AN ECONOMY OF RETREAT: On Staying Home in the Indian Himalayas

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It's just before 5 a.m. in rural Kalimpong. The air is quiet and still. A couple of dogs saunter up, half-asleep themselves, to ascertain if I have any biscuits to go with my coffee. As the sun starts to peek over the horizon, lights pop on across the village. Within minutes, dozens of Bengali tourists, layers of synthetic woolens over their sleeping garments, gather in the dirt clearing. As one man exits his room, he knocks on the adjacent window, barking in Bangla to a Nepali woman inside to make tea for him and his family. With more sugar this time. The Himalayan range starts to appear from behind the pink-hued dawn clouds. The center of this panorama is Kanchenjunga, the world's third-highest peak. Mobile phones click. Selfies are taken. When the mountains have been sufficiently seen, the tourists pile back into their rooms to be served "bed tea" and snooze until breakfast. All the while, Nepali families prepare for them to reemerge, cooking, fetching water in reused vegetable oil jugs, and piling into shared jeeps to go to the nearest market to buy supplies.

This has become a morning routine in many villages across Kalimpong, a district in the northernmost part of the Indian state of West Bengal, bordering Bhutan and the state of Sikkim. The majority of Kalimpong's residents come from the historically marginalized Nepali, Bhutia, and Lepcha groups, who have

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long struggled to establish claims to belonging in India. Almost twenty years ago, villagers would have been awake, but they would have been preparing to head to the fields. People even called Kalimpong the region's "breadbasket," noting a contrast between its food-producing small farms and the monocultured tea plantations in neighboring Darjeeling.

Cast your eyes down from the horizon. Today, acres of land lie barren. The steps of once productive rice terraces have become overrun with weeds. Kalimpong's sheer hillsides have always been landslide-prone, but thanks to climate change and a wave of new road construction, erratic monsoon rains have made landslides even worse. The cost of growing food has risen above market value. Cheaper products from the plains are now trucked up to Kalimpong on those newly built roads. More and more villagers, especially youth, have migrated to India's cities or abroad in search of work. For many families, hosting Bengali tourists for short-term "homestays" has become one of the only alternatives to wholesale abandonment. One older woman in the village of Sisnu Gaon summarized the situation: "Earlier we used to graze cows and goats and farm," she explained. "But now there are no fields. Homestays are the only way that we can make money."

This essay contributes to theory about how new valuation projects emerge in response to agrarian and climate crises. From the Caribbean to the Andes to rural Palestine, farming and fishing villages ravaged by drought, landslides, war, and trade policies that favor agro-industry over smallholding have become frontiers for speculative investment in residential and commercial development, including tourism (Gascón 2016; Ojeda 2012; Kohlbry 2018). These speculative projects have reanimated long-standing colonial ways of seeing the countryside, as well as a nostalgia for the very nature that imperial projects have destroyed. Since India's economic liberalization in the 1990s, trade-friendly state policies have facilitated the acquisition and consolidation of farmland for the development of cash-crop monocultures, high-end housing, and low-cost, export-oriented manufacturing (Cross 2014; Levien 2018; Jodhka 2023; Sainath 1996).

In what follows, I situate the rise of homestays in Kalimpong within what I call an *economy of retreat*. The term *economy of retreat* calls attention to the late capitalist return of the *oikos*—the house, or the household—not only as a fundamental unit of the economy but also as a critical lens for understanding the economy. This return has happened at a time when once subtle changes in climate are becoming apparent in everyday experience. Following João Biehl and Federico Neiburg (2021, 540), I ask "how people's lives and worlds are made and remade in relation to the house and house-ing practices when critical times

become an everyday predicament." Heat and pollution in cities like Kolkata have caused growing numbers of urbanites to temporarily flee to the hills. The intensification of homestays, temporary low-cost retreats, stresses transportation and water infrastructures to their breaking point and increases waste. At the same time, this urban retreat to the hills turns houses into potential new sources of income. In Kalimpong, realizing that potential means physically retrofitting and renovating houses to appeal to paying customers. This labor supports the affective and service work most familiar in studies of tourism—cooking, cleaning, childcare, and the like.

An economy of retreat is one in which two kinds of aspirations converge. On one hand lies the aspiration of urban dwellers to be mobile enough to temporarily escape climate crisis in the form of stifling heat and air pollution. On the other is the aspiration of rural people like those in Kalimpong to be stable enough to weather the crisis at home. Put another way, the economy of retreat entails a meeting of urban anxiety with agrarian precarity. It is shaped by the flexibility and temporariness of capital's entanglements. While retreat, broadly, need not always involve the physical structures of housing, it does concern the shifting grounds of habitation shaped by classed, racialized, and ethnicized difference. I use *economy* not only to highlight the intertwined social, technical, political process that shape the unequal power relations of escape but to also consider how and with what effects retreat touches down in the lives and homes of rural people.[1]



Figure 1. A homestay. Photo by Yojak Tamang.

Scholars have shown how pollution, heat, and food insecurity threaten home and habitability for low-income, racialized people in cities (Baviskar 2022; Checker 2011). For rural people who can no longer survive as farmers, from India to China to Malaysia, operating homestays offers a way of staying home (Chio 2014; Preston and Ngah 2012). This turns the *oikos* into a volatile space, both environmentally and socially, but also into a space of new speculative opportunity. Attention to this double movement permits scholars to trace the relationship between capitalism and climate change through domestic space. When the domestic is put into the service of providing retreat for others, it becomes a new form displacement (Figure 1).

Ecologically sensitive but remote areas like the eastern Himalayas constitute spaces of retreat in two senses. In one sense, these have long been places to which those with time and means have gone to escape urban overcrowding, heat, and pollution. The growing intensification of climate crisis in cities reinscribes the countryside as a space of refuge and redemption. In another sense, however, the country itself is in retreat. Kalimpong's small farms form part of what Raymond Williams, in *The Country and the City* (1973), calls a "vanishing rural order." The concept of retreat captures a paradox Williams identified in representations of the country and which critical scholars of tourism have identified in representations of spaces of leisure: that they are both simultaneously timeless *and* disappearing, stable *and* precarious (Moore 2019; Ojeda 2024; Kincaid 1988).

After further discussion of the relevance of retreat for understanding the interface between climate change and agrarian capitalism, the rest of this article discusses three key aspects of the economy of retreat. The first is geopolitical. For more than a decade, the government of West Bengal has aggressively promoted homestay tourism. Its goals are to stimulate "rural development," to put failing farmland to work, and to tamp down a long-standing subnational movement fought by Nepali, Lepcha, and Bhutia people for rights and recognition. The state has begun to provide modest subsidies to convert houses into homestays, provide training in hospitality, and support marketing for villages. Despite state incentives, operating homestays requires capital that most Kalimpong families do not possess. Private speculators have stepped in to provide this capital. They have infused villages with money and social connections. Indebtedness to these investors has rattled villagers' sense of belonging and even sovereignty over their land.

Second is the rise of new forms of geographical arbitrage. In this economy, value accrues to those who can leverage the density of urban environments and social networks against the relative openness of agrarian ones. It is difficult to buy and sell land in Kalimpong. This means that the patterns that have obtained



Figure 2. Tourists looking out over the valley. Photo by Yojak Tamang.

in similar situations elsewhere—with smallholders selling up to property developers or large plantation companies—do not always hold. Instead of purchasing land and driving inhabitants away, speculators in Kalimpong's emerging homestay market *lease* the rights to run villagers' houses as homestays. Householders do not leave. Instead, they stay on in their own homes as service workers. This makes homestays an example of what Rob Nixon (2011) calls "displacement without moving."

The third aspect of the economy of retreat concerns physical and temporal horizons. Even as homestays may have helped some families remain in Kalimpong, the work of remaining, which includes the construction and maintenance of drastic renovations to houses themselves, is fraught with ambivalence (Rizvi 2019; Middleton 2024). There is a widespread sense that the life span of the homestay economy will be a short one. As they repair houses, build extensions, and install infrastructure in anticipation of arriving tourists, homestay operators recognize that what they are selling is the agrarian crisis itself. As the focus of labor shifts from fields to houses, economic futures come to depend on the ability to sell Kalimpong's agrarian past. The renovation of village houses by contemporary residents, in other words, is a way of giving visitors access to the decaying remains of the farms and forests their ancestors cultivated. Visitors seek a view of the Himalayan horizon, and with it a rural way of life in the process of unraveling due to landslides, the rising cost of basic food and supplies, and out-migration (Figure 2). The economy of retreat thus resembles the economies of anticipation that have emerged around climate crisis elsewhere, but it is distinct

from other forms of "disaster capitalism," in which abrupt events like hurricanes, floods, or earthquakes provide openings for drastic if long-desired programs for privatization and austerity (Klein 2007; Adams, Van Hattum, and English 2009; Wright, Kelman, and Dodds 2021). The economy of retreat instead leverages rural villagers' desire to remain at home against anxious urbanites' desire to experience what remains of a vanishing environment.

RETREAT

Retreat has become a keyword in studies of housing, climate change, and agrarian crisis. Large-scale "managed retreat" from climate risk—from coastal flooding to wildfires—can involve carrot-like approaches such as housing buy-out programs, or more indirect stick-like approaches, such as high insurance premiums or the inability to access insurance altogether (Hino, Field, and Mach 2017; Agyeman, Devine-Wright, and Prange 2009). Managed retreat, with its technocratic optimism about a voluntary stepping-away from harm and its militaristic overtones, occludes another more pervasive condition, especially for agrarian communities. In the face of inequitable multinational trade agreements, land-use policies that favor industrial monocultures over biodiverse small farms, and changes in ecological conditions (from salination to erosion to deforestation), agrarian people are leaving their land. Mass rural-to-urban migration, particularly in South Asia, is another pervasive form of climate retreat (Paprocki 2020).

Within the broader economy of climate retreat, so-called climate havens, cities and towns that appear insulated from the worst effects of climate change, are attracting new forms of real estate speculation. In such havens, housing—whether for permanent residence or temporary escape—has reemerged as the center of economic activity (Kamin 2023; Arbit, Bottoms, and Lewis 2023). To be sure, the status of such locations as havens has always been somewhat dubious. Until Hurricane Helene struck in September 2024, for example, many considered the cool mountain towns of western North Carolina "climate havens" (Simon 2024; Safransky 2024). These havens are not a new idea. In fact, one prototype for the contemporary climate haven were the British colonial "hill stations" that dotted the altitudinal margins of South Asia. Cities like Shimla, in contemporary Himachal Pradesh, Ooty, in the Western Ghats of Tamil Nadu, or Darjeeling, in the foothills of West Bengal just a few hours' drive from Kalimpong, were all explicitly founded as refuges from the heat and disease of British India's lower-altitude administrative centers (Pradhan 2017; Kennedy 1996; Bhattacharya 2012; Kenny 1995). This colonial legacy of altitudinal retreat persists into the present.

The economy of retreat does not only concern intersecting forms of mobility (Chio 2014) but also the struggle of marginalized communities to remain in place. This struggle revolves around the question of how physical houses become homes, and what it takes to keep them that way (Fennell 2015). Retreat—managed or otherwise—fractures the connection between house (the physical structure) and home (the space of care, sociality, and ancestral belonging) (Bourdieu 1979; Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995). Houses have conventionally been imagined as sites of stability, of long-term investments in the future of the family, the community, and even the nation (Carsten 2018; Fehérváry 2013; Guyer 2015; Zaloom and James 2023). Arguably, such investments make them into homes and root people in place (Besky 2017a). Much of the anthropological scholarship on houses and homes stems from research in agrarian contexts, where the household itself serves as a central economic unit, even if feminist scholars have questioned the givenness of the household as a stable social entity (Collins 1986; Guyer 1981; Harris 1984). At the same time, a long tradition in feminist scholarship in anthropology has also drawn attention to the diverse ways women have worked not just *in* the home but also *through* the home, including renting out rooms in their houses (Lamphere 1987).

As climate change progresses, and as disasters accrete, the ambiguous relationship between house and home becomes more politically fraught and, potentially, economically potent (Shneiderman 2024). As I show below, when houses are reimagined as sources of value through the homestay economy, they become connected in new ways to public infrastructures such as roads, water systems, and communications networks (Anand, Gupta, and Appel 2018; Amin 2014).

The rendering of houses into spaces geared toward the enjoyment of others—the reconciliation of retreat's traumatic valence with its restorative one—turns them into sites of what Nixon (2011, 2) terms "slow violence," or "a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all." Attending to slow violence requires tracing the "socioenvironmental fallout from developmental agendas whose primary beneficiaries live elsewhere" (Nixon 2011, 18). Tourism constitutes one such developmental agenda (Chio 2014; Gascón 2016; Gascón and Milano 2018; Devine and Ojeda 2017). In island and oceanside communities, national policies reorient entire economies to service, especially in the wake of structural adjustment policies that make self-reliance impossible (Córdoba Azcárate 2020; Gonzalez 2013; Moore 2019). For working people, a defining condition of life in such would-be climate havens is a sense of "displacement

without moving" (Nixon 2011). In the West Bengal Himalayas, as I show in the next section, Nepali, Bhutia, and Lepcha people have historically struggled for recognition as full-fledged citizens, even as they have been pulled into a development discourse that touts the retrofitting of houses into homestays as a means of economic and geographical stability.

THE "OPEN" HILLS: The Geopolitics of Retreat

Across the Himalayas, international adventure and eco-tourism have long carried promises of economic prosperity and political stability (Bennike and Nielsen 2024; Bennike 2020; Liechty 2017; Lim 2007). To be clear, those seeking homestays in Kalimpong are not adventure or eco-tourists. What distinguishes the case of Kalimpong from other Himalayan sites is the way a colonial geography of retreat has been transposed onto domestic, subnational development politics and colonial and postcolonial desires for the country. The state of West Bengal is shaped like a lopsided hourglass. Its southern part, orienting to the megacity of Kolkata, is dominated by Bengalis. In its geographical middle, the state narrows to the width of a railway line, before opening to a smaller, hilly northern region, dominated by indigenous Lepchas and Bhutias, as well as the Indian Nepalis who have long considered the region their homeland. Nepali serves as the lingua franca here. Many people in Kalimpong, especially in the villages, do not speak Bangla, but the tourists coming to Kalimpong's homestays are overwhelmingly Bengali families from Kolkata and its environs who do not speak any Nepali. They ascend into Kalimpong's villages on multiday package tours that include food, lodging, and transportation. They stay one night, two at most, in each village before moving onto the next. This is not luxury tourism. Homestays cost a fraction of the price of a stay at even the most down-market hotel. People pay an all-inclusive rate per head, and they pack into rooms, with extra mats rolled out on the floors, enabling large families to travel together.

Government websites, billboards, and booking agents characterize the villages of Kalimpong as "offbeat" (as in, "off the beaten path"). As one of the largest travel agencies working in the region puts it: "Exploring the flourishing beauty of Kalimpong is amusing, but relishing the beauty of its less trodden destinations is even more enjoyable. Being able to escape the clutch of urbanization, these offbeat destinations are like fresh sweet fruits that are hard to resist."[2] While predictably generic as far as tourism marketing goes, this description is apt for understanding not only the environmental allure of Kalimpong but also the geopolitical context that undergirds the economy of retreat here.

The growth of the homestay market came in the wake of the second Gorkhaland agitation of the early 2000s, the latest chapter in a long-standing movement to form an Indian state separate from West Bengal, which would include the hills and its majority of Indian Nepalis, or "Gorkhas" (Besky 2014; Subba 1992). Gorkhaland demands for territorial sovereignty have hinged on both economic and ethnic arguments. Since Indian independence in 1947, the West Bengal government has denied the region and its Nepali-speaking communities opportunities for economic development. Adapting a colonial geographical imaginary that dates to the early 1800s, in which Himalayan hill stations served as temperate retreats for Europeans in India, Bengali political leaders and many of their constituents in the south have tended to view the hills as the bucolic backyard of Kolkata.

The southern and northern parts of the state, the plains and the hills, have long been linked through the historical experience, both real and imagined, of retreat. For colonial administrators and planters, hill stations provided a climatic foil to the heat and disease of the plains, to which civil servants could come to regenerate their bodies, and with those bodies, colonial rule (Bhattacharya 2012; Kenny 1995). Within Bengali literature and film, the hills have served a similar romantic and recuperative purpose. A house in the hills, or even a short-term retreat to a country bungalow in the mountains, has long served as a sign of cultural capital (Sen 2020; Pal 2010). For example, in Satyajit Ray's 1962 film *Kanchenjunga*, which takes place in Darjeeling, a taut family drama plays out as the characters wait patiently to see the mountains come out from behind the clouds. Within Bengali literature, the peace and solace of the mountains is a dominant motif, from the writings of Rabindranath Tagore (who made seasonal retreats to Kalimpong) to Ray's film and his Feluda books (and numerous filmic remakes) to the contemporary series on the Bangla streaming platform Hoichoi, *Homestay Murders*, based in a genericized Kalimpong. The construction of the hills as a space of retreat depended on British and Indian elites' labor taxonomies of the Nepali, Lepcha, and Bhutia people who lived there as "naturally" skilled at service occupations, from cooking to child care to gardening—precisely the kinds of services that tourists seek for their stays in the mountains.

The Gorkhaland agitation questioned the inequities and colonialist assumptions built into this geographical imaginary. Gorkhaland leaders drew attention to what they saw as an extractive relationship between the south and the north. To do so, as is the case with political action and public protest across South Asia, agitations frequently took the form of *bandhs* (strikes, literally, "closures") (Besky

2017b). Closures of roads, businesses, and transportation brought tourism to a standstill during the resurgence of the movement between 2007 and 2011.

West Bengal's current chief minister, Mamata Banerjee, came to power in 2011, just as the Gorkhaland movement began to fracture, in part because of the economic privation caused by the *bandhs*. Banerjee campaigned on a familiar imaginary of the mountains, claiming that she would make the hills into "Switzerland," while Kolkata would become the "London" of the region (Chakraborty 2013; Press Trust India 2011). In 2012, Banerjee declared the hills "open for business." The *bandhs* subsided, with one major exception in 2017, sparked by Banerjee's attempt to make Bangla the medium of instruction in government schools in the hills. Since then, Banerjee and her ruling party, the Trinamool Congress, have devoted considerable resources to the project of keeping (or, more accurately, prying) the hills *open* to the flow of people and capital from south Bengal. This project is often euphemized by the party slogan "the hills are smiling," an attempt to highlight the boons of development that have arrived under Banerjee's regime. Money will flow from the city to the country, Banerjee reminded people in the hills, but only if the country remains open.[3]

Like agrarian tourist-development initiatives in mid-2000s China that promised "peasant family happiness" alongside modernization (Chio 2014, 89–90), Banerjee's project of opening the hills was facilitated by national-level policies, particularly the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA), the 100 days' work program rolled out almost twenty years ago to address unemployment across India. In north Bengal, MNREGA initiatives led to the construction of miles of new roads, connecting villages once only accessible by foot to main highways. In the past two decades, men in the hills have been opting for the guarantee of wage labor on MNREGA projects over the more uncertain seasonal payouts of farming.

In the hot months, before the rains take hold in mid-June, both the main roads and the smaller rural roads built through MNREGA are packed. The state of West Bengal now cancels work and school on particularly hot days in Kolkata, and people flock on overnight trains to the hills. The season resumes after the rains and during the Hindu festival season in the autumn. While the region's most well-known city, Darjeeling, has played host to tourists since the 1850s, the past decade has seen a marked swelling in the volume of visitors. If Darjeeling was the prototypical climate retreat, complete with hotels, paved walkways, a zoo, and other attractions—all packed into a relatively small space atop a picturesque ridge—Kalimpong's value lay in its social and ecological "openness":

the comparative lack of manicured attractions and the low density of its population. In other words, Kalimpong was attractive because it looked like a bucolic countryside. It looked like a place where small farming—and small houses—still predominated. Officials in the District Magistrate's office actively promoted homestays, enticing villagers to convert their houses by issuing subsidies and offering hospitality trainings.

A Kalimpong-based driver explained the allure of Kalimpong's villages to me in 2023. As we drove up the mountain from the bazaar town of Siliguri in the plains, we passed new billboards that lined the road. They broadcast messages from state development agencies extolling the natural wonders of the hills. In Darjeeling, he told me, "All you see is concrete. You can't see anything. All the views are blocked. . . . It's all buildings. But there is still space in Kalimpong. It's still *open*." This was partly because houses here are small farmhouses, not the grand holiday homes of nearby hill stations. The very modesty and low density of residence in Kalimpong provided tangible evidence of the area's suitability as a climate retreat.

That modesty and low density also provided a material counterpoint to urban housing conditions. Kalimpong was seen less as a "rural void" (Driessen 2018) than as a site of new economic potential. As in other contexts where infrastructure projects facilitate both tourism and extractivism, houses emerged as a symbolic and material focal point (Dunda 2023). "These tourists come from cities," one homestay operator later told me. "In the city, they live in clusters. When they come here, they want to stay in villages, away from the noise, in an isolated place. [That] is enough for the tourists."

The project of "opening" the hills is one of arbitrage between urban climate anxiety and rural economic crisis. It reconciles the promises of escape from the city for urbanites with the promise of the ability to remain for rural Nepalis, Lepchas, and Bhutias. In this way, Banerjee's policies, conjoined with the national MNREGA initiative, manifest a version of a "land broker state" (Levien 2018) in which, as Arjun Appadurai (2024, 4) puts it, the valuation of land shifts from "fertility" to "location." Farmland deemed unproductive is being revalued through infrastructural investment and incentive-making. Thanks to new roads and the expansion of buying capabilities for the urban lower middle classes, it is now possible for people who would not have been able to leave the city during the summer, or to take refuge in the cleaner, cooler air of the mountains in the winter, to do so. And thanks to the MNREGA-built roads (and privately built ones as well), tourists can drive straight into villages that until recently remained



Figure 3. A new road leading into a homestay village. Photo by Yojak Tamang.

unconnected (Figure 3). Kalimpong's homestays offer sources of temporary retreat from the front lines of climate crisis. For political leaders in Kolkata, this democratization of the imaginary of the hills as a space of retreat has become a means of suturing the state's ethnically marked margins to its center and of suppressing subnational demands (see Stein 2008 on Israeli tourism in Palestine).

But state claims about the development benefits of alleged openness remain far from universally accepted. Activists and journalists in the hills describe evocations of Switzerland and smiles as a new language of colonial occupation. They parody this Switzerland imaginary to highlight continued environmental violence. For example, in 2024, the *Darjeeling Chronicle* ran a series of video clips on social media that featured overflowing drains, rubbish-choked hillsides, and denuded land with the sarcastic lead-in "Meanwhile in Switzerland . . ."[4] The paper's editors captioned one video documenting a monsoon flood in a poorly maintained drainage ditch by saying, "This is what happens, when municipality officials turn a blind eye to . . . rampant occupation."[5]

This language of occupation framed conversations about agrarian change across the hills. In the fields on the outskirts of a village in Kalimpong, two older Nepali men cut long fronds of *amliso* (tiger grass), which they would later dry and make into brooms. They reflected on changes the opening of the hills had brought while they stopped to take a break from the sun. The more verbose of the pair said: "Bengalis, personally, I do not like them. They try to fool us." He

explained how Bengalis "had taken all of the main places." By this, he was referring to the hilltop land that afforded airflow, long hours of sun, and, of course, better views. He continued, "I thought that when the Bengalis came here, there would be development." Even though many villagers remained in their houses, if the homestay economy kept expanding, the old man said, now gesticulating with a frustration I heard across the hills, "then these Bengalis will tell us: 'Eh, *kaanchaa* [youngest son]! You are from Nepal!'"

The desire to be acknowledged as citizens of India, and not of Nepal, has been a long-standing pillar of Gorkhaland politics. The residents of Kalimpong's villages are Indian citizens, and their families have been living in India since well before its contemporary borders were drawn. Despite these perennial feelings of displacement and dispossession at the hands of Bengali people and capital, many in Kalimpong also described homestay tourism as a means—often the only means—for rural people to *remain* in their homes and villages. The price of remaining, however, was a reinhabitation of labor subjectivities elaborated during the colonial period, when Nepalis, Bhutias, and Lepchas were considered particularly adept at service work like cooking, cleaning, child-rearing, and manual labor. To participate in homestay tourism, they had to double down on the racialized imaginaries Bengalis had of people in the hills.

LEASING THE COUNTRYSIDE: Retreat as Geographical Arbitrage

Sisnu Gaon is located, as the lore goes, on the former Silk Road. The village grew out of what was originally a small settlement of casual workers for the West Bengal Forest Department. Workers' rights to build houses were premised on their remaining in place. These plots were not fungible. Sisnu Gaon sits at the end of a rough road but boasts spectacular views of Kanchenjunga and the surrounding Himalayan range. It is the most saturated homestay village in Kalimpong. There are now an estimated 250 homestay rooms in a village of roughly forty families.

By 2011, an infrastructure that would bring tourists straight into the village was falling into place, thanks to MNREGA, but there were no homestays. Most villagers had little capital to convert their homes. To take advantage of a burgeoning market, villagers turned to finance. Private lenders loaned money to people to renovate houses and build homestay rooms. They tiled floors, added en suite bathrooms with hot water geysers, built furniture, and bought bedding. All this tended to leave homestay owners in debt once they opened.

While Bengalis with large amounts of capital were *buying* land in some places, it was far more prevalent for Bengalis with significantly less capital to

lease villagers' houses. In many villages, Bengalis cannot legally buy land. If land is owned by a member of a Scheduled Tribe (ST) community (e.g., Tamang or Lepcha), that land cannot be sold to a buyer from outside an ST community. Other villages in Kalimpong, like Sisnu Gaon, lie within the bounds of forest reserve land. This means that villagers do not have any land papers that would enable them to access bank loans or other "facilities" from the state. It also means that they do not have any land that they could legibly transfer.

While villagers in these situations cannot sell land, they can lease it. Or more accurately, they can lease the structures atop it, namely, their houses. If these villages happen to have some of the most desirable mountain views in the region, it is in large part thanks to the labor of previous generations of residents, who cultivated the landscape to create the very openness that homestay tourists seek. Yet a stunning landscape is not enough. The conversion of houses into homestays entails a shift in labor from field and forest inward to home and village. What people in places like Sisnu Gaon possess is labor power. What they lack is capital.

Starting in the early 2010s, Bengali lessees from Kolkata and other cities began arranging to pay householders a yearly rate, per room, which would allow them to act as "agents" for that homestay. This annual rate ranged from Rs. 30,000 to Rs. 50,000 per room per year (about $350–$600 USD). Homeowners used the money from leasing to pay for the retrofit and maintenance of houses, creating hotel-like spaces where they could inhabit the racialized service roles long associated with Nepalis, Bhutias, and Lepchas in northern India (Besky 2014). The leasing agents secured bookings through social media platforms, websites, and word-of-mouth social networks. They had access to a large population of would-be low-budget, mostly Bengali tourists that villagers did not. Agents would collect a per-night rate (Rs. 1000 in Sisnu Gaon during the high season, or about $12 USD) and then give the householder an additional few hundred rupees per head, per night for each guest to cover the costs of food (about $3.50 USD).

In development-speak, these agreements might be seen as allowing capital-poor householders to share profits with the leasing agents and, of course, keep their homes. The ideal leasing scheme was short-term. One homestay operator explained, "When I started the homestay, I didn't have any contacts or good networks. So, in the first year, I leased this homestay to an agent from Kolkata. He was a Bengali. From the agency, I got a lot of bookings. The guests took my visiting card, passed it to their friends, and now they book directly through me. Now, I run the homestay myself." This was the ideal case. When successful,

leasing would help people pay off their debts, find clients, and become independent entrepreneurs. But more often, leasing turned into a trap.

Near Sisnu Gaon, in Buckabari (also within the forest reserve), one homestay owner explained, "If I give my homestay on lease, they will pay a certain amount for the lease and give a *khuraki* (allowance) per day to feed the tourists. But it will not suffice! You have to buy chicken. You need to clean the room. You need to wash the dishes. And you need water. Nothing remains! You have to take out another loan. Then that money comes and then vanishes too."

The agrarian crisis that engendered the homestay economy also made it difficult for families to get out from under lease agreements. Not only is growing subsistence crops less viable, as I noted in the introduction, but the commodity crops promoted by the state, including cardamom, ginger, oranges, and decorative plants, are both prone to blight and increasingly challenging to cultivate because of a chronic lack of water. This made homestays the only alternative. The high tourist season in Kalimpong corresponds with the dry season, before the monsoon. This means that homestay operators must buy water from tanker trucks, or spend hours lined up at springs or public taps. Indian tourists bathe more than once a day, using considerably more water than villagers. Water scarcity, exacerbated during the tourist season, thus created additional costs for villagers. When I was carrying out fieldwork between 2019 and 2024, the hot, dry season had become longer, luring more tourists to the hills, while the monsoons had become more erratic. Kalimpong's sheer hillsides are also landslide prone, and monsoon rains, when they came, were making landslides more catastrophic. In the economy of retreat, changing climate cycles conjugated with new cycles of debt.

The leasing and booking agent system is distinct from the familiar platform economy supported by the likes of Airbnb. In those systems, owners place their homes or rooms on a standardized, and rather unpeopled, modular web space, one that (like the agents and lessees) takes a cut of the profits. The networks through which homestays in Kalimpong's villages operated were much more analog and routed through the figure of the Bengali male broker. Visitors booked their families into a package over the phone or on basic websites or through Facebook pages. Large groups traveling together might have to be spread over more than one homestay. While there were certainly a couple of bigger players with multiple homestay leases and many contacts for booking clients, the agent landscape remained decentralized. The logics of the "sharing economy" touted by Airbnb and other familiar platforms meant something different in Kalimpong. Sharing one's home was a means of preventing its full surrender.

The so-called agents who took out homestay leases often had little experience before entering the market, other than having been tourists at one point themselves. One leasing agent, who was visiting Buckabari during the high season, explained that he first went there just as some of the first homestays had opened in the mid-2010s, after a road had been extended to the village. He said: "I heard about Kalimpong from friends in Kolkata. People told me about Buckabari. They said that it was a forest village and a very peaceful place with a good view of Kanchenjunga. I trekked all the way here [from Sisnu Gaon] and stayed for a few days. I liked their hospitality."

When he returned to Kolkata, he uploaded pictures and videos on Facebook and Instagram. Soon, people in his social network began contacting him about Kalimpong, and about Buckabari in particular. He started sending tourists there. "The tourists were all my friends from Kolkata," he explained. "I built a relationship with the owner of this homestay [i.e., he leased it]. The locals here do not have a direct connection with Kolkata. But if the locals lease their property, then they can just be carefree."

Agents like this one enacted an arbitrage between the social and ecological openness of the country and the social and ecological density of the city. Exasperated homestay operators I interviewed in Kalimpong would talk of not having *access* to tourists—of not knowing how to reach them, or attract them through social media or run a website. The economy of retreat depended in part on the continued indebtedness of rural householders, but it also depended on the allure of the "offbeat" nature of life in the hills. It depended, in other words, on the limited scale and low density of the social and environmental relations that constituted country life. Small villages, a few families, living lightly on the land, as they always had, would "naturally" have few social connections to potential customers in the plains.

THE TEMPORALITY OF RETREAT

Jojo was one of the only homestay operators in Sisnu Gaon who did not lease out his homestay. He was an early adopter. In 2012, after the coming of the road and the suppression of the Gorkhaland agitation, a few tourists came, but business was spotty. "They used to laugh at me," he said, referring to other villagers watching Bengali tourists sleep in the detached block he had built outside his house. But now, he was full most of the time, and Jojo often referred guests to other homestays. As Jojo talked, he received a few calls. He responded in a Nepali-inflected Bangla. A booking for a family of six. Another for seven.

After hanging up, he added: "But this, too, has a lifespan. Later, these people," gesturing to those who had just booked "will look for some other place. And if they get one, they will leave for it. Won't they?" He continued, "Sisnu Gaon is kind of a resting place. A place to just stop for one night for people traveling on to Sikkim." As a place to briefly stop on the way to somewhere else, it could easily be replaced. It had the openness, the mountain panorama, but so did many other places in the Himalayan foothills.

In the economy of retreat, capital flows toward the literal horizons (the beaches and mountaintops), but it tends to avoid material entanglement. Lessees in Kalimpong, for example, made money through agreements premised on access to people and marketing, not to material things. Most had little to no stake in the concrete, the windows, the geysers, or the other modifications to village houses. During the slower times of the year, such as during the heavy monsoon rains in July and August or in the coldest weeks of the winter, the clanging and banging of repairs takes the place of meandering tourists. Repairing bathroom fixtures, regrading concrete walkways to hedge against complaints from aged guests, and fixing furniture required reallocating labor and money from fields to villages. This work served to turn *houses* into the kinds of *homes* that tourists expected.

State initiatives, primarily MNREGA, brought the road network into the villages, and lessees provided a modicum of capital, but villagers who entered the homestay economy had to take on the physical labor of what, in infrastructural terms, we might think of as going the "last mile": connecting water pipes to toilets, roads to carparks, and of course, of expanding and renovating houses



Figure 4. Clearing land to build a homestay. Photo by Yojak Tamang.



Figure 5. Extending an existing house. Photo by Yojak Tamang.

themselves. During the period of my fieldwork, Sisnu Gaon experienced a drastic boom in construction (Figures 4 and 5). The space of the village was renovated in anticipation of coming tourists, who sought a view of a mountain environment that was itself deteriorating. In places like Sisnu, the story of the economy of retreat is told in bags of cement and piles of building stones. In this way, housing became infrastructure, a materialization not just of memories and family histories but also of the imagined future (Anand, Gupta, and Appel 2018). Without these permanent transformations to the village, tourism would not be possible, yet as Jojo observed, these privatized public works would likely outlive the homestay economy, if not hasten its demise.

Then he paused and, with an air of both cynicism and fatalist reassurance, said: "But we should be happy. There is development today."

As villages like Sisnu became better known, as people extended their houses and built more rooms, and as more bookings came in, they ran the risk of becoming congested, of becoming too much like the cities to which they were supposed to serve as a foil. This was already happening. In the hot months of 2023, operators in Sisnu noticed a dip in guests, while other villages found themselves more packed than ever before. When I asked about the future of homestays in Sisnu, one younger operator said: "I can't think about the future, but what I feel is that the number of tourists has declined recently . . . . I am sure half the Bengalis have already visited Sisnu, and they would not want to come

here again. But I think that new homestays operating in more rural pockets will definitely be lucrative."

Other operators outside Sisnu snarked that Rs. 800 a night (the going rate per head in the off-season) proved way too low and was creating a race to the bottom across the district. "Sisnu is about to reach its limit. 100 percent is in lease," one operator in Buckabari said. Another operator in a village as popular as Sisnu explained that leasing created a landscape in which there were "homestays everywhere. It has become like a *sabji mandi* [vegetable market]. What the tourists search for is a peaceful and remote stay."

Another operator appeared even more cynical. "The concept of the homestay has failed completely," he noted, comparing the tourist economy of Kalimpong to that of Nepal, where international tourists dominated the client base. In Nepal, "tourists are interested in knowing about local people, their life, economy, culture. They milk the cow, manure the field, everything a local does. These tourists eat on our schedule and sleep when the locals sleep." In Kalimpong, by contrast, "homestays are run as hotels. Here people come and order food of their choice and want us to run on their own timings . . . . It is all haywire." He was implying that an economy premised on retreat was incompatible with an economy premised on the preservation of home. A retreat is fungible and interchangeable—it depends on the climatic conditions—whereas a home is place-bound and specific.

I recount these iterations of the same pessimistic view about the limits of homestays because they reflect not only a version of the familiar "tourist cycle" (Zurick 1992) but also how, amid climate crisis, the occupation of "the near future" (Guyer 2007) by debts and short-term leases is joined by a vernacular form of what Adriana Petryna (2022, 3) calls "horizon work," an attempt "to pry time away from the pace of runaway climate change in order to make room" to consider what a meaningful action might be. Retreat was something that villagers were "stuck with"—materially, economically, and socially (Córdoba Azcárate 2020). All that concrete would be difficult to undo. Another homestay operator reflected that "I do not see a bright future . . . . The guests come to look for peace, for tranquility, for a place where there is no pollution. But what is happening now is everyone is opening a homestay. Villages are crowded. The more the community is dispersed, the better I would say it is for tourism."

Even Bengali lessees knew that time in the economy of retreat was limited. An agent in Buckabari predicted that "the offbeat areas will run only for fifteen to twenty years, and after that, these places will reach their limit. A dead end." For emphasis, with a flip of the back of his hand, he said, "finished."

Homestay operators' ambivalent sentiments about the time horizon of the business, borne out of the confluence of new lease arrangements, secondhand social media contacts, and the concrete-and-steel renovation of homes, encapsulate the doubling of rootedness and precarity that, I have argued, is emblematic of an economy of retreat. The sense that homestays were destined for obsolescence reflects an awareness of the accretive effects of the slow violence of homestays, as well as of a speculative affect that resonates across other late capitalist spaces. Operators' resignation to the looming end of the economy of retreat resembles what Gisa Weszkalnys (2015) describes in her ethnographic work on "first oil" in São Tomé and Príncipe, or Amelia Moore's (2019) account of the restructuring of the Bahamian island tourist economy to accommodate the reality of climate crisis. On the ground in places like Sisnu Gaon, the economy of retreat was "a protracted and precarious achievement based on a speculative epistemology and reliant on specific technical, legal, and commercial practices and devices with surprisingly incongruous effects" (Weszkalnys 2015, 612). The lease agreements brought the tourists. The added rooms, heated water, and flushing toilets kept them there. And the success of it all guaranteed that the tourists would soon seek a more "open" horizon.

Homestay operators like Jojo would be left with the accumulated and less ephemeral material remains: the rubbish that, as Jamaica Kincaid (1988) trenchantly observed of Antigua decades ago, enacts colonial occupation long after the formal end of empires. In this case, villagers anticipated how the physical space of the *oikos* would stand as a material reminder of the fleeting openness of the hills themselves, the fleeting promises of climate arbitrage, and the fleeting potential of staving off agrarian crisis. When the homestays ended, they knew, Jojo and his neighbors would once again be left to weather the monsoons, the landslides, and the progressive loss of livability on their own.

CONCLUSION

The ambivalent and ephemeral economy of homestay tourism offers just one example of what happens when geopolitics—in the sense of both the politics of development and state-making and the politics of a changing Earth—meets the intimate practices of social reproduction (Ojeda 2024). In addition to cooking and cleaning, homestay operators derive value from the Himalayan farm landscape their ancestors built. They are all too aware that inviting city dwellers to retreat to that landscape only delays its unraveling; it does not reverse it. In this way, the economy of retreat becomes slow violence—a steady degradation

of land and livelihoods hidden in plain sight (Nixon 2011). Views of ecological horizons as stable and unchanging obscure the violence of extraction and accumulation. They also obscure the fact that the horizon itself is disappearing. Retreat, too, is in retreat.

When people in Kalimpong talked about tourism as "development," they talked of the cars, roads, and landslides that have already arrived and those to come. They talked about the labor of retrofitting and renovating dwellings to suit temporary paying guests. In the conversion of the agrarian economy from one of field-based crop production to one of home-based social reproduction, economic boons emerged for some. Some people could send their children to school. A few could make it as independent entrepreneurs, free from the predatory leases that trapped their neighbors. But for others, the economy of retreat proved a more fraught proposition.

Mass tourism furthered the vision of politicians like Mamata Banerjee of an "undivided Bengal." A clear anxiety surrounding expanded access to the hills for low-budget travelers was the plan's potential to cede control over rural space to Bengalis. Yet this kind of occupation could not be easily resisted. As retreat became the premise of the economy, villagers found themselves in a double bind. After all, the very homestay boom that allowed lower middle-class Bengalis to retreat from the heat and pollution of the city also allowed Nepalis, Bhutias, and Lepchas to stay in their ancestral homes—to avoid migrating to Kolkata or beyond in search of work. While the rural poor are frequently depicted as those most likely to be displaced by a changing climate and a changing agricultural economy, in Kalimpong, displacement happened at home, and in place (Nixon 2011; see also Burger 2025).

With increasing climate uncertainty, short-term economic instruments—leases, reverse mortgages, timeshares—have emerged both as a means for those who can afford escape from flooding, wildfire, and natural disaster, and as a means for others to remain in place. These speculative attempts to retrofit landscapes and labor patterns in the face of environmental change occlude the longer-term processes that led to the crisis in the first place. In Kalimpong, they conceal decades of marginalization by the Indian state, and a lingering colonial understanding of the hills as a space of "natural" climate retreat. Yet even if most agreed that the homestay economy will prove to be a short-lived one, its legacy, like the legacy of colonial occupation in the hills, would remain written into the homesteads and villages of India's Himalayan margins. Long after the last tourists had left, their past presence would be marked in concrete verandahs, unoccupied extensions and outbuildings, and mounds of nondegradable plastic.

The economy of retreat, then, is not a means of understanding tourism per se, but of naming the conditions under which economic and environmental precarity become lodged in domestic spaces, when the division of house from home becomes what is at stake in economic projects. The analytic of the economy of retreat highlights how questions of climate justice overlap with questions of housing and belonging. Put another way, climate change constitutes a labor question (Besky and Blanchette 2019). And it is one that ramifies in and through domestic space. In this essay, I have shown how the house becomes the stage for economic and political struggles over the right to remain in place, and the capacity to seek refuge. Rather than a stable ground from which crisis is observed, or within which crisis must be weathered, the house in Kalimpong has become a material lens onto the crisis itself.

ABSTRACT

To stimulate rural development, the Indian state of West Bengal is promoting homestay tourism in the district of Kalimpong, on the state's mountainous margins. This essay situates the homestay market within a broader late capitalist "economy of retreat." The economy of retreat is an analytical framework for considering the re-valuation of domestic space amid interlinked agrarian, economic, and climate crises. As climate change upends rural livelihoods and threatens urban livability, domestic spaces have become renewed sites of political and economic potential. The economy of retreat entails a meeting of urban anxiety with agrarian precarity. This turns homes into environmentally and socially volatile spaces, but also into spaces of new speculative opportunity. Attention to this double movement permits scholars to trace the relationship between capitalism and climate change not in disaster or salvage accumulation but in the material and affective work of remaining in place. [housing; agrarian crisis; climate change; leases; tourism; climate haven]

NOTES

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1. Homestay tourism is one of a range of disparate late capitalist projects of retreat. These span from the familiar weekend away in the countryside to the more privileged

space of semi-permanent escape, from digital nomadism to libertarian exit (Craib 2022). Thank you to Héctor Beltrán for linking homestays to digital nomadism.

2. North Bengal Tourism, "Offbeat Places near Kalimpong," 2026, https://northbengal-tourism.com/offbeat-destinations/kalimpong/. Last accessed January 20, 2026.
3. After this essay went into publication, in May 2026, Mamata Banerjee and her party the Trinamool Congress lost the West Bengal Assembly Elections to the Bharatiya Janata Party.
4. "Meanwhile in Switzerland: People Thanking Darjeeling Municipality for Starting a Swimming Pool." *Darjeeling Chronicle* Facebook post, June 28, 2024. https://www.facebook.com/TheDarjChron/videos/1194884618530073/. Last accessed September 5, 2026.
5. "Meanwhile in Switzerland: *Har Ghar Jal Yojana* (A Water Scheme for Every House)." *Darjeeling Chronicle* Facebook post, June 15, 2024. Last accessed September 5, 2026.

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