

Alumnus but not forgotten: (he's back!): Siddharth Pandey



As the first fellow to return to gd:c for a second term, what were you working on during your first stay with us?

My first project at the gd:c explored the notion of dis:connectivity in the Indian Himalayas, particular in Himachal Pradesh. Taking current ecological degradation and uneven mountain development as its starting point, the project attended to how a swiftly disappearing way of highland life offered a different understanding of landscape and culture in the past. Focusing on

Fig. 01
Siddharth Pandey

everyday aesthetics and life from the precolonial and colonial eras, I initiated a conversation spanning architecture, music, folklore and dwelling rituals that testified to sophisticated regard for ecology. In short, I interpreted dis:connectivity in terms of a deracination characterising the present-day Himalayas and connectivity in terms of an environmentally attuned relationship to the mountains.

How has your research evolved since then, and how did your previous stay at gd:c contribute to its evolution?

Highland cultures, aesthetics and interdisciplinarity continue to guide my research. The Himalayas, after all, are so vast that, even while focusing on only one region, you continue to find new aspects to think about. I cherish this ability to be moved by so-called ‘familiar’ terrain, for it keeps me wedded to creative spatial engagement and critical appreciation of lived geographies.

My current project builds upon my previous experiences at gd:c and develops the (sub)discipline of Himalayan humanities. While the study of water-bodies (rivers, seas and oceans) has been a staple of global history research for over a decade, mountains have eluded that level of scrutiny. Of course, some sparse arenas (journals and academic/ popular platforms) do forward a cultural approach to the study of mountain regions.

A humanities-oriented approach to the study of mountains reflects a shift from their predominant geopolitical treatment. While these two prisms shouldn’t be divested from the humanities, there is also value in the experiential, socio-cultural and aesthetic aspects of mountain life. I remain committed to studying the deep links between nature and culture (given that natural geography plays an overwhelming role in the day-to-day human culture of the highlands). But over the years, my work has acquired a more philosophical bent. The dynamism of the centre’s numerous projects (helmed by fellows, postdocs and the whole team) has opened new avenues of thought and practice, while also honing my scholarly sensibilities.

What intellectual stimulation — book, article, exhibition, performance — have you encountered recently that particularly impressed you?

Earlier this year, I read Robert Macfarlane’s *Is a River Alive?*, and that work has stayed with me for its eloquence, vision and formal experimentation. Macfarlane is a professor of English and geohumanities at Cambridge and is the pre-eminent writer on landscape and nature of our times. I have been reading him for over a decade, and he has repeatedly stunned me with his understanding of the relationship between ‘landscape and the human heart’.

Is a River Alive? takes the titular question as the book’s fundamental research-drive and navigates the swiftly developing

concept of 'rights of nature' over several journeys across different continents. In lush, living prose, Macfarlane narrates his travels along and across water-bodies in Ecuador, India, Canada and England, dwelling on the language of the natural world and its 'aliveness'. As poetic as it is political, the book brilliantly balances perception with non-human personhood, while also transforming into a compelling testament to writerly craft and rigorous commitment.

What song would you choose as the soundtrack for your time at gd:c?

Ah, that's a tough one! I can never select only one soundtrack for my time here, simply because I love variation. Almost every day, I let my playlist hover among Ludovico Einaudi, Enya, AR Rahman and other composers from the East and West. As a musician, I am often struck by the contiguities and correspondences between different tunes, sometimes across cultures, which also influences my compositions on the keyboard and piano (my keyboard has accompanied me during both my Munich stays, and that allows me to practice my own soundtracks every now and then).

Having grown up listening to Himachali folk songs sung by my mother, mountain melodies constitute my core aural memory, and I find myself returning to them. But speaking of soundtracks and Munich, I must further acknowledge the sheer joy whenever I come across the Ukrainian Lisniak band playing enthusiastically in Marienplatz. These street performers are as brilliant as any well-recognised musicians, and they never fail to enliven the marvellous city centre. Since Lisniak was also around during my first gd:c stay, I treat it as a fundamental musical anchor of my German life.

Given the choice of anyone, dead, alive, or even a fictional character, who would you most want to host as a dinner guest?

It would have to be William Morris! He was a polymath who has long inspired me with the endless ways he realised the richness of life. Inhabiting an age where, for all its emphasis on interdisciplinarity, we continue to be siloed in our approaches, it is instructive to recall people and periods who embodied the opposite. Morris, along with his teacher John Ruskin, spearheaded the Arts and Crafts movement, which critiqued the Industrial movement and provided a mesmerically creative and ethical orientation towards everyday living. And for such an orientation to matter, Morris himself saw through – and practiced – the links that make the world a beautiful place to live in. A designer, poet, novelist, architect and eco-socialist, Morris championed a way of life where labour and leisure, hand and head, nature and culture, beauty and the everyday weren't treated as binaries but as mutually constitutive. His vision is desperately required for the disconnected world we live in, and it would be wonderful to summon his ghost for a long, winding discussion.