from researchers based in the Hindu Kush Himalayan region and are committed to equitable participation through travel and accommodation support.

Submission Guidelines

Please submit a **paper proposal of no more than 400 words**, together with a **short biographical note (max. 150 words)**, indicating:

- The thematic panel(s) your paper addresses
- The disciplinary approach and key sources or methods used
- Your institutional affiliation and career stage

Queries and submissions should be sent to: **Stefan.lueder@sai.uni-heidelberg.de**

Deadline: 01 August 2026

Participants will be notified of decisions by **30 August 2026**.

Accepted participants are expected to submit a full paper of 3,000–5,000 words by 30 September 2026 for circulation to all workshop participants in advance; all participants are expected to read all circulated papers before the workshop.

Venue and Context

The workshop will be hosted by the **South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University** and is co-organised with the Center for the Study of Knowledge, Materials, and Materiality (KaMM Center) and the Max Weber Forum for South Asian Studies (MWF), Delhi. Kathmandu offers a uniquely compelling site for exploring geology as a historical and political force.

Funding and Support for Participants

Subject to a positive funding decision, which we expect to confirm by the end of August 2026, we will be in a position to cover:

- **Economy-class return travel** to and from Kathmandu for all selected speakers.
We prioritise funding for travel for scholars based in the Hindu Kush Himalayan region and South Asia. If you are able to secure institutional or departmental funding for your travel costs, please indicate this in your proposal, as it helps us direct support to those with fewer resources.
- **Accommodation** in Kathmandu for the workshop duration (3 nights, on a shared basis)
- **All meals, coffee/tea breaks, and refreshments** throughout the three workshop days, including the working dinner on the evening of 13 October

There is **no registration fee** for this workshop. We welcome scholars from all regions of the world. Our aim is to ensure that financial constraints do not prevent participation and, therefore, prioritise travel funding for researchers based in the Hindu Kush Himalayan region and other parts of South Asia.

Organisers

Dr. Stefan Lüder, South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University

Dr. Surabhi Pudasaini, Center for the Study of Knowledge, Materials, and Materiality (KaMM Center), Kathmandu