

**Ganga is 'Disappearing':  
Women, Development, and Contentious Practice on the Ganges River**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Georgina Drew  
Ganga is 'Disappearing':  
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(Under the direction of Dr. Dorothy Holland)

This dissertation explores conflict over development and ecological change along the upper stretch of the Ganga River in the Garhwal Himalayas, India. I focus on the circulation of competing discourses about change on the sacred Hindu river, the emergence of actors and movements that address the Ganga's management, and the transformation of actor subjectivities. I especially emphasize the meanings that people produce about a river that some fear could 'disappear' due to the projected impacts of hydroelectric development and upstream glacial melt. My framing of these issues employs social practice theory to situate the past and enduring struggles that inform the conflict. In using this theoretical lens and especially its dialogic approach, I present a variety of views and discourses to elucidate the cultural or figured worlds that inform the debates about the river's management. Through the exploration of "river dialogues", I demonstrate how the conflict is charged with varied understandings of the Ganga's utility, the agency of its Hindu Goddess, and the continuity of the cultural-religious practices linked with its flow.

Since a number of mountain women participated in debates about the Ganga's management, my dissertation highlights their discourses and actions. I do this while drawing from feminist political ecology to show the significance of gendered practice. I

also establish how some women employ particular cultural forms and genres of expression, such as devotional song, to evoke the figured worlds in which the sanctity of the river's grace-providing flow is paramount. I then indicate how the performance of these songs enable women's participation in movement activities and the influence they have on subjectivities.

These points of inquiry illuminate the entanglement of cultural, religious, and gendered concerns in environmental conflict along the Ganga. The dissertation contributes to critical development studies by showing the mixed desires for, and ideas about, development; it adds to our understanding of the relationship between gendered practice in daily life and movement activity in the Himalayas; it shows how movement involvement influences actor subjectivities; and it demonstrates the meaning-making practices that people produce to interpret transformations on a river that is revered as a living Goddess.

To: Mom, Jason, Grandma & Grandpa

Special Thanks: Chad and Fern

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At the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH), I've been extremely fortunate to be a part of an outstanding anthropology department whose colleagues exhibit a delicate academic balance between compassion and brilliance. Since I arrived at UNC-CH, Dr. Dorothy Holland has been a primary guide and academic mentor. Always supportive, Dr. Holland nurtured my intellectual development and offered countless hours of consultation and guidance that greatly improved this dissertation. She also encouraged me to apply my research to real life problems and to strive for engaged scholarship. Dr. Holland's work through Models of Engaged Scholarship (MES) and Collaborations for Integrating Research and Action (CIRA) are

exemplars of the applied scholarship that I aspire to pursue in the future. Dr. Holland was and is, in short, an outstanding academic advisor and role model. Her friendship and good humor have put wind in my sails through the highs and the lows of my graduate school and dissertation writing experiences. Dr. Holland, I am extremely grateful for all that you have done and continue to do.

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## Table of Contents

<b>List of Figures.....</b>	<b>xiv</b>
<b>Glossary of Terms in Hindi.....</b>	<b>xv</b>
<b>Chapter 1: 'Saving' the Ganga: An Ethnographic Prelude and Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 2. River Dialogues .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Transformations on the Ganga.....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Early Research Encounters.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Affect and the Management of the Ganga.....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Approaching River Dialogues: Theoretical Orientations .....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Research Significance and Chapter Overview .....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Chapter 3. Contested Development Practice and the Bhagirathi Ganga .....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Anthropology and Development in India: From Theory to Ethnography .....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Development and Contradiction.....</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Dams on the Bhagirathi Ganga: Issues, Implications, and Oppositions.....</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>Dialogues about the Bhagirathi Ganga.....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Dam Building in the Himalayas: Current Projects and Development Legacies... </b>	<b>52</b>
<b>Past Projects, Present Concerns: Tehri Dam and Activist Legacies.....</b>	<b>57</b>

<b>Chapter 4. Figuring the Ganga in Uttarkashi .....</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>Figured Worlds and the Importance of Flow .....</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>Approaching the Ganga: Some Cautions .....</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>Uttarkashi: A Nexus of Inquiry and Action .....</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>Epistemologies and Ontologies of the Ganga in Uttarkashi .....</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>Dams and Conflict in Uttarkashi District.....</b>	<b>83</b>
<b>Activists in Uttarkashi: Ganga Ahvaan and the Clean the Ganga Movement .....</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>Daily Practice, the Ganga, and Uttarkashi.....</b>	<b>91</b>
<b>Counter Arguments .....</b>	<b>94</b>
<b>Chapter 5. Contested Practices and Regional Actors.....</b>	<b>96</b>
<b>Regional Dam Oppositions: G.D. Agarwal and the Politics of Fasting .....</b>	<b>98</b>
<b>Is Fasting Undemocratic? Contested Practices of Dam Opposition .....</b>	<b>104</b>
<b>A River is Many Things: The Environmental and Secular Hindu Perspective ..</b>	<b>106</b>
<b>Ganga Ahvaan Activists Respond to the Environmentalist Critiques.....</b>	<b>110</b>
<b>Figured Worlds in Dialogue.....</b>	<b>114</b>
<b>Chapter 6. Defending the Ganga: Social Movements and the Role of Women.....</b>	<b>118</b>
<b>Movement Actors in Uttarkashi: Engagements and Motivations .....</b>	<b>119</b>
<b>What Motivates Women’s Activism?.....</b>	<b>127</b>
<b>In Every Movement a Majority: Tales and Hypotheses of Women’s Activism..</b>	<b>132</b>
<b>Women’s Activism in the Garhwal Himalayas: An Overview .....</b>	<b>137</b>
<b>The Relationship between Gender and the Environment: Some Analyses .....</b>	<b>141</b>
<b>Gender, Practice, and Activism on the Bhagirathi Ganga.....</b>	<b>145</b>
<b>Conclusion: Untying the Knots of Generalization .....</b>	<b>153</b>

<b>Chapter 7. Women, Practice, and the Performance of Devotional Song.....</b>	<b>156</b>
<b>Situating Women’s Devotional Practice: Historical Context.....</b>	<b>162</b>
<b>Devotional Song: A Gendered Genre of Discourse.....</b>	<b>168</b>
<b>Devotional Songs in Activist Space: Exploring Performance.....</b>	<b>171</b>
<b>Narratives, Performances, and Spaces of Authoring .....</b>	<b>176</b>
<b>Songs and Affect: Sita’s Story .....</b>	<b>181</b>
<b>Songs and Contentious Practice: Nirmala’s Story.....</b>	<b>187</b>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>193</b>
<b>Chapter 8. A ‘Disappearing’ River? Conflicting Views and Discourses .....</b>	<b>196</b>
<b>A Region and a River in Peril? Context and Controversy.....</b>	<b>200</b>
<b>Assessing Knowledge of Ecological Change at Manikarnika Ghat, Uttarkashi .</b>	<b>205</b>
<b>NGOs, Social Movements, and the Circulation of Climate Change Discourses .</b>	<b>217</b>
<b>Hindu Interpretations of Change: The Influence of Texts and Cosmologies.....</b>	<b>222</b>
<b>Religion and Ecology: Some Limits .....</b>	<b>228</b>
<b>Closing Thoughts .....</b>	<b>231</b>
<b>Chapter 9. Concluding Remarks and Observations.....</b>	<b>233</b>
<b>Enduring Struggles and An Enduring Goddess.....</b>	<b>235</b>
<b>Appendix A: Map of Hydroelectric Projects on the Bhagirathi Ganga .....</b>	<b>243</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>244</b>

## List of Figures

FIGURE 1.1 A "SAVE GANGA" RALLY IN GANGOTRI.....	3
FIGURE 2. 1 MAP OF THE BHAGIRATHI GANGA IN UTTARAKHAND, INDIA .....	17
FIGURE 2. 2 IMAGES OF THE GANGA .....	28
FIGURE 3. 1 LOHARINAG PALA AND PALA MANERI PROJECTS .....	54
FIGURE 4.1 CONGRESS PARTY AND YOUTH RALLY IN FAVOR OF DAMS ON THE GANGA..	65
FIGURE 4. 2 UTTARKASHI, UTTARAKHAND.....	77
FIGURE 4. 3 A DEVTA'S CARRIAGE BEING RITUALLY WASHED IN THE GANGA .....	89
FIGURE 6.1 A DENUDED VARUNAVRAT MOUNTAINTOP ABOVE UTTARKASHI .....	130
FIGURE 6. 2 GENDERED WORK: FORAGING AND CULTIVATION .....	148
FIGURE 7.1 A STATUE OF SHIVA ON MANIKARNIKA GHAT, UTTARKASHI .....	163
FIGURE 7. 2 WOMEN SINGING DEVOTIONAL SONG IN UTTARKASHI .....	185
FIGURE 8.1 DEVOTION TO THE GANGA AT MANIKARNIKA GHAT.....	207
FIGURE 8.2 SEASONAL FLOW VARIABILITY AT MANIKARNIKA GHAT, UTTARKASHI.....	209
FIGURE 8.3 GLACIAL MELT AT GAUMUKH (SNOUT OF GANGOTRI-GAUMUKH).....	216

## Glossary of Terms in Hindi

<u>Hindi Transcription</u>	<u>Pronunciation</u>	<u>Meaning</u>
<i>aastha</i>	(aah-sTha)	religious faith/belief
<i>aviral</i>	(aa-vee-ral)	uninterrupted, constant
<i>bachao</i>	(ba-chow)	to save or keep safe
<i>bhāvanā</i>	(bhav-aan-aa)	feelings/emotion/feelings
<i>bukh hartal</i>	(bhook-har-tal)	fast-unto-death
<i>devi</i>	(dev-ee)	Goddess
<i>devta</i>	(dev-Ta)	God (Mountain-dwelling God)
<i>dharma</i>	(dhAr-maa)	righteous or dutiful action
<i>ganga</i>	(gaahn-gha)	Ganges River/Goddess Ganga
<i>lupt hona</i>	(loopt hOna)	to disappear
<i>mahila</i>	(mah-hee-la)	women
<i>mangaldal</i>	(mang-al-dahl)	committee
<i>nirmal</i>	(neer-maul)	holy
<i>pavitra</i>	(pahv-it-tra)	pure/holy
<i>pehchaan</i>	(peh-chaahn)	identity/recognition
<i>pichadha</i>	(pee-chaa-rha)	backwards
<i>vikās</i>	(vee-kahs)	development
<i>vīnas</i>	(vee-nahs)	destruction
<i>vishwas</i>	(vish-wahs)	belief

## **Chapter 1: 'Saving' the Ganga: An Ethnographic Prelude and Introduction**

*In the early morning hours of April 26, 2009, a few dozen people gathered in the heart of an Indian district capital by the name of Uttarkashi to embark on a journey that followed the Ganga (Ganges River) to its upper Himalayan reaches. Huddled together in the morning light and bundled against the spring chill, the sixty some travelers greeted one another while they waited for the bus that would take them up to Gangotri, a Hindu pilgrimage town located 15 miles below the Ganga's glacial source. The majority of the people assembled were low-income women who had risen between two and three in the morning to tend to livestock and household chores. They sacrificed precious sleeping hours to fulfill their domestic duties before the start of the two-day pilgrimage. The occasion that marked their journey was the opening of the temple at Gangotri and the seasonal return of the river's Goddess Ganga from her warmer winter home at Mukva. The main purpose of the trip that day, however, was to raise awareness about the threats to the continuity of the Ganga's flow.*

*Around five-thirty in the morning, a boisterous and cumbersome bus arrived to carry the participants of the awareness-raising campaign up the winding mountain roads. Before leaving, the group organized a small demonstration to announce their program. They paraded through the streets of Uttarkashi with banners and picket signs that urged people to "save" the Ganga, a river revered by Hindus. Shouting slogans, the group broke the silence of daybreak with their call-and-answer chants. These noises*

*reached inside the gated walls of the District Officer, the region's most important official, and he came outside to greet us. After receiving his blessing—he was a devout Hindu who was personally concerned by the dam building and ecological change upstream from Uttarkashi—we marched back to the vehicle and began our journey. When the bus was fully loaded, the women sang songs in celebration of the Ganga and the Himalayas in which it resides. The songs lasted hours into the trip, subsiding only when we reached the construction sites of several hydroelectric projects. The earth moving equipment, tunnel drilling, and artificial channel building of those dams cast a silence over the otherwise lively group.*

*We reached Gangotri in the late afternoon after the completion a 70-mile journey that took six and a half hours. The procession resumed where it left off in Uttarkashi. Once more, the banners and picket signs were paraded on display. Yet again, the slogans rang out. "Let the Ganga flow free!" one yelled. "Let the Ganga flow pure!" the group answered.<sup>1</sup> Marching slowly and deliberately, we walked past the hotels and souvenir shops that line the narrow lanes of the pilgrimage town. Turning right at the Goddess' temple, we veered down towards the riverbed. Before we reached the ghat, or steps that lead to the river, the women in our procession stopped to bow before the shrine that marks the site where Hindus believe that King Bhagirath did hundreds of years of penance to bring the Ganga to earth. It was only after paying their respects to this ancestor that they preceded to the river.*

---

<sup>1</sup> The slogan, in Hindi, was: *Ganga ko aviral behne do! Ganga ko nirmal rehne do!*

**Figure 1. 1 A “Save Ganga” Rally in Gangotri**



*When they reached the ghat, many could not believe their eyes; the Ganga was nowhere in sight. They looked in front of them and saw only white sand and rocks. They looked upstream and observed an empty riverbed leading as far as the eye could see. Besides us on the steps leading to the river, day laborers were reinforcing the embankment. Their cement-and-steel laying machinery sent a mixture of droning and shrill cries into the air. The people in our group squinted their eyes at the blindingly bright sight of the dry riverbed and cupped their ears against the construction noise. Many looked to one another in confusion, tears welling up in their eyes.*

*Gathered at the empty banks of the Ganga, members of the procession began to voice their indignation. One of the first to speak was Sita,<sup>3</sup> a woman from Uttarkashi city.*

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<sup>2</sup> The author, Georgina Drew, is the owner of each photograph that appears in this dissertation. All rights for their replication are reserved.

<sup>3</sup> I use pseudonyms to protect the identities of the mountain residents quoted in this dissertation. Many of these respondents gave me permission to use their real names but I prefer to maintain their confidentiality given the contentious nature of the issues and the inflamed reactions that their comments could spark within the regions where they live. I use the real names of high-profile activists and politicians, by contrast, because their names were prominent in the media and are already part of the public debate.

*Sita was one of a core group of roughly ten women and four to five men who have been involved in efforts to clean the Bhagirathi Ganga in Uttarkashi since the late 1990s. Since 2006, she has been very vocal about her opposition to new hydroelectric projects on the river. Although she is an animated speaker, Sita was exceptionally emotional when she began to talk. After shouting out a homage to the river and its Goddess (Jay Ganga Maya Ki!), she lambasted everyone she could think of who might be responsible for the sight before our eyes. Her denunciation included remarks against the government, whom she blamed for not taking better care of the holy river. But the emphasis of her speech was on the lack of water in front of her: "Today," she said, "the steps of this ghat lead to an empty river." Then she sobbed: "Oh Mother, Our Queen! The Sustainer of the Universe... Where has she gone? What have they done? On the platform where people were scared for fear of falling [into the turbulent waters], today it is dry. They have ruined it!" Sita's chest heaved as she said these words, her hands gesticulating wildly in the direction of the riverbed.*

*Following Sita, another woman addressed the audience that gathered. The woman, Nirmala, also complained against the government's lack of action to defend the river. And she called for all the nations of the world to step forward and defend the Ganga's flow. Since she had also been involved in the river cleaning and dam opposition efforts alongside Sita, she summarized their position while adding context:*

*For the last ten years, we've been working and telling people that our Ganga should be kept clean (swacch) and that the flow should be uninterrupted (aviral). [We also say] That our glaciers should be cared for. In this region, there are so many dams. They create a lot of pollution. It impacts our glaciers. When our Ganga, our National [River] Ganga, is in such a state, why wouldn't we cry?*

*Nirmala's comments established the years of struggle in which residents of Uttarkashi city have worked to defend the Ganga. It also indicated that she and others perceive that hydroelectric development impacts the health of upstream glaciers. She furthermore criticized the development policies as hypocritical as they target a resource that the central government declared to be a "national" river and a symbol of India's heritage. In a situation where the Ganga is declining and the government response seemed inadequate (at that point), she rhetorically asked, "why wouldn't we cry?" When faced with the potential of the river's loss, tears were the appropriate response.*

*After the speeches were over, we began to remove litter by combing the river's banks for plastics and other debris. Soon into the cleaning campaign, people noted with great relief that a small sliver of flow had been redirected to the other side of the riverbed. Nearly abandoning their cleaning project, most of the women made their way over a mound of boulders that hid the thin stream on the far bank. Their eyes met the deep blue of the river's glacial flow and they immediately rushed forward to ceremonially bathe in the ice-cold waters. It was a small consolation to see a bit of water even though the stream was no more than fifteen or twenty feet in width. If it had stretched across even half of the area available, its girth would have measured about one hundred and fifty feet.*

*When the cleaning program and bathing rituals were over, we made our way back through the small lanes of the pilgrimage town to arrange lodging for the night. At a point along the way, perhaps in response to our banners and pickets signs, a heated discussion broke out between the people from Uttarkashi and some of the residents of*

*Gangotri. I turned on my tape recorder right as someone began to interrogate us sharply, “What do you know about the environment?” Within seconds, the leaders of our group were caught in a shouting match with some of the locals. Fingers began wagging on both sides and the men from Gangotri soon descended to the street from the porches of a hotel to engage in a direct exchange. It was a rapid-fire flurry of grievances. The group leaders from Uttarkashi tried to pacify the mob of five or six locals. When our campaign leaders commented that we’d come to raise awareness about environmental concerns along the river, an enraged man shot a quick rebuttal saying that they regularly clean the Ganga themselves. They have monthly programs, he insisted, and they penalize people whose sewage is found leaching into the riverbed. After he made the point that they take good care of the sacred river, the man argued that, “All this talk about the environment is nonsense.”*

*A main point of contention, we discovered, was that others had come before us in the name of “saving” the Ganga and the Himalayas. We gathered from the enraged man’s comments that he and his friends believed these people had been paid to conduct the campaigns. And because of the press such actions received, pilgrimage to Gangotri had slowed. That hurt the tourism industry and the people who work in it. It was infuriating for those that lived there and depend on the seasonal income. What stung most, from the angry man’s perspective, was that the Ganga is at its cleanest in Gangotri. Everywhere else on the river’s path, the Ganga is dumped on and degraded. So, he reasoned, if you live near the Ganga in Uttarkashi, then clean the river there. Or else, he warned, “If you come here again, we’ll drown you in the Ganga.”*

*Two men and one woman (Nirmala) from our group tried to counter these objections. They reiterated that they have cleaned the Ganga in Uttarkashi regularly for over a decade. Their efforts were successful, they added. They even had the meat shops shut down because the blood from animal butchery was finding its way into the holy river. But the problems are bigger than pollution along the Ganga where they live. The river's very being is in danger, they stated. They had come to draw attention to the many threats that it faces. Although they didn't mention climate change directly, the enraged man assumed this was one of the issues they were concerned with. Pointing his index finger in the face of one of our group members, he retorted:*

*I'll tell you, these people are making fools<sup>4</sup> of others in the name of global warming. America is polluting so much. Russia is polluting so much, putting so much carbon out. That is responsible for the melting glaciers. It is not melting because you and others come here. So much pollution comes from many miles away. You cannot stop that... Statistically, America is the world's biggest polluter. India is [only] number nine. America is emitting most of the carbon. So try to learn about global warming... Watch the Discovery Channel, watch Geography [National Geographic] and then tell us who is polluting more. Gaumukh [the Glacier] must be opened. That gives employment to everyone... When people go there, our children get jobs. If you make our kids jobless, we will beat you up with our shoes.<sup>5</sup>*

*This outburst was followed by a significant amount of shouting. But the already established themes continued to circulate. From the Uttarkashi side, people emphasized that they have great faith in the Ganga and that they came to do something in the name of helping her. The reply from the men that surrounded us was that they were suffering from all this concern for the river while others gained. In 2008, the government set a decree*

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<sup>4</sup> This is a greatly softened translation for a derogatory word that refers to a particular part of the female anatomy.

<sup>5</sup> Public discussion in the streets of Gangotri on April 26, 2009.

*limiting the number of people who can journey to the upstream glacial source at Gaumukh to 150 per day. This, they felt, caused bureaucratic hurdles for visitors. What was worse, they 'knew' that tourism and hydroelectric dams were not to be blamed for the glacier's fragile state. Their television viewing informed them that the emissions from America were a much bigger threat to the glacier and the river's health than localized activities could ever be. Jobs were at stake, they reminded us, and the mentality we embodied was precisely the problem. People were making a quick profit off of campaigns like ours. Although we did eventually convince them that our program was self-financed, they still directed their scorn for such people onto us. And, in case we ever thought of risking our lives by coming back with one of the moneyed organizations, one man offered a warning: "They'll give you 100 Rupees (\$2)," he said. "And they'll make 100,000 (\$2000) for themselves."*

*Having venting, the angriest among the Gangotri locals stormed off. Once the crowd diffused, we made our way over to the ashram where we passed a night many degrees warmer than it should have been for mid-April. Most of the women in our group stayed up and sang devotional songs long into the early morning hours. They were waiting with great anticipation for the arrival of the river deity the next day. These songs lifted their spirits and, for a time, quelled the day's disappointments.*

The above ethnographic description offers a window onto some of the main contentions that exist over the use of the Ganga along its Himalayan reaches. At one level, people express love for and devotion to its waters. The affection that people feel for the Ganga is linked with millennia of reverence for the river's flow. These precedents are recorded in some of the oldest texts associated with what we now refer to as the Hindu religion. In everyday life, the sights and sounds of the river comfort people while providing life-giving waters. Yet, on another level, intense debates circulate over the river's management. Despite the care and devotion that many enact for the Ganga, there is extensive disagreement about how it should be treated.

The contention is heightened in the Himalayas where thousands of pilgrims travel every year to see the river in its most pure form and to receive the Ganga's divine grace. The income that these pilgrims provide to the region is a lifeline for many. Since the road building up into the hinterlands of the Himalayas accelerated in the 1970s, the pilgrimage and tourist industry has boomed. Hotels line the banks of the Ganga's originating tributary, the Bhagirathi (or Bhagirathi Ganga)<sup>6</sup>, and many more are under construction.

At the main temple to the Goddess Ganga in Gangotri, what was once a reclusive destination for religious ascetics has expanded into a bulging tourist hub with sewage and waste management challenges. Even further upstream, some 15 miles away, the Gangotri-Gaumukh glacier is nestled into a spectacular mountain range. This vital ice

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<sup>6</sup> I use two names for the river in this dissertation. The first is Ganga (pronounced "gaahn-gha"). This term refers to the entire length of the river from the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal. This word is often used to refer to both the river and the Goddess Ganga that resides in and with the flowing water. When speaking of the river's tributary in the Himalayas on which this dissertation focuses, I use the term Bhagirathi Ganga to maintain the name of a specific stretch of water (the Bhagirathi) while indicating its pan-Indian significance as a part of the Ganga. Note, however, that when respondents talk about the Bhagirathi Ganga, they usually only call it Ganga.

mass is melting. Its potential loss is a growing subject of concern for residents, scientists, and policymakers. To protect the glacier, a cap on daily visitors limits the number of devotees and adventurers that can travel to the Ganga's source.<sup>7</sup> The regulation has angered many as the ethnographic encounter describes.

During the period of my research from 2008-2009, however, the contention over the glacier's protection was overshadowed by the heated debates that revolve around hydroelectric development along the banks of the Bhagirathi Ganga. Two projects are already in operation on the river and several more dams were under construction prior to 2010. Numerous people, groups, and networks organized to promote and oppose the dams. The multivalent perspectives and arguments they shared revealed different cultural or figured worlds in which the river's purpose and use values were fervently disputed.

*This dissertation examines the emergence of actors and actor subjectivities as revealed in the debates and movement processes that focus on the Ganga's management in general and hydroelectric development in particular.* These emerging actors draw from and adapt cultural forms that they employ to address resource management along the Ganga in the Indian Himalayas. My examination of these actors and their efforts illustrates the influence of enduring struggles, contested socio-cultural practices, and divergent ideas about the significance of ecological change. These domains intersect with

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<sup>7</sup> The cap on the number of people who can visit Gaumukh glacier per day was instituted in 2008 when my fieldwork began. The limit of 150 people is meant to reduce the damage caused when several hundreds (if not thousands) of pilgrims travel up to the glacier at certain auspicious times in the Hindu calendar to receive the Ganga's blessing at its originating point. Besides protecting the small path leading to the glacier and the fragile ecosystem that is harmed by heavy foot traffic, the per diem cap on tourism also helps to monitor pollution. Pilgrims and tourists must now register and pay a deposit on all non-degradable materials at a checkpoint at the beginning of the trail and are required to bring these wastes back in order to receive a refund when they leave the park.

regional and national histories and processes. The mediation of these circulating forces is central to this dissertation and the social practice theory that I draw from.

My examination of emerging actors and actor subjectivities additionally explores the variety of perspectives and discourses that circulate around the river's management. These views and utterances, I argue, point to different meaning-making practices about the river and its importance. The meanings that are produced, countered, and discussed illuminate the significance of development and ecological shifts. These meanings are used to influence activities along the river and the policies that address its use.

By employing a dialogic approach that sets into conversation the various polyvalent discourses and "river dialogues", I also show how people address a key preoccupation: whether the Ganga river is 'disappearing' and, if so, what its disappearance means. My exploration of these issues illustrates the dynamism of the conflict over the Ganga's management, the power struggles that are part of the contestation, and the entanglement of environmental, cultural, and religious concerns. I also show how aspects of contention, activism, and practice are gendered.

I focus especially on women's concerns, discourses, and actions in this text because women played an overwhelming role in regional movement processes. While their involvement draws out scholarship on the gendered dimensions of development and environmental resource management, I emphasize women's roles to highlight a perspective that is often overlooked and not because I desire to address gender solely for the sake of academic discussion.

In addition to examining the intimate and contested domains of development and resource use along the Bhagirathi Ganga, this dissertation additionally contributes to

studies of gender and ecology. It does this by exploring the gendered implications of development practice and environmental shifts with a focus on women's concerns and inclusions. The approach I take supports my aim to promote the democratization of debates over resource conflict, especially when people express different views about the use of vital water sources. Insights from my discussion of reactions to ecological change along the Ganga are also relevant to the growing body of anthropological work on social responses to climate change as well as debates about the role that religion can play in fostering ecologically sound behavior.

## Chapter 2. River Dialogues

“Water flows from high in the mountain.  
Water runs deep in the earth.  
Miraculously, water comes to us and sustains all life.”  
-**Thich Nhat Hanh** (N.D.)

“The agency of nature in affecting human affairs develops in tandem with human abilities to know it and manage it in particular ways.”  
-**Anna Tsing** (1999: 6)

In August of 2010, the Indian government deviated from their typical approach towards dam building in ecologically sensitive and culturally significant areas by canceling three projects along the upper reaches of the Ganga in the Himalayas. In a public statement, the Minister of Environment and Forests at the time, Mr. Jairam Ramesh, cited “religio-political and environmental” reasons when he announced that the dams would not be built on the Bhagirathi Ganga (Sethi 2010). This decision was meant to appease the dam opponents that demanded the “free flow” of the river in Uttarakhand. As the press noted, the decision marked a policy shift from the days when the Indian government would turn a deaf ear to public dissent on dam building. It also denoted a change in the official stance towards investing public funds on projects of dubious worth.

The declaration that the river could flow freely without these dams was somewhat misleading. The Maneri dam and the Tehri reservoir already obstruct the Bhagirathi

Ganga's course in Uttarakhand state. Notwithstanding this technicality, the government decision to cancel the aforementioned dams culminated years of struggle to contest development and environmental policy in a region with numerous ecological challenges. The move came after years of social movement activity that occupied villagers, river devotees, urbanites, and even some prominent Hindu spiritual leaders. As I discuss in this dissertation, participation in the dam opposition efforts was fluid. Disagreements about the implications of dam building on the Ganga influenced this fluidity as well as the pressing socioeconomic struggles that occupy people's time and limit their ability to engage in the contestations over the river's management.

What follows is an effort to trace the meaning-making practices and debates that influence management and policy decisions such as the ones noted in Chapter 1 and in the opening account to this chapter. Grounded in ethnographic research, this discussion attends to the concerns and actions of the people that address development practice on the Ganga's course in the Indian Himalayas. In observation of the high involvement of women in environmental protest in Garhwal (the area through which the river flows in the mountains), I focus on women's preoccupations with the Ganga and their subsequent social movement participation. Throughout the dissertation, I demonstrate how conflict over the management of the Bhagirathi Ganga is linked with enduring struggles and livelihood challenges that intersect with cultural-religious practice.

The emphasis on enduring struggles engages the negotiation of social difference among actors that are, in the words of Holland and Lave (2008), historically related, partially united, partially divided, and always in tension due to distinct (but not fixed) political stances and relations of power (3). Development is linked with enduring

struggles because it helps to shape the material and social terrains that people navigate. These terrains inform the production of meaning that is influenced by differences of socio-economic class, education, and sentiments of belonging or identity. Before delving into the specifics of the enduring struggles that manifest along the Ganga, it is important to contextualize the entity that inspires much of the activity described in this dissertation.

### **Transformations on the Ganga**

Flowing 1,560 miles and supporting the life and livelihoods of nearly half a billion people, the Ganga is one of India's most important freshwater sources. Revered for its life-giving properties, the river is also honored as a Hindu Goddess with great powers to spiritually purify the earthly bodies that enter her waters. Despite socio-cultural reverence for the Ganga's cleansing powers, the river is highly polluted. The levels of biological and chemical contamination are especially high in the Indian plains where sewage and factory effluents render the waters toxic (Alley 1998, 2000, 2002).

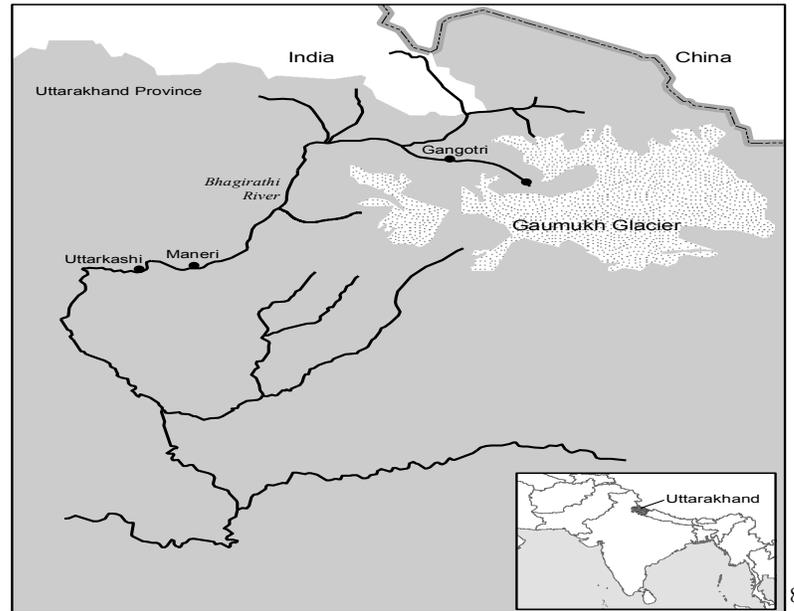
In recent years, spurred by growing scientific data on the hazards of climate change, efforts have addressed the projected impacts of rising temperatures, glacial melt, and changing precipitation patterns on the future of the river's flow. The 18.5 mile-long Gangotri glacier, which provides a substantial amount of the perennial current, retreated significantly in the twentieth century (IPCC 2007; Naithani et al. 2001). If the glacier continues to lose runoff potential and the Indian monsoons increase in irregularity, some worry that diminished long-term flows in the Ganga could force millions of people and multitudes of non-human life to make do with significantly less water resources. There are also concerns that the reduction of flow would interfere with Hindu cultural and

religious practices in which the river plays a central role.

While water quality concerns are long-standing and the implications of climate change are increasingly debated, a pressing issue for many living along the river's upper reaches in the Indian Himalayas has been the proliferation of hydroelectric projects promoted within a framework of power generation and development.

The construction of dams along a relatively clean stretch of the river in an ecologically fragile zone has aroused pride in some and anger in others. The development concerns reveal conflict over practices along the river's originating tributary. The tensions speak to different ways of perceiving, approaching, and knowing the river. Given the immediate nature of the dam projects and the opposition movements, this dissertation explores the developmental conjuncture along the glacier-fed reaches of the Bhagirathi Ganga. These concerns were primary for many of the study's informants. Development, however, is only one of the many challenges that people confront. Debates over dam building establish a landscape of contested practices that enable me, in the middle and latter part of the dissertation, to address the numerous social and environmental changes to which people are adjusting.

**Figure 2. 1 Map of the Bhagirathi Ganga in Uttarakhand, India**



The exploration of these topics draws from sixteen months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted from 2008-2009. For twelve months of that time, I was based in Uttarkashi District in the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand where concern for the Bhagirathi Ganga is frequently articulated along the river's banks. The work took me to distant mountain villages, social movement protests, public meetings, and conferences in various locations. My emphasis on activist networks and policy debate additionally required three months of research in the capital city of New Delhi. In the Himalayas and in urban centers, I attended twenty-five movement gatherings and I participated in twenty cultural events in which the river played a prominent role. I also logged over a hundred semi-structured interviews that explored the river's meaning and its management, ten life history interviews, and ten focus group discussions. These methods exposed me to a range of positions influenced by concerns for employment, tourism, development, and the welfare of the river's Goddess Ganga. Although I focused much of my time and attention

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<sup>8</sup> Map created by Amanda C. Henley, GIS Librarian, UNC, Chapel Hill.

on the actors involved in efforts to question development and address environmental change in the Himalayas, I also documented the perspective of pro-dam contingents and climate change skeptics. These included laborers, business owners, and politicians. This dissertation weaves the extensive experiences and conversations of fieldwork within a series of “river dialogues” that address the many points of concern and contention.

My engagement with multiple perspectives and the numerous “groups” from which they emerge helps to move beyond what Satterfield (2002) identified as anthropology’s previous tendency to focus on two oppositional positions (which were usually super- and subordinate) in ethnographic accounts. This, she argued, has hampered the discipline’s ability to focus on the many creative and engaged dialogues *between* [original emphasis] subordinate groups such as their dialogues about nature, cultural meaning, resource use, and future practices. In the process: “...we ignore[d] the mutual (and dialogic) orientation of one group to the other and of both to the more powerful discourses and enduring cultural forms that infuse their exchange” (ibid.: 162). Satterfield’s cautions follow those made by Marcus (1998) who argues that the exploration of conflict is increasingly appropriate to the study of contemporary society.

Whereas Satterfield suggested a “triangular” approach,<sup>9</sup> my treatment of conflict over the management of the Ganga is complicated by a diversity of actors with different motivations and commitments to the issues I engage. Because there are so many people that move in and out of the movements—some of which come for a single event and others who participate in several overlapping movements—the landscape of actors is at

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<sup>9</sup> A triangular approach would engage the discourses coming from two or more “subordinate” groups that are engaged in dialogues with each other *and* the powerful or dominant actors (the top of the triangle).

times “messy”. I have tried to reduce the potential for confusion by focusing on a key set of people with whom I regularly interacted. I place emphasis, for instance, on a number of actors (many of them women) who contest the management of the Ganga from Uttarkashi, a district capital in the state of Uttarakhand. I also feature the discourses and actions of some Delhi-based activists that travel up to the Garhwal Himalayas to organize events and lead protests. I introduce counter discourses in order to demonstrate the discursive tensions that illuminate different aspects of the conflict.

### **Early Research Encounters**

In the summer of 2007, rumblings of opposition to three run-of-river schemes along the Bhagirathi Ganga began to increase in scope and scale. Leading the efforts at first, an ashram 12 miles (20 km) outside of Uttarkashi city organized demonstrations and roadblocks with dam-affected villagers. They initially undertook these actions at the urging of their leader, or spiritual guru, who was concerned with the ecological, cultural, and religious implications of the hydroelectric projects. This was somewhat unusual work for an ashram, or center of spiritual retreat. The ashram residents, some of them foreigners, found themselves on awkward terrain. But since their compound was adjacent to the river, they were quickly able to perceive the potentially negative implications of the Ganga’s redirection through a series of tunnels. They were particularly concerned with the continuity of the spiritual pursuits that are linked with contemplation along the Ganga as well as the livelihoods and cultural-religious practices of people living in surrounding villages.

Switching the focus from meditation to *seva* (selfless service, in this case directed towards saving the Ganga from hydroelectric development), many principal devotees of the ashram spent long hours touring villages; speaking with people along the river's course; and organizing meetings, protests, and press conferences. As their networks increased and the regional movement became a national one, several people and organizations from downstream locations like New Delhi and Jodhpur, Rajasthan joined in the growing dam opposition. This loose collective of people eventually called themselves "Ganga Ahvaan." The Hindi appellation translates to "Call of the Ganga". The phrase lends a sense that the river Goddess is crying out for help and it implies that devotees must act on this plea.

In traveling to villages, the ashram members and urban activists of Ganga Ahvaan learned of the deleterious effects of tunnel blasting, road construction, and land appropriation that the projects were exacting on people living near the construction zones. Ever more intent on stopping the dams, they began a campaign in coordination with villagers to raise awareness about the impacts of hydroelectric development in the region. A few of the ashram residents and activists even documented the villagers' complaints and participation in dam opposition activities. This footage was laced into a 45-minute documentary that they laboriously produced to outline their main arguments about why the river should be preserved from destructive development projects. The final piece, which aired numerous times on a regional television network in Uttarkashi District, emphasized the river's cultural and religious significance (Aryaman 2007).

During a preliminary research visit to Uttarkashi in the summer of 2007, I listened to people's descriptions of the beginning activities of the movement. There was a feeling

of momentum building, of villagers and urbanites finding common ground and strength in mutual concern for the river. At a trip to the aforementioned ashram, I saw videos of protest as they were being edited. One clip showed large congregations of people conducting sit-ins and waving anti-dam banners at a tunnel construction site. The effort at that protest, explained one of the organizers, was to peacefully show the “people power” that was building in opposition to the run-of-the-river projects. On the surface, the demonstrators—a large majority of whom were women—looked composed and focused in their cause. I found out later that many village meetings had preceded the protest. In these meetings, people argued intensely over the dams and the role of development in the financially strapped mountains. Explained an organizer, “Initially, no one was opposing the dams. They were citing it as development.” After reflecting, she qualified: “That was the men folk. The women folk genuinely felt very bad about it (the dams).” So although the movement was growing, it was evident from the beginning that tension existed among the diverse actors associated with different genders and socio-economic standings.

These early observations and conversations reflected key themes that would continue to emerge in my sixteen months of dissertation research from 2008-2009: contested practices of development, movement politics, and gendered concerns for the Bhagirathi Ganga. While it took me years to clarify the nature of women’s relationships with and preoccupations for the river, I attempted to do so in those early encounters. In one exchange, I asked two female villagers involved in the opposition to explain why so many women were showing up for the protests. One of the women, who eventually became a friend and informant, shook her fist exuberantly at me and shouted, “Because

women are strong... (We) women can do anything!”<sup>10</sup> When asked about women’s concerns for the river in particular, they gave animated replies explaining the Ganga’s intricate role in the life cycle from birth to death, its importance for religious ritual, and the many blessings that it bestows. In addition to these concerns, the women expressed dismay that the river’s mistreatment may cause the flow to “disappear” (*lupt hona*), taking away their identity (*pehchaan*) and leaving them with nothing. When I pressed for more comments on the river’s significance, I was treated to a series of devotional songs (*kirtan*) in Garhwali and Hindi. One tune proudly proclaimed, “Ganga is the holiest river. There is no other river like her.” (*ganga nirmal dhar, aur koi dhar nahin.*) The points that these women raised were repeated frequently during the main period of my ethnographic fieldwork. From the summer of 2008 to the end of 2009, I logged many hours of commentary touching on religious ritual, development conflict, and livelihood struggles. Among the women I most extensively worked with, devotional songs were prevalent. These melodies, as I show in chapter 7, were employed during periods of worship as well as in protests to oppose dam construction along the Ganga.

When I began fieldwork fulltime in 2008, the opposition movement to dam building along the Bhagirathi Ganga gained national prominence and exposure when a retired professor from the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur, went on a fast-unto-death (*bhukh hartal*) to stop the projects. The former professor of engineering, Dr. G.D. Agarwal, began his fast on Manikarnika ghat in Uttarkashi, a religiously significant location along the Ganga for those of the Hindu faith. After a week and a half

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<sup>10</sup> Interview in mixed Hindi-Garhwali on August 10, 2007. The woman’s full statement expressed that women have an important role in ‘waking up’ those who do not understand the threats to the river: “All women can raise awareness. Women can do anything.”

of fasting, and following a heated encounter with dam laborers who assembled around Dr. Agarwal *en masse*, he moved his fast to New Delhi. The pro-dam contingent heralded their counter protest as a success. Newspaper articles expressed, somewhat jubilantly, that locals acting in the interest of the state's progress and development drove him out. Dr. Agarwal and his supporters, on the other hand, asserted that the shift to Delhi had been planned; whereas the commencement of the fast in Uttarkashi was symbolic, the move to Delhi was strategically enacted to put pressure on policy makers in the nation's capital. Whatever the iterations, the effect was that, by July of 2008 when I arrived in Uttarkashi to begin the main component of my fieldwork, many residents were of mixed minds about development along the Bhagirathi Ganga. Some felt strongly that the projects should not continue and praised G.D. Agarwal for acting on a moral imperative to defend the cultural and spiritual heritage of the nation. Others cited the counter protests and the newspaper articles that followed to substantiate what they understood to be the majority opinion: the people of Uttarkashi District were in favor of dams and the development they signified and enacted.

On June 30 of 2008, G.D. Agarwal broke his first fast after receiving assurances from the central government that an investigation would assess the environmental and cultural implications of dam building along the Bhagirathi Ganga. For a time, movement activity subsided. When I visited homes and villages in Uttarkashi District, I found that the divisions over the projects and protests were deepening. These rifts amplified in January-February of the following year when two anti-dam conferences and a second fast-unto-death by Dr. Agarwal expanded the extent of national debate and discussion over the river's management.

Given the divisions, I decided to trace the variety of concerns, meaning making practices, and activities. I moved from movement to movement and organization to organization to explore the landscape of perception and conflict on the river's management. I did this to focus on the range of action and commentary provided by actors engaged in overlapping issues, movements, and networks. This is an approach that several social movement scholars advocate (Edelman 2001; Wolford 2006, 2010; Holland et al. 2008).

At times, I had to navigate around or simply ignore the invitations of certain groups that I found—often too late—to be influenced by, or to be part of, conservative Hindu camps whose rhetoric verged on fundamentalism. These groups positioned the Ganga as an unequivocal symbol of religious pride, heritage, and Hindu “culture” (*sanskriti*) that had to be defended from manipulation at all costs. At times, however, their discourses became exclusionary, pitting “real” Hindus (ones raising awareness about the condition of the Ganga) against practicing and non-practicing Hindus who were not involved in the river's defense.<sup>11</sup>

The conservative Hindu rhetoric usually originated in the Indian plains where people lived in locations removed from the river's flow. In the mountains, by contrast, it was difficult for people to ignore the environmental and livelihood concerns that also fueled the conflict and which generated mixed perceptions about the potential impacts of dam building. Since my focus is on the meaning making practices and processes of contestation that took place in the Garhwal Himalayas, particularly as they coalesced in

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<sup>11</sup> Agarwal (2007) argues that a significant dimension of Hindu fundamentalism is precisely the attempt by some to give prominence to one interpretation of Hinduism over others. She calls this a “visible contemporary struggle over meanings” (33) and she reminds us that such struggles have gender implications (322).

the district capital of Uttarkashi, I do not place a large emphasis on the actions and discourses of the conservative Hindu actors that were residing in the Indian plains.

Contrary to the conservative framings of the issues, I argue that the conflict over dams along the Ganga was not only about religion and the continuity of Hindu religious practice. Many of my consultants in Uttarkashi District argued that concerns about culture and religion, which they often conflated, were important. But they also demonstrated that these preoccupations were linked with enduring socioeconomic and resource struggles along with the trials of daily practice in the region. These struggles and hardships, as I show in chapter 6, are gendered due to socially generated distinctions about biological difference between males and females and the relegation of distinct practices that can result. That same chapter shows the influence of earlier regional struggles—such as the Chipko movement in the 1970s and the fight for an independent state of Uttarakhand in the late 1990s—to emphasize how the fight over the Ganga in the Himalayas is influenced by past legacies and that the conflict (as it regionally manifested) had multiple dimensions that were sometimes glossed over by Hindu activists based in the Indian plains.

Even as the conflict over development took up a significant portion of my time during fieldwork, the period of study overlapped with an increase in regional understandings about issues such as pollution and anthropogenic climate change. When national and international attention focused on the retreat of Himalayan glaciers in 2009, for instance, I documented varied perceptions of such phenomena as well as the presence of discourses about the environmental challenges among non-governmentalists, scientists, and government officials. As I traveled to and from villages, towns, and cities, I also

recorded a growing concern among everyday citizens for food and water security in an area of the world that is hard hit by rising temperatures, erratic monsoon rains, and dropping groundwater levels. I address these preoccupations in the penultimate chapter of this dissertation while demonstrating the multiplicity of epistemologies and ontologies that inform social responses to ecological change.

### **Affect and the Management of the Ganga**

Water is the main cultural artifact around which this discussion of the “disappearing Ganga” revolves. A necessary source of life, water is significant in many different cosmologies and religious systems. As a sustaining feature of existence on the planet, its vital role is readily recognized and upheld by a multitude of cultural practices.

Numerous social scientists address human relationships with, and emotions towards, water resources. As more people experience the physical, economic, and social disruptions caused by shifting (and often declining) water availability, the scholarship will continue to engage the myriad material and non-material implications of these changes. For the coming work, several past studies serve as guideposts. Exploring “fluvial intimacies,” for instance, Raffles (2001) eloquently described the personal ways that water bodies enter into lives, landscapes, and histories in the Amazon. Others, such as Lansing (1991), looked at how people have managed water features and the corresponding ways that those features have organized social relationships. Cruikshank (2004), in her study of native Alaskan stories about glaciers, examined the memories and moments in which solid water bodies feature as actors (and fairly emotional ones at that) in social-natural landscapes. Most recently, Susan Crate (2008, 2009) has explored the

implications of global climate change and melting tundra on the livelihoods and cosmologies of people living in places such as Siberia. Building on these engagements, this dissertation addresses intimacy, emotion, and meaning making with a particular water body, the Himalayan stretch of the Ganga, which is undergoing rapid change. In the latter part of this dissertation, and particularly in chapter 7, I argue that entities such as the Ganga are connected to human subjectivities. The non-material affects associated with water resources and their management, I assert, have tangible implications for the way that we experience our lives and livelihoods.

The most obvious way that my study is distinct from the work of the scholars noted above is its focused attention on relationships with the Ganga in the Indian Himalayas. That region, and the nation-state of which it is a part, has particular histories of social-cultural reverence for water bodies. In India, water is regularly honored for its sustenance and divine grace. Notes Darian, “Among the many symbols of India endowed with spirituality, water is the most sacred, at once the purifier and the origin of the mystery. It is the real and imagined source of life” (Darian 1978: 14). For those suffering from a lack of water, this essential connection is as much religious as it is practical. In the hot climates of India, water is an essential element in daily life and its absence is dearly noted in times of scarcity or drought. The Katha Upanishad, an ancient Hindu religious text, equates life with being born of water. Thus, for Hindus, devotion to a body of water has real significance; it is a prayer for water and at the same time a prayer for life.

**Figure 2. 2 Images of the Ganga**



Left: The Bhagirathi Ganga flowing through Uttarkashi District, Uttarakhand

Right: A representation of the Goddess Ganga at her winter temple in Mukva

Amongst water sources, the Ganga has supreme symbolism for many. Its constantly giving nature lends credence to the common refrain that the river is a symbolic and literal Mother. As a nourishing entity and purifying force, it has played an important role in daily life for thousands of years. For these reasons, the manipulation and contamination of the river evokes strong emotions and diverse responses.

Scholars (Ahmed 1995; Alley 2002; Haberman 2006) have documented the affect that some associate with the presence of pollution in the river's flow. Whether the river is seen as a Goddess (*devi*), a source of live-giving water, or both, the general consensus is that the Ganga should be clean, healthy, and safe for religious use and consumption. Indian officials have repeatedly stated this desire. In the 1980s, former Indian Prime Minister Rajeev Gandhi set into motion the Ganga Action Plan (GAP), to reduce polluting activities and improve the river's water quality. Millions of US dollars were

poured into the project. Critics claim that the plan failed, falling far from the mark due to corruption and a lack of enforcement effort (CSE 2008; Chapman & Thompson 1995). A report by a government agency, the Central Pollution Control Board, indicates that the levels of pollution increased significantly in the years following the inception of the Ganga Action Plan (2009). This observation bears true for many who live along the Ganga and even for casual observers who live in proximity to the river's banks at nearly any point in the populated Indian plains.

Whether or not pollution harms the Goddess is a topic most expertly studied by Alley (1998, 2000, 2002) and, to some extent, Haberman (2006). These scholars draw somewhat disparate conclusions. Alley asserts that river devotees are able to separate, or compartmentalize, the river's pollution from the pure and enduring nature of the Goddess that the waters embody. This, she argues, hinders conservation measures and reduces political will to penalize polluters. Focusing on the Yamuna River, which begins in the Himalayas and merges with the Ganga at Allahabad, Haberman (2006) finds that some devotees claim that pollution harms the river's deity. Those who connect degradation to the potential impairment of religious rituals and spiritual practice, he contends, are more likely to promote environmental stewardship. He thus argues that environmental education can channel human love for rivers and their associated Goddesses to promote best use practices and avoid pollution.

The divergent assessments reflect the different geographic locales, livelihood issues, and research periods of the respective studies. Haberman's research came several years after Alley's in the beginning of the twenty-first century, a time of increased environmental awareness across the country. During my subsequent ethnographic

research in the Indian Himalayas, for instance, many people readily noted that the river had become “dirty” (*ganda*) or “polluted” (*pradusheet*) even though the river suffers relatively less sewage and effluents in the mountains as compared to the plains. Yet while people were willing to apply negative adjectives that were virtually unheard of downstream in Varanasi during the time of Alley’s study in the 1990s, observations of degradation translated into only a handful of devotee-led conservation efforts. I touch upon such contradictions in the chapters that follow, adding other puzzles presented to me by residents of Uttarkashi District as well as by people living in the populated Indian plains who address the management of the Ganga’s upper stretch in the Himalayas.

### **Approaching River Dialogues: Theoretical Orientations**

While debates about pollution and its impact on the Goddess are worth discerning, I focus my work on a broader range of meanings, concerns, and practices in relation to the river. I am also preoccupied with the affects of unprecedented localized and global ecological transformations. These emphases take me in many directions. To begin, I address the developmental challenges that confront residents of the Garhwal Himalayas (through which the Bhagirathi Ganga flows) and other Indian citizens. My treatment of these issues considers people’s discourses, the varied perspectives these different discourses exhibit, and the different cultural worlds they construct. The development concerns lead me to address, in the latter part of the dissertation, the related and interconnected environmental concerns in the Himalayas that include upstream glacial melt and shifting weather patterns.

In this work, I am theoretically influenced by social practice theory, critical

development studies, and feminist political ecology. I take a social practice theory approach that draws from Mead (1934), Bourdieu (1977), Bakhtin (1981), Holland et al. (1998), and Holland and Lave (2001, 2008), among others. The frameworks they outline help me understand the interactions of historical, institutional, cultural, and personal terrains in which people act and react. I find social practice theory to be a useful means to view concerns and debates about the management of the Ganga in the context of environmental change because it allows me to examine the confluence of enduring struggles, local contentious practice, and the subjectivities that are emerging in the context of these social-environmental processes. These three dimensions are given some degree of attention in each chapter of the dissertation. They are addressed when I explore the historical and contemporary development challenges along the Ganga, the social movement efforts to address resource management, the gendered forms of discourse and action available to movement actors, and the emerging efforts to understand and react to climatic change.

Social practice theory directs my attention to the subjective dimensions of resource knowledge and to the intimate identities that are intertwined with the Ganga's flow. This enables me to relate conflict over the management of one of the world's most iconic water resources with perceptions of self. I also investigate the degree to which subjectivities and identities are mediated through situated practices along the river. This is particularly important when it comes to speaking about development legacies and the participation of illiterate and semi-literate women in efforts to defend the river.

Critical development studies and feminist political ecology are also influential in this dissertation. They add different sets of scholarship and theory that guide me to frame

my study of enduring struggles as well as contested contemporary practice in certain terms. In chapter 3, for instance, critical development studies allow me to situate the ideological battles over development, progress, and modernity as they have circulated within and beyond South Asia in the past few centuries. The scholarship on development in India is particularly important because it addresses the ongoing debate about development desires and the degree to which modernization processes are forced upon or adopted and transformed within local contexts. This allows me to explore the issue of agency—also a major subject of study in social practice theory—and the ways that people imagine, contest, and redefine development along the Ganga’s Himalayan stretch.

My use of political ecology is heavily influenced by feminist scholarship. Feminist political ecology recognizes that resource conflicts impact socially differentiated bodies and genders in disparate ways (Biersack et al. 2006; Escobar 2008; Rocheleau et al. 1996). I find political ecology useful because it facilitates the exploration of power and knowledge in questions of resource management. It does this while focusing on the disparate means and opportunities that different people have to inform and influence social-environmental practices. Since my dissertation has a sub-focus on the efforts of women to speak to and contest resource management on the Ganga, feminist political ecology guides me to focus on the socially-dictated divisions of labor and daily practice that influence women’s actions, self-definitions, and their abilities to engage in debates about the river’s worth and use. Feminist political ecology also facilitates my effort to address the meanings associated with natural resources and their management. Struggles over meaning open up the field of exploration to the affective and subjective dimensions of resource use, themes that arise repeatedly in this dissertation

and that link back to the main theoretical orientation of social practice theory.

Although the Ganga is technically a river, I do not treat it as a mere natural resource in this dissertation nor do I draw a clear separation between nature and culture. This heeds the cautions of actor-network theorists such as Latour (1993) as well as the arguments of many political ecologists who assert that “nature” is constructed by discursive and meaning-making practices (Escobar 1992: 2). What some therefore see as natural—such as the flow of the Ganga through the Himalayas—is also cultural and social; it has been affected by human interaction and, at the same time, it shapes daily lives and livelihoods. These insights help me examine how the Ganga is formed through discourse and power in order to better understand the significance of its waters.

Within these theoretical influences, I also emphasize a dialogic approach to present a variety of perspectives on human engagement with the Ganga and the Bhagirathi Ganga in particular. In their treatments of hunting and logging disputes, scholars like Holland (2003) and Satterfield (2002) have demonstrated how social practice theory, which stresses a dialogic approach, can shed light on the socio-cultural and subjective implications of resource conflicts. Because the project I undertake is complicated by a diversity of actors, groups, and identities my approach outlines numerous overlapping and antagonistic perspectives.

The dialogic approach employed here relies heavily on the contributions of the Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin.<sup>12</sup> In Bakhtinian thought, there are no absolutes. All consciousness is a process of dialogic exchange (e.g. addressing and responding) with the

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<sup>12</sup> Even though much of his work was produced in political exile in the early to middle half of the twentieth century, his writings were revived towards the end of the century with much scholarly interest. Holquist (1991) aided in this endeavor with a biography that overviewed Bakhtin’s key philosophical contributions.

“others” that we encounter in particular times, spaces, and socio-cultural frames.<sup>13</sup> For Bakhtin, therefore, perspectives are apt to change depending on the dialogic context since nothing is fixed. The dialogic approach, therefore, emphasizes the play and significance of particular utterances that signify acts of authorship or co-authorship (Dentith 1995: 13). Utterances involve a “taking of sides in all the multiple conflicts and negotiations that constitute the politics of language” (ibid.: 34). To pinpoint the multiplicity of language use that varies by speaker and context along with the power struggles therein, Bakhtin coined the term *raznorecie* which is translated from Russian as ‘heteroglossia’ or ‘multispechedness’ (ibid.: 33). Important for understanding the debates along the Bhagirathi Ganga, heteroglossia includes the multiple and conflicting voices used by different people and institutions. It follows Bakhtin in insisting that *all* meanings have some level of power and that some meanings dominate without having total power. These theoretical insights inform my understandings of the various discourses and dialogues encountered in the conflict I describe in the dissertation.

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<sup>13</sup> Many of Bakhtin’s efforts were concerned with the nature of consciousness. After contemplating the philosophical challenge, “Who am I?” Bakhtin argued that existence is a state of dialogue with the world and the people around us. He therefore argued that the “self” is a dialogic and relational construct. This self, however, is also an “event” in time and space that experiences reality (albeit with limited perception) from a unique position in existence. Holquist explains: “In dialogism, the very capacity to have consciousness is based on *otherness*” (1991, 22). This is not to say, however, that there is a center and an exterior to knowledge; in Bakhtinian thought there is no ontological privilege. For this reason, his work stressed *relative* knowing rather than absolute knowledge.

## **Research Significance and Chapter Overview**

This text examines the extent to which conflict over, and meanings about, transformations on the first 80-miles of the Ganga's flow is linked with river-related practices, livelihoods, and identities. I studied this by engaging with daily practice, social movement processes, and efforts to address and/or oppose the proliferation of hydroelectric projects along the Ganga's upper reaches. The exploration is set within the context of past and existing development projects and environmental challenges in the Indian Himalayan region of Uttarkashi District. Since men and women have different roles and responsibilities in this region, and since women comprise a large portion of the social movement actors who have contested hydroelectric development on the Ganga, I focus on the gendered dimensions of resource concern. The emphasis that I place on low and middle-income women's efforts to address the Ganga's management reveals differences in the ways that certain women relate to the river (compared with men) and the ways that the Ganga enters into the daily and subjective dimensions of life. This, I argue, is not because women or men have disparate affinities with natural resources that are biologically determined. There are, rather, divisions of labor and variations on economic and religious practice that give women and men a different sense of the significance of the Ganga's management.

A focus in this dissertation, as I have already mentioned, is on the emergence of actors that address the management of the Bhagirathi Ganga and the actor subjectivities that form and fluctuate in the processes of dialogue and contentious movement practice. Some of these actors identify with particular groups and others perceive themselves to be more driven by a cause than affiliation with a collective or network. As I earlier noted,

my focus on multiple actors and movements rather than two opposing sides to an argument helps to address the contingent nature of movement processes as well as the fluidities of actor positions and subjectivities. This is an important aspect of social practice theory. My emphasis on the multiple discourses and dialogues in circulation also addresses the generation of new activities, new cultural or figured worlds, and the emergence of new or hybrid epistemologies and ontologies that situate the Ganga's importance and make meaning of the transformations taking place along the river. These hybridizations show the entanglement of culture and religion with ecology and the difficulty that people face in reducing the conflict over the Ganga to only one of these particular domains.

Critics will note that this dissertation does not extensively engage the role of the state in the debates and movement processes that I describe. Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal (2003), for instance, might find my discussion lacking. Their work calls for a greater emphasis on the nation-state in efforts to understand how development policies and projects are enacted (*ibid.*: 6). My response is to point out that I do engage politics and governance but I focus on how people respond to, and are in dialogue with, governmental policies, narratives, and resource management decisions. In my approach, the nation-state is important, as are the other national and international processes that intersect in the Garhwal Himalayas, but I address them to the extent that they help us understand the enduring struggles and local contentious practices in the region. I find that this method of discussion allows me to honor different ways of perceiving and producing meaning about the issues my consultants address without relegating the figured worlds they present to the realm of politics alone.

Six main chapters and a conclusion follow these opening remarks. Chapter 3 examines legacies of development along the Bhagirathi Ganga and the particularities of concern for the projects that were planned and under construction during the period of my research. The chapter also emphasizes the significance of my dialogic approach. Chapter 4 examines the ways that people relate to the Ganga in Uttarkashi District. The circulation of ideas about the river demonstrates the different figured worlds from within which people operate and that influence people's relationships with the Ganga. My exploration of figured worlds illustrates how certain meanings and meaning-making practices influence people's arguments about the value of development and hydroelectric dams on the river. Chapter 5 looks at the influence of actors from the Indian plains that address resource management concerns along the Ganga in the Himalayas. I focus on the actions of Dr. G.D. Agarwal and the controversies that his efforts on behalf of the Ganga inspired. Chapter 6 engages the social mobilizations and movement activity that centered on the river's management in the district capital of Uttarkashi. Since women constituted the majority of activists involved in the dam oppositions, the focus is on women's relationships with the Ganga and their motivations for defending its waters. Chapter 7 hones in on the specifics of women's discourses. It does this by highlighting the medium of devotional song that women frequently engage in religious practice, environmental campaigns, and dam protests. These songs, I argue, help women evoke the figured worlds in which the Ganga is an entity of paramount importance. The performance of the songs also allows women to situate their relationships with the Ganga, participate in efforts to defend its flow, and mediate their senses of self and belonging. Chapter 8 returns to the overarching concern that I encountered in my research and which I encapsulate in a

question: Is the Ganga Disappearing? To address this, I engage dialogues about ecological change along the Ganga and its potential loss. I explore how people interpret what is happening to the river in the context of development and climate change. I insert speculations about the causes and significances of the river's potential decline. This includes "scientific" discourses as well as religiously-influenced responses that forefront the river's agency as a living Goddess who can retreat (at her glacial source) or self-revitalize as she so desires. Despite the Ganga's giving and forgiving nature, for instance, some believe that she is now upset by the rampant human sin in the world and is retreating from the earth to express her anger. I also note that religious interpretations do not always inspire ecologically sound behavior and that they can even validate the development status quo. Chapter 9 offers a brief commentary on some responses to the canceled dams in the Himalayas and it points to the struggles for equitable development and environmental resource management that are likely to persist along the Ganga. I conclude with observations about the enduring nature of faith in the Goddess Ganga.

### **Chapter 3. Contested Development Practice and the Bhagirathi Ganga**

Development fostered many of the great debates of the twentieth century. Even into the twenty-first century it continues to ignite dreams in some and draw criticisms from others. The concept is a slippery one. Development entails both creation and destruction—manifesting in myriad ways throughout the world. It is often mobilized by an ideology of progress that promises improved livelihoods for the masses (de Wet 2009; Rist 2007). As many have shown, however, dominant developmental practices often exacerbate global inequity to the detriment of people and ecologies (Black 2002; Shiva 1993; Wallerstein 2004). The wide imbalances, some argue, are linked to the apparatuses of the Bretton Woods institutions established in the post-war era of the 1940's (Escobar 1995; Rist 2007; Sachs 1992). With their high interest loans and structural adjustment programs, organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) set terms of exchange that were not necessarily favorable to the countries that received their aid (Stiglitz 2002). Coterminous with these institutions are the effects of an evolving, multifaceted, and sometimes “exceptional” (Ong 2006) neoliberal capitalism that promulgates the commodification of nature and the privatization of resources (Harvey 2005). Despite efforts to temper these forces with “people-centered” and “sustainable” development practices, numerous ideological and institutional constraints persist (Arce & Long 2000; Nandy 1996; Mosse 2005). In an increasingly toxic world, critical development studies address the root causes of unbalanced development as it

feeds into downward cycles of human and ecosystem exploitation.

Although there are meta-scale influences, development tensions must be viewed locally and regionally. In India, for instance, colonial and post-colonial legacies inform opposition to and support for developmental praxis. Before focusing on the particularities of development along the Ganga, it is important to sketch the development debates that relate to India's current challenges. Given the intertwined nature of development and modernity, the discussion steps back to examine the progression of thought that led to country's current developmental conjuncture. The overview offers a telling backdrop for the examination of localized perceptions about development along the river in chapter 4.

### **Anthropology and Development in India: From Theory to Ethnography**

Since the early years of anthropological inquiry, development—broadly conceived as technical, economic, and social progress or the lack thereof—has been a primary subject of interest and exploration. The “armchair” social scientists from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many of them European males, pondered the “primitive” nature of non-Western societies. These scholars situated themselves within the center of modernity's strides towards reason, autonomy of the individual, self-conscious subjectivity, and progress. This was set in contrast to those who turned to tradition, “superstition”, and divine authority for guidance. Tylor (1872) and Morgan (1877) famously formulated hierarchies of humankind's progress from “savage” to “civilized”. For some, such as Hegel (1770-1831), India represented the early stages of development. In this “sunrise” land, Indians ranked far down on the ladder of rational thought. Such perspectives helped support the project of British colonization in India,

which officially lasted from 1858 to 1947. The colonial ‘project’ purported to bring order and progress to inferior societies through the extraction of resources and labor at the direction of the colonists. As Gilmartin pointed out, (1995) the British considered Indian communities to be part of the “natural” environment that they sought to model, control, and subject to their rule (214).<sup>14</sup>

Even Marx, a renowned philosopher of political economy who gave one of the world’s most powerful critiques of capitalism, demonstrated modernist thinking in his treatment of India. For Marx (1818-1883), a student of Hegel, India was on the periphery of the intellectual and developmental horizon. Distinguishing India from Europe and America, he positioned Indian society—and the Indian village in particular—as an unchanging unit that perpetuated static, stagnated thought. Explaining this stance, Marx wrote, when contextualizing the otherwise abominable domination of “Hindustan” (India) by European colonizers: “We must not forget that [before British colonization] these little communities were contaminated by distinctions of caste and slavery, that they subjugated man to external circumstances, that they transformed a self-developing social state into [a] never changing natural destiny, and thus brought about a brutalizing worship of nature, exhibiting its degradation in the fact that man, the sovereign of nature, fell down to his knees in adoration of *Hanuman*, the monkey, and *Sabbala*, the cow” (1978 [1853]: 658). Subsequent scholars amended, but to varying degrees upheld, the sentiments of a parochial pre-colonized India. Summarizes Smith (2003), “As modernity took shape,

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<sup>14</sup> In the quoted article, Gilmartin was specifically referring to the implementation of water management schemes (hydraulic systems) in India by the British. Pertinent to the subject of contemporary development thought and practice in India, Gilmartin also asserts that the roots of the hydraulic system, as it is implemented in the modern nation state, “are to be found in the political implications of the relationship between environment and community established in the colonial era” (1995, 236).

from Kant to Hegel and on to Marx and Weber, there was (an) increasing use of India as an example of what modernity was not” (15). This genealogy of thought had serious implications as modernity was considered a necessary condition for developmental advances.

In the twentieth century, Foucault helped deconstruct discourses about the linearity of progress. Foucault’s work disrupted the illusion of the free-thinking and rational post-enlightenment being by demonstrating how hegemonic discourses, intellectual gate keeping, and dominant social structures influence the way people think and act (1978). By showing how discourse transmits and produces power, Foucault’s genealogical approach provided a tool to help undermine, expose, and make fragile dominant ideological and social frameworks. For those looking “East”, Foucault was helpful in breaking down the power/knowledge nexus of Eurocentric colonial and post-colonial scholarship that Said (1978) termed “Orientalism.” The project of deconstruction also inspired the scholarship of the “subaltern” that sought to make the oppressed of South Asia subjects of their own histories.

As the second millennium drew to a close, the language and discourse of “development” was targeted by what was later termed “post-development” or “critical development” scholarship. Of the critiques waged, Escobar’s (1995) especially had far-reaching currency. By tracing the genealogy of development, he and others have illuminated the discursive production of the “underdeveloped” to whom the industrialized countries and their economic institutions extended aid packages that consolidated power and wealth. Some, such as Ferguson (1994), showed the “instrumental” and ideological effects of development regimes. Because they identify scalar hierarchies of power in

international development discourse and practice, the insights of such scholars were usefully applied to localized contexts in ethnographic studies. These efforts demonstrated the de-politicizing effects that the dominant development agenda had on subjugating logics and ways of being that were sometimes defined as “traditional” or “alternative” (Blaser 2004, 2010; Gardner & Lewis 1996). To highlight “other” (non-hegemonic) modes of development and economic exchange, some approaches explored counter practices including community-driven economies that are internally dictated, socially equitable, and environmentally sustainable rather than primarily extractive (Gibson-Graham 2006). Many efforts contrasted small-scale, localized development efforts with large engineering projects in India and elsewhere.

Amidst the widespread critique of development theory and practice, some of the scholarship, much of it based in India, contests the notion of a hegemonic development agenda. Arguing against the unidirectional flows of development ideology (i.e. North to South and top-down), some argue for a “heterogeneous dynamism” in approaches to development and the project of modernity (Sivaramakrishnan & Agarwal 2003). In the examination of context-specific and historical phenomena in South Asia, these efforts insert “subaltern”, populist, and nationalist invocations of development into the discussion. Considering a range of historical and empirical phenomena, Sinha (2008) asserts that different spatial levels (local, national, global) are connected to transnational flows of development power. He argues that such flows produce new political possibilities rather than the total ‘de-politicization’ of development (61). These approaches factor ambiguity and contradiction into development dilemmas while examining the ways that modernity is sometimes appropriated and re-embedded in

different locations (Gupta 1998) in the process of “place making” (Gidwani 2002: 26).

Although focused on the South American context, Asher (2009) also urges us to examine the complex co-constitution of development by looking at how dominant discourses and ideologies influence repertoires of resistance and claims about political-economic rights.

These points and counterpoints highlight a critical issue in the debate about development and its apparatuses: the role and scope of multiscale agency. Many scholars of South Asia, drawing from empirical and ethnographic research, seek to redirect attention to the desires and actions of people from diverse walks of life that challenge, revise, reconfigure, and adopt development agendas. This invokes earlier work demonstrating the positive charge that the word development can have. Pigg (1992) drew from the Nepali context to note that, “everyone wants a piece of the development pie” (492) for the material benefits the word implies *and* because village representations and identities are intertwined with the politics of development (492). To this, Shrestha (1995) added that in South Asian states like Nepal, becoming “developed” is linked with social status and enhanced self-perception.

In the twenty first century, even as scholarship shifts focus from the leveling force of “economic globalization”<sup>15</sup> to the ideological, institutional, and political influences of

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<sup>15</sup> The term is often used to target the free trade policies that left weak economies vulnerable to the bulldozing effects of industrialized markets seeking rock bottom labor costs in exchange for the lowest possible tariffs for their own—often subsidized—goods.

“neoliberal” capitalism (Harvey 2005)<sup>16</sup>, critical development scholars continue to emphasize the localized damage to cultures and ecologies of inequitable development. Among the many contested practices, large hydroelectric projects receive significant attention. Their virtues in the context of ecological sustainability and social justice are subject to widespread disagreement.

### **Development and Contradiction**

Dam critiques often highlight the ironies that dams create. On the one hand, hydroelectric projects provide technocratic means to generate energy and maximize water resources for agriculture and industry. On the other hand, they do so by creating contradictions and ethical tensions (de Wet 2009: 79-80). For although dams facilitate “efficient” resource use and help some people meet their vital needs, they do so while depriving others of well-being and, in cases of displacement and resettlement, sometimes violate cultural values and human rights (ibid.; Oliver-Smith 2005, 2009).

Exploring the contradictions, scholars like Ribeiro (1994) have focused on the production of hydroelectric projects as they relate to the logic of economic expansion. Others honed in on the ecological and social costs of dam construction and displacement (Cernea 2000; Donahue & Johnston 1998; Johnston 2009). The health and psychological impacts of those displaced by dams have also received attention (Kedia 2009).

In India, many anthropological and social science studies highlighted the

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<sup>16</sup> David Harvey defines neoliberalism as a theory of political economic practices that propose to advance human well being by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills in institutional framework of strong private property rights, free markets, free trade, and deregulation. In the neoliberal ideology, the role of the state in the market should be restricted to the preservation and defense (by military force if necessary) of the conditions in which markets are held to best function (2005, 2-3).

opposition of tribal peoples to hydroelectric development along the Narmada River that flows through the states of Gujarat and Maharashtra (Baviskar 1995; Fisher 1995; Kothari 1995). The extensive documentation of agitations against dams on the Narmada earned international notoriety for the movement, the Narmada Bachao Andolan, and its leaders. In limited instances, scholarship based on the stories of dam-affected people along the Narmada explored the cosmological disruption and spiritual significance of damming its waters (Baviskar 1995; Degan 2000; Fisher 2000).

Within India and beyond, many examinations of dam building extrapolate them back to the project of development and its roots in modernist thought and/or modernity. Shiva's (1988) efforts positioned dam building as a pronounced symbol of humankind's attempts to control a "feminine" nature. Under the ecofeminist frame as formulated by her and others, development projects like dams were thought to mirror the subjection of the productive and creative force of women who are oppressed by male-dominated societies (Mies and Shiva 1993). Although the ecofeminist approach is critiqued as essentialist (Baviskar 1995), there are gendered implications of development projects. Kedia (2009), for instance, has shown that women had an especially hard time relative to men after being displaced from the villages that were submerged by the Tehri dam in the Garhwal Himalayas. His study showed that displaced women had lost access to medicinal plants leaving them more susceptible to illness; they suffered physically and psychologically from the stressors of urban living; and they complained that their social support systems were weakened because they were distanced from relatives.

Another critique of hydroelectric development is that they create an inequitable distribution of resources. Hydroelectric schemes often produce electricity for urban

centers and siphon off vital water supplies from communities in need. The “rationalizing” logic of “maximizing” the utility of resources like water, therefore, has distinct winners and losers. For this reason, some equate water with power and argue for projects that directly benefit the people living nearby (Donahue & Johnston 1998).

Despite the drawbacks associated with dams, they are still a favored mechanism of development. For even though many consider large dams to be “flawed” endeavors with overstated benefits and understated costs, they are recommended as a “necessary development option” for a growing human population with ever-increasing energy needs (Schudder 2005). In India, state and central governments consistently emphasize the necessity of dam building for electricity generation. As of 2008, the country had as many as 4,500 dams and a long list of projects waiting to be built (Mittal 2008). Many of the new projects are earmarked for construction in the fragile Himalayan mountains, which is itself an area of historically contested development practice.

### **Dams on the Bhagirathi Ganga: Issues, Implications, and Oppositions**

When a value-laden concept like development gets packaged in the form of state-sanctioned projects and hydroelectric schemes, the reaction varies greatly depending on the particularities of the location. In the Indian Himalayas, the site for much of the present research, development is influentially set in opposition to the state of being “backward” (*pichadha*). Within a modernizing India, disdain for backward hill peoples can mobilize dominant development ideologies and practices, especially in ethnolinguistically distinct regions like Garhwal in the state of Uttarakhand (Rangan

2000). In that area, consequently, few argue against development, referred to in Hindi as *vikas*. To do so is to position oneself against the betterment of the region and the nation.

This does not mean that people passively accept the agenda as it is presented to them; there is extensive critique that involves a re-imagining of the meaning and constitution of development. The strongest critics often set *vikas* in opposition to *vinas*. These two words are quite similar when spoken yet *vinas* signifies destruction, something which most think of as being distinct from the idea of development. To say something such as, “This is *vinas* not *vikas*!” is to make a play on words that inverts the very idea upon which development is based. When the two terms are used in tension, speakers point out that development cannot enact the promise of improved livelihoods if it entails the deterioration of the resource base upon which many people subsist.

Within these qualifications of development, dams receive mixed reviews. Extensive conversations with a range of people indicate that many perceive benefit in dam building and power generation. Contention lies, however, in debates over the scope, equity, and implications of hydroelectric projects that redirect the Ganga’s culturally and religiously significant waters.

For some of the religiously inclined, as I show in Chapter 4, dam building is only a problem with regard to the main flow of the Ganga; they have little problem with the construction of similar projects on the river’s supporting tributaries or with large projects on other rivers in India. Others—Hindu and non-Hindu—see limitations in exclusively zoning-off the Ganga’s primary flow. They charge the proponents of such arguments with misguided religious zealotry. Among those that consider hydroelectric development a necessity, the focus is on maximizing its utility and protecting the river from pollution.

For the environmentally minded, a major concern is the ecological impact of dam building on the fragile ecosystems of the Himalayas (something I elaborate upon below). In between these positions are numerous debates that address the water quality implications of dam building; the impact of hydroelectric projects on cultural practices; and the effect that the water diversions will have on the river's goddess. The conflicting viewpoints reveal socio-cultural, religious, and political tensions.

### **Dialogues about the Bhagirathi Ganga**

The numerous perspectives are particularly revealing when they are viewed dialogically. Bakhtinian thought and the dialogic approach (1981), discussed chapter 2, provides a useful means to examine overlapping and conflicting utterances about development along the Ganga. Since the dialogic approach draws out the multiplicity of human perception, we can explore the various discourses as they relate to ideas about development, progress, and modernity. The value of focusing on dialogues combined with the guiding insight of heteroglossia, or 'multispechedness', is that we move away from binaries that draw proverbial lines in the sand to delineate the "pro" and "anti" dam contingents. These labels are deceptive, as many people move on and off sides while others straddle different degrees of middle ground. Group affinity, moreover, is only one facet of change to be observed. Identities—or senses of purpose, belonging, and self-definition—also shift (Holland et al. 1998). This happens as actors engage in dialogue with one another and the biophysical contexts in which they exist. Thus, even though I delineate many groups in the debate over the river's management, I use a dialogic approach to underscore how dynamic group affiliations are. This exercise demonstrates

the extensive degree of fragmentation, factionalization, and conflict that exists between and within actors who address the river's management. Rather than treating inter and intra group discord as "noise" a more productive approach is to engage such fractures to demonstrate the contingency of social processes (Wolford 2006, 2010).

The added value of the dialogic approach and heteroglossia is that they provide a means to excavate discourse that elicits the theoretical insights of the Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci (1971). Writing from jail during Italy's fascist experiment in the mid twentieth century, Gramsci explained how the interests of ruling parties become hegemonic by taking on a "common sense" character in society. Despite this, Gramsci pointed out that power can be contested and circumvented on multiple scales when people resist taken-for-granted ideas and practices. The approach that Bakhtin proposed shows how this happens in speech as the dialogic process mediates meanings through a constant, open-ended negotiation. Such negotiations allows for the emergence of "alternative" meanings beyond those that are dominant (O'Reilly 2007: 621). In so doing, these negotiations give space to multiple perspectives and possibilities that bring with them the potential for social change and transformation.

In the case of the dam controversy along the Ganga, the struggles over power were not always an objection to the dominant development and religious practices in India. A remarkable thing about the movement actors whose discourses I feature in this dissertation is that most of them identify as being part of a cultural and religious Hindu majority and they offered commentary that valued the idea of development. This means that the dam proponents and opponents shared *some* cultural similarities. The conflict, therefore, was distinct from the struggles over dam building in other places such as on the

Narmada River in Maharashtra, India. In that conflict, tribals (*adivasi*) fought simultaneously against the imposition of “Hindu culture” as well as a dominant political economic system (Baviskar 1995). Many actors in the Himalayas, by contrast, either positioned the Hindu religious figurings in which dams are justified on the Ganga or they argued that the dams were anathema to Hindu practices of reverence for the river. Both figurings reaffirmed Hindu cultural and religious systems rather than opposed them.

In light of the cultural and religious similarities among actors, I focus on the figured worlds in dialogue more than the “cultural politics” that the contestations entail. Cultural politics, as described by Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar (1998), involve the processes enacted when sets of social actors shaped by and embodying different cultural meanings and practices come into conflict with one another (7). This is true along the Ganga if we consider culture to mean “a collective and incessant process of producing meanings that shapes social experience and configures social relations” (*ibid.*: 3). At the same time, cultural politics often refers to attempts to upset a dominant cultural order with meanings and practices that are marginal, oppositional, minority, residual, emergent, and alternative. This is less the case in the controversy about dams along the Ganga since many people used the issue to reify Hindu practices and uphold the value of development practice. What was in greater tension, I argue, were the figured worlds in which dams and development projects can harm the Ganga, its Goddess, and the places through which they flow.

This is not to say that there was no marginalization of people within the movements or that there was agreement among movement actors. Some of the people whose comments and life stories I share felt marginalized because of their socioeconomic

standing and gender, their social location in the “backwards” Garhwal Himalayas, or because of low levels of formal education and few economic opportunities. And although some activists expressed similar concerns, I show in subsequent chapters that disagreements were abundant even within the movement and networks. The different perceptions point to varied approaches on economic growth, development, and the means by which civil society should work to change policy.

Despite the prominent defense of Hindu cultural and religious practices that were evidenced in the opposition to dam building, the majority of adherents of the amorphous religion known as Hinduism were not involved in social movement activity to address the management of the Ganga. This was as true in the Indian plains as it was along the river’s banks in Uttarkashi District. The reasons for this are a point of investigation in this study. In this chapter and the next one, I demonstrate how persuasive development discourse can be. In chapter 8, I address the influence of Hindu texts that frame past and current social-ecological transformations as inevitable phenomena that humans are powerless to change. These figurings, along with other factors, can deter efforts to contest practice on the Ganga.

### **Dam Building in the Himalayas: Current Projects and Development Legacies**

The rivers that run through the Himalayas are a potentially large source of hydroelectric energy. Not counting China, the Himalayan regions of India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Bhutan could add up to 150,000 megawatts (MW) of hydroelectricity to their national grids by 2030 in an effort to reduce dependency on fossil fuels. According to some estimates, India may elect to produce as much as two-thirds of the expected total

(Dharmadhikary 2008: 6-8) in an effort to reduce a shortfall of some 30,000 MW (Mittal 2008). The state of Uttarakhand alone has an *estimated* [my emphasis] potential to generate as much as 20,263 MW of the energy the country desires.<sup>17</sup> To tap into this capacity, a total of 53 projects were approved for construction on the Bhagirathi Ganga and Alakananda Rivers and up to 200 more projects were being planned in the period leading up to the momentous summer of 2010. If all these dams are constructed, a series of projects would obstruct these rivers every 3-5 miles (5-7 kilometers).

Along the first 80 miles (125 kilometers) of the Bhagirathi Ganga, three dams were originally proposed for construction. As noted, a move by the central government in February of 2009 initiated a process to cancel them all. In that order, the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MOEF) scrapped a project that had not yet begun—Bhairon Ghati Phase I and II. That project was unpopular given its proximity to the sacred Gangotri temple and a national reserve. In addition to damaging the sanctity of the region, some (such as the interlocutors at Gangotri in chapter 1) believed it would harm tourism. The second and third projects, Loharinag Pala and Pala Maneri, were suspended several times over 2009 and 2010 until they were ultimately canceled despite multi-million dollar investments for their partial construction.

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<sup>17</sup> Big Dams: Is Ganges (an) Infinite Resource? *The Pioneer*, [http://www.hydroworld.com/index/display/news\\_display.1228841699.html](http://www.hydroworld.com/index/display/news_display.1228841699.html), accessed July 27, 2010.

**Figure 3. 1 Loharinag Pala and Pala Maneri Projects**



Artificial canal (for water diversion) at Loharinag

Mountainous tunnel at Pala

These dams initially had institutional and government backing. They were cited as a “clean” mechanism for energy generation and development. The projects were also potentially lucrative for the contractors and agencies involved in their approval. As a critic reminds us, “Big dams mean big budgets which in turn means big profits.”<sup>18</sup> The expansion of hydroelectric development was also a source of concern for many of the residents living in project areas. Despite the marginal employment opportunities for unskilled labor that dam building provides, opponents argued that the ecologically destructive projects are not viable given the potential threats of climate change and glacial retreat. While the exact figures for retreat are controversial, estimates warn of significant loss in ice cover and water availability in the Himalayas by the end of the twenty first century (IPCC 2007; Immerzeel et al. 2010).

In the context of growing water stress and climate change, numerous social movements and non-governmental organizations in India adamantly voiced opposition to

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

run-of-river hydroelectric projects on a stretch between the river's glacial source and the district capital of Uttarkashi. The people opposing the dams questioned the environmental damage caused by dynamite blasting to construct tunnels in a fragile, zone-five area of seismic activity with frequent landslides. Challenging claims that run-of-river hydroelectric projects are benign, opponents argued that the dams would threaten the ecological balance of the region by diverting water through a series of mountainous tunnels (6-10 miles long each). They further charged that taking water out of the riverbed through a virtual cascade of tunnels would leave downstream sections with minimal flow. This would hinder groundwater recharge, withhold water needed to support biodiversity, and could possibly have altered the river's ability to maintain a self-cleansing rate that is nearly three times as fast as rivers such as the Yamuna (Down to Earth 2008: 31).

As the melting glaciers deposit more sediment into the runoff, another concern was that energy production targets would not be met due to an increase of corrosive, turbine-damaging silt (Dharmadhikary 2008: 25). The increasingly irregular precipitation patterns (related to a climate-vulnerable monsoon) contributed to concerns about energy production and long-term water availability. Future weather patterns aside, some argued that India's existing dams are already struggling to meet energy targets. A 2008 study by the South Asian Network on Dams, Rivers, and People (SANDRP) draws from government data to show that 89 percent of 208 large dams in India are under-performing and that 49 percent generate less than half of their projected output.

In light of these and other issues, dams along the Bhagirathi Ganga came under intense scrutiny. The critiques were peppered with a sense of disillusionment over the entrenched ideological and power struggles that, as earlier noted, have defined

contemporary opposition to dam building. As Mittal wrote in a scathing essay:

What is happening in the Bhagirathi valley represents a dangerous mindset sweeping the country: the emphasis of national over local, the glorification of the word ‘development’ regardless of what it means on the ground, the shift of scarce resources from communities to corporations, the myth that money can compensate sacrifices made by those at the lowest end of the totem pole, one-dimensional definitions of cost, and the idea that benefits will last forever (2008).

Because of the high stakes that Mittal and others pointed out, numerous groups worked to raise public awareness about the proliferation of hydroelectric development projects along the Bhagirathi Ganga. Several social movements and NGOs, for instance, supported three of the aforementioned “fast unto death” programs undertaken by G.D. Agarwal in 2008, 2009, and 2010. These protests were grounded in cultural and religious concerns for the wellbeing of the Ganga and the Bhagirathi Ganga in particular. The public profiles of such campaigns were augmented by the agitations of groups such as Ganga Bachao Abhiyan (Save the Ganga Movement), Ganga Ahvaan (Call of the Ganga), and the Ganga Raksha Manch (Ganga Defense Forum). These actions helped force a decision by the central government to declare the Ganga a “national river”.

As part of the river’s elevated status, a new governing body, the Ganga River Basin Authority (GRBA), was established in 2008 to monitor projects on the river and promote its sustainable use. While heartening in itself, the GRBA came on the wake of fiscally wasteful and nominally successful Ganga Action Plan (GAP) begun in the 1980s by a late Prime Minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi. That program, as several have noted (Ahmed 1991; Alley 2002; Bhargava 1992; Chapman & Thompson 1995) was fraught with corruption and a lack of political will to penalize polluters. The result is that the Ganga is now more polluted than it was thirty years ago. There is hope that a billion-

dollar loan from the World Bank will spur new efforts to arrest the increasing toxicity of the river's waters. Those familiar with India's track record for the implementation of environmental programs, however, remain skeptical (CSE 2008).

### **Past Projects, Present Concerns: Tehri Dam and Activist Legacies**

In Uttarakhand State, it is unclear whether the renewed focus on the river's health and its elevated "national" status will be enough to permanently block the construction of new projects in a region with a legacy of hydroelectric dams. Even though the government has canceled the three contested dams along the first 80 miles of the Bhagirathi Ganga, it is important to remember that such decisions can be reversed due to the absence of binding legislation, the whims of party politics, and the energy demands of the Indian state. The Tehri dam is an example of the changing tides of development policy and practice in India. Work on the Tehri dam, which was built along the lower stretches of the Bhagirathi Ganga, was stopped and then resumed several times before it was completed in 2006. Since the Tehri dam emerges frequently in conversations about development along the Bhagirathi Ganga, its history is pertinent to debates on contemporary projects. The dam inspires pride as well as bitter commentary along the reservoir and further upstream in Uttarkashi district. Although some point to the country's need for electricity to validate its presence, others feel it to be an unsightly affront to region and the Goddess that the Ganga's waters embody.

Towering to 855 feet (260.5 meters), Tehri was the highest in Asia and the fifth tallest in the world when it was completed. At full capacity, the dam and its four turbines are designed to produce up to 2400 Megawatts (MW) of electricity in conjunction with

the Kotli Bhel project downstream. In addition to energy production, the dam can divert water to irrigate up to 270,000 hectares of land and it can transfer as much as 270 million gallons to thirsty metropolises in the plains. Out of that total, some 162 million gallons are earmarked to service roughly four million of New Delhi's residents.<sup>19</sup> Whereas the initial estimate for construction was four million US dollars, the actual expenditure was closer to 1 billion USD.

The dam's construction came in starts and stops and was surrounded by controversy. The main concerns cited were that the dam would displace some 80,000-100,000 people in 100-200 villages; destroy 5,200 hectares of arable land; submerge the historic capital of Tehri Garhwal once ruled by an aristocracy; and disturb the ecological balance. Another prominent protest was that the dam's massive reservoir would add pressure to the seismic fault below, potentially resulting in more earthquakes. Environmentalists also argued that the artificial lake would destroy thousands of hectares of fertile land, that the problem of landslides would increase, and that the reservoir—extending 27 miles (45 km) up the Bhagirathi and 14 miles (23 km) up the Bhilangana River—would produce enough methane (through the decomposition of submerged organic materials) to offset the dam's promise of “clean” energy. Although dams like Tehri don't run on carbon dioxide emitting fossil fuels, methane is a much more potent greenhouse gas and it causes several times more damage (International Rivers 2008).

Movements in opposition to the dam began to appear as early as 1978. They worked, unsuccessfully, to stop the project and its projected effects. Initially, a group

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<sup>19</sup> THDC India Ltd., [http://thdc.gov.in/Projects/English/Scripts/Prj\\_Introduction.aspx?vid=132](http://thdc.gov.in/Projects/English/Scripts/Prj_Introduction.aspx?vid=132), accessed February 1, 2007.

called the Tehri Bandh Virodhi Sangarsh Samiti (TBVSS) led the protest efforts. Virendra Dutt Saklani was the first Chairman of the organization, whose name in English translates to the Tehri Dam Opposition Committee. Under his leadership, the initial years of protest saw extensive education campaigns, petitions, and “massive” demonstrations (Dogra 1992: 60-63; Mukerji 1997: 15). These actions came at the heels of the *Chipko Andolan* (Tree Hugging) efforts to oppose deforestation in the Garhwal hills of Uttarakhand State, the same region in which the dam was being built. The movements converged with a period of growing activism that transformed the “passive environmental consciousness of Indian subalterns into an organized power” (Sharma 2009: 36). For a time, the Tehri dam opposition represented the growth of grassroots mobilization and coalition building with other anti-dam movements (Kothari 1996). In the Tehri protests, ecological and scientific discourse blended into environmental campaigns that were replete with references emphasizing the religious importance of the Ganga and the sacred geography of the Himalayas. Despite the initial surge of activity, support dwindled over the years as the movement failed to make headway and the project was increasingly regarded as a *fait accompli*.

A few individuals, despite the odds, opposed the dam to the very end. Among the most notable figures was the Gandhian activist, Sunderlal Bahuguna, whose earlier efforts in the Chipko Andolan protests were internationally recognized. Towards the latter days of the dam construction, Sunderlal (as he is commonly known) enacted several village awareness-raising programs (traveling by foot as in the custom with *padyatra*) and extended fasts-unto-death. These fasts, some of which lasted over forty days, he undertook alone and from the base of the dam’s growing walls to ignite the waning

opposition. In his appeals, he argued for the holistic, sustainable management of the Himalayas in which reforestation efforts would outpace development projects and nature would be viewed as a component of social life rather than a commodity to be extracted (Bahuguna 1998).

While the environmental and displacement concerns were prominent, people like Sunderlal repeatedly asserted that the wellbeing of the Goddess Ganga was at stake. He felt, as others did, that the dam and its reservoir would kill the river's divine energy as only running water retains the life force, or the *shakti*, of the Goddess (Sunderlal 1997; Drew 2007). Recalling the river's role as a spiritual and cultural Mother, he insisted that the dam would deny people access to her motherly love (Haberman 2006: 71). When the dam was finished and the reservoir waters began to rise, he conducted a symbolic ritual (*shraddha*)—usually reserved for the loss of one's biological parents—to mark what he saw as the death of *Ma Ganga*, a Hindu term for Mother Ganga (Bose 1992: 235).

Although people like Sunderlal saw the dam as a fight between good and evil,<sup>20</sup> dam proponents believed Tehri to symbolize progress, modernization, and the promise of sustained economic growth. The voices of dissent were criticized for keeping India from reaching its full potential. Taking an extreme position, a manager of the Tehri Hydro-electric Development Corporation (THDC) said of the opposition movements that, “Environmentalists are anti-national and should not be allowed to interfere in matters that engineers know best.”<sup>21</sup> Implicit in such arguments is the presumed superiority of

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<sup>20</sup> Haberman (2006) cites Sunderlal's framing of the Tehri dam as a fight between gods and demons in which “Dams are the expression of demonic power.” Explained Sunderlal: “The dam will kill the goddess because the water will not be flowing. Only flowing water is alive; dammed water is not... The dam will kill the *shakti* [divine life force] of the river” (72).

rational, science-based approaches to the management of the environment in the service of national goals. This mentality is rooted in modernist and colonial legacies (Bandyopadhyay 2009; Gilmartin 1994; Iyer 2003).

In between the divergent arguments—the Ganga as Hindu cultural heritage and Mother Goddess versus the Ganga as a tool for economic growth in the national project of development—some opposed the dam while cautioning against the employment of religious rhetoric. Although sympathetic to the environmental concerns of the Tehri dam, Sharma (2002, 2009) was deeply critical of the politicized Hindu rhetoric of dam opposition. In an article on the Tehri movement, he argued that it represented the commingling of “green” and “saffron”, words that respectively demarcate the environmental movement and the fundamentalist Hindu right. The alliance, he asserted, involved compromise and a loss of principle among diverse stakeholders with divergent perceptions about the dam and the project of development. When the environmental concerns colluded with Hindu nationalism, the diversity of opinions were simplified and narrowed, obscuring detail and nuance. By invoking certain Hindu sentiments, the environmentalists came close to the politics of conservative Hindu forces, thereby co-opting their ideas and values. Wrote Sharma, “In effect, certain metaphors and myths (of the Ganga) acted as Trojan horses, through which communal politics entered and re-entered green politics” (ibid.: 37). This, he critiqued, harnessed an “aggressive” Hindu identity based on the preservation of the Ganga that created spaces of exclusion and hostility against non-Hindus—particularly Muslims and a “conspiring West” (ibid.: 40).

Sharma’s observations call for caution when looking at social responses to the

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<sup>21</sup> H.M. Vyas, manager of the THDC, quoted in “Tehri: Hanging over troubled waters.” *Down to Earth*, May 1992 1(1).

proliferation of development projects in Uttarkashi District. I concur with his main point that polarizing discourses and actions should be handled with care to prevent the promulgation of dangerous exclusions and xenophobia. While Sharma is right to identify conservative political motivations, however, what his critique fails to address are the deeply emotional and spiritual sentiments of some activists and the ways that issues of faith can supersede politics for such people. Many Himalayan residents living along the Bhagirathi Ganga, for instance, express deep attachments to the river and the cultural-religious “traditions” (*parampara*) with which it is associated. This is important to acknowledge because people are emotionally connected to what they find valuable and meaningful. And, since emotions inform discourses and actions, “A recognition of the fundamentally emotional character of all personal commitments is essential if we are to understand any public discourse, including that on nature protection” (Milton 2002: 109).

While being careful to honor the emotion and meaning that motivates people to defend the continuity of the Ganga’s flow, it is also prudent to remember that traditions are invented (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Lancaster 1992) and they are sometimes even conservative. Traditions must, therefore, be approached critically. In a short but eloquent essay on “Modernity and the Sense of Loss,” Ashish Nandy notes the dangers of reifying traditions located in some distant but uncertain past: “For most Southern ideologues of tradition, tradition has now come to mean a mainly defensive invocation of classical thought and antiquity. The modernity of traditions has become a source of cultural pride, a prop for cultural nationalism” (2008: 26). Despite this criticism, Nandy is sympathetic to patterns of belief and behavior that have informed worldviews over the ages—and whose sense of loss is deeply felt by those “deposited in the sprawling waste yard of

history” (ibid.: 27). Rather than tossing traditions aside, therefore, he argues for a “critical traditionalism” to reinstate the dignity and intellectual relevance of everyday life for people and communities that “live with and in traditions, reinvented or otherwise” (ibid.). The call for a critical traditionalism, I believe, gives us a lens through which we can view the affirmation of cultural and spiritual attitudes towards the Bhagirathi Ganga while being careful with religious rhetoric.

The following chapters keep the above cautions in mind while focusing on the sentiments of those who enact meaningful rituals and practices (including development) in which the river plays a prominent role. Through the engagement of their concerns for the Ganga, we enter into discussions on the significance of everyday practice along the river; divergent ideas about the value of the Ganga’s flow, the interface between notions of place in the Himalayas and identity; and the impact of water management schemes on gendered lives and livelihoods. By also engaging the views of dam proponents within the Himalayas, we gain a better appreciation for the trials of life in the mountains and the stakes involved in the fight over development on particular segments of the Bhagirathi Ganga. To focus the discussion, I turn to an examination of views on the Ganga’s significance in Uttarkashi, Uttarakhand and the meanings that people generated about hydroelectric development in the region.

## Chapter 4. Figuring the Ganga in Uttarkashi

*August 27, 2009: All the shops closed early in the main market of Uttarkashi. The narrow, winding lanes that would normally be bustling with midday commerce were nearly deserted when I entered town. Only a handful of storekeepers worked hurriedly to pack up and secure the sliding metal sheets that, once padlocked, sealed the doors to the outside world. I asked one group of workers if it was a holiday as they hauled heavy sacks of rice and lentils inside a store for foodstuffs. “No holiday,” they replied, “its a strike. The dam builders are coming through. If we don’t close shop, they’ll tear it down.” As he spoke, a speaker announcement was audible from the main activity grounds, a space specifically reserved for fairs, cricket matches, and the occasional protest.*

*I hurried my pace to reach the open-air field. When I arrived, I saw a giant tent erected in the eastern corner with an assembly of hundreds standing underneath. After preliminary inquiries, it became clear that this was no ordinary pro-dam rally. Flags for the Congress Party, one of India’s two main political parties, waved around the tent. I’d just begun asking people about the protest—was it organized by the NTPC company, the ones building the dam, or was it a Congress party event?—when three jeeps stormed onto the grounds, stopping near the tent. Young men quickly jumped out of these cars and onto the roofs and bumpers to yell animated slogans through a loudspeaker. “Death to those who oppose the dams!” shouted the man with the microphone. “Death to them, death to*

*them!” came the chorus.<sup>22</sup> I’d been taking pictures of the protest but when I heard the slogans, I began to back up slowly, seeking refuge in the women’s corner of the tent. Did they know that I’d been making inquiries at NTPC headquarters the day before? Would anyone recognize me as the foreigner that spends time with the dam opponents?*

**Figure 4.1 Congress Party and Youth Rally in Favor of Dams on the Ganga**



Left: A caravan of pro-dam youth storming the Ram Lila grounds in Uttarkashi

Right: An image, from inside the tent, of a “rally” organized by dam proponents

*If people knew of my mixed affiliations, they did not make it known to me. Several people ushered me to a seat in the women’s section when a call from the loudspeakers urged the growing audience to assemble under the tent. As the rally got underway I realized that the event was, in fact, affiliated with the Congress party. Featured speakers included some of the most prominent regional and state politicians. Many had come to see Vijay Bahuguna, a member of parliament, who made a brief appearance to talk in favor of dams and development in the economically struggling area. Before he arrived,*

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<sup>22</sup> The slogan in Hindi was, *Dam ke khilaf walon ko murdabad murdabad!*

however, a dozen or so speakers made impassioned pleas.

One man spoke directly to the opposition's concerns. "Its not that we do not want to save Ganga," he preemptively countered. "We are not opposing Ganga. Ganga is our culture and our Mother. Ganga is our identity (pehchaan)!" After pausing to receive the applause these sentiments evoked, he then employed poetry to cast doubt on the integrity of those opposing the dams:

Ganga, that your water is nectar  
Ganga, that your water is nectar  
--Everybody says so!  
But who worries about you and keeps you in their thoughts?  
In your sacred land, there are many worshipers of Lakshmi [wealth].  
In your sacred land, there are many worshipers of Lakshmi.  
They release their sewage [into your waters],  
that is how great your devotees are.  
Religious, non-religious, saints, and sadhus—all live on your banks  
Religious, non-religious, saints, and sadhus—all live on your banks  
We know not why you like them.<sup>23</sup>

Reiterating his prose, the speaker argued that ashram residents and religious leaders have thrown out the gods of the sacred Himalayas, only keeping in their prayers Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth. "My friends," he continued, "go and see where their sewer pipe opens up—it probably flows to the Ganga!" Then, pointing me out in a crowd that had grown to nearly a thousand, he added that millions of outsiders come to the

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<sup>23</sup> Author's translation from the following Hindi transcription:

Ki Ganga tera pani amrit  
Ki Ganga tera pani amrit  
--Aisa sab loge kahte hai  
Par kisko kitni phikar hai teri, kaun tere hit main rehte hai  
Aaj teri is bhumi par lakshmi ke adhik pojari hai  
Aaj teri is bhumi par lakshmi ke adhik pojari hai  
Gande nale kiye tere hawale aise tere pojari hai  
Dharmi, adharmi, sant, sadhu—sab tujhse tere kinare hai  
Dharmi, adharmi, sant, sadhu—sab tujhse tere kinare hai  
Lekin tujhko, najane ma, tujhko kyon ye pyare hai.

*region every year believing it to be paradise. Calling the dams opponents “fakes” who do dirty things in the name of righteous action (dharma) he accused them of ruining the beauty of the land to turn a quick profit from river devotees while they dump wastes and oppose progress in the mountains. Denying affiliation with the companies involved in dam building, he argued for the resumption of two suspended projects, estimated to generate about 1000 megawatts, so that the state could become a “power house” in which the youth would no longer have to “beg” for work.*

*In this tirade, G.D. Agarwal’s fasts-unto-death to stop the dams were not forgotten. Recalling the retired professor’s affiliation with a prestigious Indian Institute of Technology in the Indian plains, he lambasted him as a meddling outsider. “He is from Kanpur, friends. Kanpur—where the Ganga is the most polluted. And yet he comes here telling us how to treat our Mother!” Mincing no words, the speaker accused Professor Agarwal of misleading the hill women to incite protest for his own selfish pursuit of fame and recognition. This was followed with accusations of corruption and bribery among the anti-dam activists that the speaker made a special point to call out, in some instances erroneously, by name.*

*Many took the podium to continue in this vein. One representative of a cadre of dam-employed youth posed a question that roused the crowd. “It is said that Ganga is everyone’s mother, that she gives of herself to everyone. Well, I ask you, can’t she also give employment to her children?” To this, a loud round of applause rang out. Encouraged, the young man added, “The movement for an independent state of Uttarakhand was made by people ready to sacrifice for the welfare of this great land. I tell you now, that movement will look like nothing compared to the fight we will*

*undertake to complete these dams!” This sentiment was met by more applause along with an orchestrated rally cry from the youth cadre. As he left the podium, the young man repeated the parting cry that almost all the other speakers gave: Glory to Mother Ganga! Glory to Uttarakhand! (Jay Ganga Maiya! Jay Uttarakhand!)*

*When the event turned into a march through the streets of Uttarkashi, I slipped away and through the market’s back alleys to visit Sita, one of the ladies involved in the dam opposition. Although her son Ravi had been to the rally, she had stayed home because she feared she’d make a scene. “If I had been there, I would have spoken up in front of everyone,” she said as she hunted pebbles in a tray of uncooked rice.<sup>24</sup> Plucking one up, she thrust it in the direction of the tented grounds and exclaimed, “I would have given them a piece of my mind!” As the rest of us exchanged notes on what was said in the four-hour rally, she begrudgingly listened, evermore intent on her pebble hunt. We observed, among other things, the way concerns over climate change and upstream glacial retreat were glossed over by speakers who claimed that the environmental rhetoric obscured a political game that threatened to obstruct development in the mountains. Contemplating the proceedings, Ravi giggled, “Sister, did you hear how they ended their speeches? ‘Glory to Ganga’ and all that? They are destroying their mother and praising her at the same time!”*

*Later, when Ravi mentioned the corruption charges that the dam proponents raised against the activists, Sita decided she had heard enough. “They are saying we take money to stop the dams? Look at us,” she said as she pointed to their simple two-room*

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<sup>24</sup> The rice threshing process sometimes chips small rocks off of the mortar. It is thus necessary to sort through homegrown and bulk dry rice rations before they are cooked at each meal. Biting unaware on a pebble in a dish of cooked rice can break teeth.

*home, “Where are these funds that we are supposed to be taking?” Shaking her head, she heaved a note of disgust and declared: “Now it is up to Mother Ganga; When the time is right, they’ll get their punishment.” Our eyes went to Sita and we watched her affix a long gaze on an uncooked grain. When her vision narrowed, I remembered the village devta (god) that comes to her and makes proclamations while reading rice kernels. For a brief moment, I waited to see if the devta would turn her utterance into a prediction of things to come. The grain, however, appeared to hold no insight. Dropping it back into the tray, she rose to prepare the evening meal.*

Whom does the Ganga serve, how should she be treated, and what impact could dam building have on the river’s Goddess? In the argument of the dam proponents detailed above, the Ganga is a selfless servant of her “children” whose energy-producing potential should be tapped for the benefit of mountain residents. This perspective argues that dam building and hydroelectric production do not harm the river and its Goddess. The dam proponents assert that polluting the river with contaminating elements like human waste and polythene bags is a worse offense than redirecting the Ganga’s flow. They even argued that dam building could save the Ganga from contamination if the river were to be directed through the projects’ tunnels.

What is striking about the discourse of the dam proponents outlined above is the deep concern they express for the Ganga. The speeches at the pro-dam rally were highly affective. The rhetoric of devotion and care for the Ganga drew loud cheers and applause from the audience of Uttarkashi residents and the people from surrounding villages who

were in attendance. The comments also demonstrated how emotional the topics of employment and development can be. The affect associated with jobs and dams are linked with long-term struggles over livelihoods in the Himalayas. Even though the Ganga is indisputably figured as a Goddess demanding respect, in the cultural or “figured” world presented by the dam proponents, the river also provides a means of regional betterment, economic growth, and progress.

### **Figured Worlds and the Importance of Flow**

In this chapter, I examine the multiple positions and meanings directed towards the Ganga in order to illustrate the ways that distinct yet in-dialogue “figured worlds” influence debates about the river’s management. An important component of social practice theory as conceptualized by Holland et al. (1998), figured worlds are the terrains in which historical subjectivities, socio-cultural processes, and individual positionalities come together dialogically to influence identity and agency (40-41). I focus on figured worlds when examining the various discourses about the Ganga’s use in order to demonstrate the circulating contexts for meaning, cultural production, action, dispute mediation, and self-understanding that these worlds help produce (ibid.: 60).

Although figured worlds are collectively imagined and improvisational, they also “happen” and are tangible to their participants (ibid.: 55). This is because the figurings that these worlds evoke are meaningful for the actors in those worlds and the meanings that are produced motivate action. Examples of the tangible effects that figured worlds can have include the way that the behavior of young college women is influenced by figurings about the importance of being attractive on college campuses (Holland and

Eisenhart 1990) or the ways that the cultural world of witchcraft in France has physical, personal, and social consequences for the actors that are construed as being part of it (Favret-Saada 1980). My discussion of the figured worlds that are brought in dialogue about the Ganga's worth and its management begins from the understanding that the worlds presented to me are valid and meaningful for my consultants.

In this chapter, I emphasize the influence of different figured worlds on ideas about the movement and flow of the Ganga's waters as they are expressed in the district capital of Uttarkashi. The district capital is a meeting point for villages in the area, it houses the administrative offices of the region, and it was a locus for dam proponents and opponents to gather and express their views on the contested hydroelectric projects. The people that gather in Uttarkashi to promote or protest development in the region come from various geographical locations within India. To reduce the potential for confusion, this chapter focuses on the views presented by people from Uttarkashi and its environs. The following chapter addresses the influence of regional actors who move in and out of places like Uttarkashi in their efforts to address the Ganga's management.

Some of the discourses that I draw from are taken from meetings that I attended and interviews that I conducted in Uttarkashi. Others are taken from text and media. When pertinent, I highlight the use of stories in these venues because I find them rich in epistemological and ontological significance.<sup>25</sup> Stories, I believe, are particularly potent sites to explore the presentations of history and "myth" that are offered in relation to the Ganga and the Bhagirathi Ganga in particular. These renderings are intelligible when we

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<sup>25</sup> I use the word ontology to refer to *positional ways of being and dwelling*. This includes the related knowledges, concepts, and orientations towards other humans and non-human entities that arise from various modalities of perceiving and existing in the world.

listen with an ear for “different stories” that point to the diverse beliefs, practices, and knowledges that may or may not challenge dominant epistemologies, or ways of knowing, and ontologies, or ways of being in and interacting with the world (Blaser 2010; Cruikshank 2005: 259).<sup>26</sup>

### **Approaching the Ganga: Some Cautions**

Being open to epistemological and ontological difference was not always an easy task for me. As an American-born citizen and researcher working in South Asia, I was sometimes challenged by the different ways of knowing and expressing knowledge about the Ganga. The cultural frames that posit a mother and life giver in the form of a river are not easy for non-Indians to grasp. Bolitho (2008) describes the conundrum of the curious foreigner in Varanasi, India attempting to understand everything that the river is and does. After living along the river’s banks and witnessing countless acts of worship and defilement, she asks herself, “What does it mean to say Ganga Ma—Mother Ganges?” This questioning takes her inward, to her own cultural constraints. Pondering this, she evaluates her own thoughts and attitudes: “I reflected on how many people addressed me as ‘Ma’ [Mother] in India, in respect, in hope that I would see their need, and in traditional greeting. Yet it was outside my cultural tradition, and my usual understandings and knowings, to call a river Mother” (400). It is one step, as Bolitho ponders, to move

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<sup>26</sup> Blaser (2010) thinks of ontologies as: a) ways of understanding the world that make assumptions about the kinds of things that do or can exist including their conditions of existence and relations of dependency; b) shaped through the practices and interactions of both human and non-humans; and c) connections between practices, “myths”, and stories. Blaser cautions that while stories are a good entry point to an ontology we must also attend to the ways in which those stories are embodied and enacted. Ontologies must be understood as total enactments involving discursive and non-discursive aspects.

from calling the river 'it' to equating it with feminine pronouns. It is another altogether to conceptualize a literal mother in the river's murky and polluted waters. Bolitho's confrontations with her own socialization lead her to reflect on the work of Chakrabarty (2000) whose writings expose the fuzzy boundaries of European modernity in India and beyond.

The problem with much of the postcolonial scholarship, Chakrabarty argued, is that western secular assumptions lead us to assert that, "the human is ontologically singular, that gods and spirits are in the end 'social facts'" (Chakrabarty 2000: 16). And yet, the "non-rational" (gods and spirits) have never been banished from history because they inevitably reappear when history confronts the "multi-cultural". Paraphrasing his work, Bolitho writes, "This challenges the assumption that runs through modern European political thought and social sciences, that one can think about social modernity in terms of a singular human consciousness. If our intellectual consciousness is born solely out of modern western rational analysis and observational procedures, Chakrabarty contends, we are in a predicament when it comes to speaking of practices within a participative, lived, pre-analytic cultural experience" (402). The trouble that arises in the translation of "Ganga Ma", therefore, is that we falter in our ability to convey the cultural experience (and the figured world) that the term conveys.

Even though I may have struggled to understand exactly what it meant for people to call the Ganga a Mother, I was at least prepared to honor the cultural framings and figured worlds that they presented to me. I was less equipped, however, to manage the ambiguity and seeming contradictions that I found when I engaged with people straddling various sides of the development debate. Admittedly, the framings given by those arguing

in favor of dam building were the hardest for me handle sympathetically. This was mostly because of the rumors of corruption that circulated about the bribes given and received to foster support for the dams. At the same time, I realize that many dam opponents and environmental organizations also had political and, in some cases, economic motivations for their actions. The ethnographic description that opens this chapter demonstrates the critique of such actors by dam proponents and provides a window into some of the discursive tensions I encountered in “the field”.

To explore those tensions and their significances, I now turn to the discourses and actions of people addressing the management of the Bhagirathi Ganga in the district of Uttarkashi where I focused most of my research. I first establish the significance of that location and why I chose it for my study. I then present the stances on the river, its worth, and its ‘proper’ management that were presented to me by people living in Uttarkashi. In the following chapter, I explore the ways of knowing, positioning, and arguing about the Ganga’s use that regional and national actors evidenced. The comments of people living in urban centers of the Indian plains draw out the different discourses about the river’s national importance and the implications of development that dam opponents and environmentalists living in disparate geographic locations identified. The discussion of these differences leads me back to the situated perspectives and meaning-making practices on the Bhagirathi Ganga that Chapters 6, 7, and 8 investigate.

## **Uttarkashi: A Nexus of Inquiry and Action**

I first visited Uttarkashi in 2004. I stopped in the district capital for several days before and after a trip to the Gangotri-Gaumukh glacier that is located some 80 miles upstream. At the time, I had been working in New Delhi in affiliation with a prominent environmental NGO. My task was to report on emerging struggles over water and food. During the course of my nine-month term as an affiliate with the NGO, I learned about the projections of glacial retreat in the Himalayas and the potential water shortages they could produce in downstream regions. I traveled to Uttarkashi and then to the Gangotri-Gaumukh to see the environmental conditions for myself.

I was concerned with what I saw when I first visited the region. On my way up the mountains, I observed that the colossal Tehri dam was in the final stages of completion along the lower part of the Bhagirathi Ganga. Numerous upstream villages were preparing to be submerged and displaced. In Uttarkashi, the second phase of the Maneri dam was also under construction. While staying in Uttarkashi, I heard rumors that more dams would be built in the region leading up to the retreating glacier. I decided to return to Uttarkashi after that first visit to research the potential impacts that a reduction in the Ganga's flow (either through dams or long-term glacial decline) would have on people, the ecologies in which they lived, and the cultural-religious practices that were dependent on accessing the Ganga.

As I mentioned earlier, I revisited Uttarkashi in the summers of 2006 and 2007 for preliminary investigations. At that time, several movements to oppose dams were gaining momentum. I learned that Uttarkashi was a locus point of activity. Some of the activists that emerged, whom I discuss in this chapter, were from the district. Others came up from

populated cities like Haridwar, Rishikesh, Jodhpur, and New Delhi. Most of the dam opponents identified as Hindus.

Over time, I learned more about Uttarkashi and the histories that help to constitute it as a place. By “place” I mean to say that Uttarkashi is an important location with a particular past of human and non-human interactions that intersect with present struggles and conflicts. Uttarkashi, like other places, is part of a constellation of social relations that are dynamic and conflictual (Conway 2004; Massey 1994). Although all places that humans inhabit are marked by struggle, Uttarkashi is a particularly prominent site for power contestations in the Garhwal Himalayas because it is an administrative capital. Oftentimes, the officials that work in Uttarkashi have been placed there by the state or central governments from other parts of the country. This is a sore point for some people living in and around Uttarkashi because they perceive that these outsiders have taken jobs that could have otherwise gone to Garhwalis. This sentiment is exacerbated by the earlier resentments that existed up until 2000 when the ethnolinguistic areas of Garhwal and Kumaon were part of Uttar Pradesh, a state in the Indian plains. It was only after years of social movement protest—which I detail in chapter 6—that an independent state of Uttarakhand was formed. This recent history begins to lend a sense of how Uttarkashi has been formed by localized and regional processes as well as by forces arising beyond its borders. Like other places, therefore, Uttarkashi is at once a particular “location” on the map at the same time that it is part of a network of relationships that extend from the “local” to the “national” and beyond. Since the sacred Ganga flows through Uttarkashi and the city is commented upon in ancient Hindu texts, the district capital has added symbolic capital as a holy site (*tirtha*) for religious pilgrimage.

**Figure 4. 2 Uttarkashi, Uttarakhand**



### **Epistemologies and Ontologies of the Ganga in Uttarkashi**

Before explaining people's relationships with the Ganga in Uttarkashi, it is important to further contextualize the district capital's socio-historic significance. Uttarkashi sits at an elevation of 3,800 feet. It is located about 95 miles above Rishikesh, a holy Hindu city at the base of the Himalayas, and about 230 miles north of New Delhi. A center of regional administration, Uttarkashi is the capital of a district that goes by the same name. Prior to India's independence from British rule in 1947, what is now a bustling town along the Bhagirathi Ganga was once simply referred to as the "Big Market" (*bara haat*) (Mehra 2007). It was the place where people would come from villages all over the district to trade goods with local and Tibetan merchants and buy provisions that could not be made in the villages. According to older residents in the region, salt was one of the most important items that people had to procure at that time; the rest they could produce on their own. Stories from residents portray the city in the years before the 1970's as a modest settlement known primarily for its religious

importance in the ancient scriptures that make up the canon of a religion that is labeled, albeit problematically, Hinduism.

One of Uttarkashi's biggest claims to notoriety is the fact that it is considered one of three main "Kashi" or abodes (homes) of Lord Shiva. "Uttar" means "upper" in Sanskrit and Hindi so the city's name translates to "Upper Kashi." In ancient texts, it is also referred to as Saumyakashi. The Skand Puran (1994), one of the many texts of the Puranas, elaborates at length on the importance of the Upper Kashi. The prose of the Skand Purana emphasizes Uttarkashi's significance as a *tirtha*—or sacred place—in which many Hindu gods reside. It also details numerous stories of conflict between gods fighting for power in the region and it presents Shiva (one of the three main male deities in contemporary Hinduism) as the city's victor. There is even mention of the deeds of great human saints who have gained boons for their extensive penance (*tapasya*) and meditation in what was, until recent decades, an isolated location.

Uttarkashi's importance is set in contrast with that of the "lower" kashi of Varanasi in the Indian plains. These two kashis bear many resemblances. Like Varanasi, the Ganga flows through Uttarkashi in the shape of a sickle. Both locations also have similar landmarks. In Varanasi, many ghats (steps leading to places of worship) line the banks of the Ganga. Instead of ghats, Uttarkashi is demarcated by the inflow of tributaries that bear the same names of the first and last ghats in Varanasi (Varuna and Assi).

Whereas Varanasi has been the center of Hindu worship to Shiva and the Ganga for millennia,<sup>27</sup> fewer people know about the significance of Uttarkashi. As the Skand

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<sup>27</sup> The significance of Varanasi (or Banaras) for the religious devout seeking communion with Shiva and/or salvation at the time of death extends over two thousand years (Eck 1982, Mahajan 2004, Rana 1993).

Purana predicted, however, Uttarkashi is gaining in recognition and becoming a prominent location for Hindu pilgrimage. A popular legend that one hears in Uttarkashi is that, as the current age of degeneration progresses in the époque of Kali yug (one of four cycles of time in the Hindu cosmology), Shiva will shift his primary residence from Varanasi to Uttarkashi. This will make Uttarkashi one of the most important locations along the Ganga. A tourist pamphlet about Uttarkashi relates this claim while adding that the Ganga's flow through the city will help maintain, and correct, the "moral balance of the universe" as it has purportedly done several times before (Andurai Utsav Uttarkashi 2006).<sup>28</sup>

As I earlier mentioned, Uttarkashi district is part of an ethnolinguistic region known as Garhwal. The area has a rich political history. Since the area was protected by the rugged terrain of the Siwalik mountains to the south it was not susceptible to the Mughal invasions that swept across the Indian plains in the first half of the second millennium C.E. Within Garhwal, however, there were battles for dominance among numerous small principalities that maintained modest fortresses (*gadhi*). Garhwal is named after these landmarks and it translates to "land of forts" (Sax 2002: 41). The number of battles subsided when Ajaypal Panwar consolidated the small chiefdoms of Garhwal in the thirteenth century. In 1804, however, Garhwal fell to the rule of Nepal's

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<sup>28</sup> Residents of Uttarkashi often shared stories of the Ganga's movements in Uttarkashi that upheld the river's role in the sustenance of moral integrity. One example, also cited in the tourist pamphlet, was the sudden shift of the river's flow from the east to the north to the south side of the city in 1857. The changed course is linked with tales of transgression in Uttarkashi that the Ganga undid by flooding—and therefore purifying—much of the city. Such events enhance the city's importance. As the pamphlet states, "Indeed, natural disasters including floods, earthquakes, fires, and landslides are a huge part of recent local memory but, with a startling resilience, Uttarkashi has only grown bigger after each one" (Andurai Ustav Uttarkashi 2006).

Gurkha forces. The Gurkha reign was brutal but short lived. It only lasted until 1815. That year saw the end of the Anglo-Gurkha war and the formation of a treaty in which the British annexed Garhwal and the neighboring ethnolinguistic region of Kumaon (Guha 1991: 11). At that time, the British restored rule to Sudarshan Shah whose aristocracy ruled from Tehri, Garhwal.

For many Indians, Garhwal is a sacred land of gods known as *dev bhoomi*. Explaining the first term, *dev*, Gulia writes, “The word devata is derived from the Sanskrit root div (“to shine”) and indeed, the glint of these Himalayan peaks has for centuries exercised a powerful hold on the Indian imagination” (Gulia 2007: 231-232). The frequency of shrines and temples that one finds dotted across the mountain landscape add to the spiritual framings of the region. Some of the temples house well-known gods and goddesses in the Hindu pantheon (which purportedly, or figuratively, has 330 million deities). A number of the temples host regional goddesses (*devi*) and gods (*devta*). Some of these entities are associated with local stories—some might call them folklore—about people and spirits that lived in the region and became powerful deities. There are also a number of practices and rites enacted in Garhwal that may have been influenced by the famed characters of the Hindu epic the Mahabharata (Gulia 2007; Sax 2002). Garhwalis believe that one of the Pandava brothers of the Mahabharata, Arjuna, got his powers as an archer by worshipping Shiva in the region. In the aftermath of the fratricidal war in which the epic culminates, the Pandavas fled to the Himalayan reaches of Garhwal in search of solitude and salvation (Chakravarthi 1998). Archaeological excavations testify to the antiquity of civilization in Garhwal. The material remains are used to validate stories about the spiritual ascetics and iconic figures that are believed to have spent time

communing with the gods in the Himalayas and undergoing penances for the benefit of humankind.<sup>29</sup>

For Garhwalis, the Ganga is the one of the most important entities in the region. The river's worth and significance is told in numerous ways. The most famous story is of the Ganga's fall to earth in riverine form at the bequest of a mortal by the name of Bhagirath. As told in epics such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana as well as in many other renderings, the Ganga was asked to leave the heavens, where she lived as a celestial being, and enter into the world in order to purify the ashes of King Sagara's 60,000 sons. These sons mistakenly thought a sage was responsible for hindering a ceremony that marked the King's reign. They woke the sage from his meditative trance and he instantly turned them into ashes. King Sagara's only surviving son could not save these forlorn souls. But his great grandson, Bhagirath, underwent hundreds of years of meditation and fasting at what is today known as Gangotri to win liberation for his ancestors. The gods were impressed with Bhagirath's penance (*tapasya*) and they agreed to let the Ganga fall from the heavens. She resisted at first, saying she would destroy the earth with the power of her descent. So Bhagirath pleaded to Lord Shiva who agreed to let the Ganga fall into his matted locks. Once her waters reached the ground, the Ganga followed King Bhagirath on a course down the mountains and then southeast to the Bay of Bengal where the Goddess absorbed the remains of his 60,000 ancestors and gave them salvation.

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<sup>29</sup> Burial sites revealed pottery shards and Paleolithic implements made of quartzite (Gulia 2007).

The story of King Bhagirath might seem like a metaphor for the grace that the Ganga's waters provide for the thirsty regions of north India. For residents living along the primary stretch of the Ganga in the Himalayas, however, the river's journey to earth at the bequest of King Bhagirath is no tall tale. It recounts, they say, true events. The story surfaced repeatedly in song and in speech. It was often invoked, for instance, at meetings, assemblies, and rallies that opposed dam building on the flow of the Bhagirathi Ganga. In these spaces, explored in detail in chapter 6, women sang songs celebrating the river's significance in the sacred geography of the Himalayas and the role that Bhagirath played in ensuring humanity could have the Ganga's blessing.

Many speeches in opposition to dam building restated this connection. Nirmla, an outspoken defender of the Ganga, for example, would frequently raise a question when dam proponents spoke of the development, or *vikas*, that the dams would bring. To their emphasis on the need for development she would retort, 'If the engineers and the dam builders are so great, why don't they bring another Ganga down to earth like Bhagirath did?' If they could do that, she assured them, she and others would have no opposition to dam building on the newly created river. This comment was usually met with laughter. But Nirmla often achieved her point with the absurdity of the suggestion; she underscored the cosmological significance of the Bhagirathi Ganga by pointing out its uniqueness among rivers. Whereas other rivers might flow because of hydraulic systems and topographic influences, the Ganga exists because of human intervention.

This perspective has parallels to the way that Escobar (1999) describes the anthropogenic influence on all natural resources and systems in the current *époque* of "second nature." His arguments challenge the idea that there is somehow an untouched

nature somewhere in the world whose “pristine” state is marked by isolation from the rest of human activities. The difference with the Ganga, however, is that people not only recognized that humans have influenced it, they believe that a human (King Bhagirath) with his penance helped to create its form and bring about its presence on the earth. Rather than conceptualizing the river as “nature” (i.e. a naturally occurring entity that exists within an ecological terrain of interconnected resources), Ganga devotees believe that the river was brought to earth through an agreement with Gods and humans. From this perspective, the Ganga is inextricably intertwined with culture and can *never* be reduced to the status of a mere river. When offering the story of King Bhagirath, therefore, people are not just citing something they learned when growing up and have heard repeatedly throughout their lives, they are arguing that current generations should not destroy an entity that is unique in the world.

### **Dams and Conflict in Uttarkashi District**

While dam building along the Bhagirathi has been highly contested, most opponents made it clear that they were not against hydroelectric generation or development. Despite their criticism of dam projects on the river, they often drew attention to the hydroelectric potential of the small streams that flow into the river’s main bed. Their suggestion was to build small dams on these tributaries. “We aren’t against dams,” said one woman, “We are against stopping the Ganga’s flow. It should be constant.” Numerous others repeated this statement and stressed that it is only when the Ganga’s flow is *aviral*—constant and uninterrupted—that it remains holy. This is

because, as Sunderlal Bahuguna commented earlier in chapter 3, only running water is imbued with the divine life force of the Goddess.

Reverence for the river's movements is historically grounded. As Eck (1996) reminds us, the poets and seers of the bygone eras often praised the blessings and purifying energies of the "goddess waters". Perhaps one of the most famous poems is the "Ganga Lahiri" written by Jagannatha in the seventeenth century. His composition emphasized the relationship between the river's moving waters and saving grace.

Contemplating this and other writings, Eck explains:

It is particularly the life, the movement, the activity of the waters of the Ganga that has attracted poets and devotees through the ages. Hers are not the motionless waters of the precreation seas, but running, energetic waters of life. The traditional etymology of Ganga derives the name from the verb *gam*, "to go." ...Her hymns constantly emphasize the running, flowing, energetic movement of her waters, and they do so at times with elaborate alliteration and onomatopoeia (ibid.: 143-144).

As Eck additionally notes, there is a pervasive notion that the Ganga needs to be flowing in order to destroy the earthly sins of her devotees. "It is running water that is the chief agent of purification in the complex Hindu scheme of purity and pollution," she writes. "Water absorbs pollution, but when it is running, it carries pollution away as well" (ibid.: 144). These were points that dam opponents also made. In conversations and interviews, people repeatedly stated that the dams would redirect the river through tunnels and leave insufficient flow in the riverbed. This, some imagined, would hinder the Goddess' ability to bless and purify devotees.

An especially strong assertion made by many river devotees and dam opponents was that the Bhagirathi Ganga must flow without interruption in order to support the observance of ritual, worship, and rites of passage. This argument emphasized the

importance of flow for the maintenance of cultural and religious practices. They asserted, for instance, that access to a flowing, healthy Ganga is needed from birth to death to fulfill the rites of passage (*sanskar*) that mark important milestones in life. These rites include feeding water from the Ganga to newborn babies, the lifelong practice of ceremonial baths on auspicious dates in the Hindu calendar, and the immersion of deceased bodies into the river to help the spirit's liberation from the cycles of birth and death. Such practices reinforce the river's intimate role in people's lives. And, dam opponents argued, these practices cannot be sacrificed for a few megawatts of hydroelectricity.

### **Activists in Uttarkashi: Ganga Ahvaan and the Clean the Ganga Movement**

Who exactly were the dam opponents? The main network of people that specifically protested against the dams in Uttarkashi District, and one that I mentioned in chapter 2, was Ganga Ahvaan. Their national movement attracted people from a variety of geographical locations, castes, and classes from the mountains to the plains. In the summers of 2006 and 2007, as the movement was building, the collective of affiliates went by the name, "Save the Ganga Movement" (Ganga Bachao Abhiyan).<sup>30</sup> For various purposes, the main organizers later changed the name of their movement. By the time I arrived in Uttarkashi for full-time research in the summer of 2008, they were exclusively calling their group Ganga Ahvaan.<sup>31</sup> At that time, and up to the point at which the

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<sup>30</sup> Organizers such as Priya clarified to me that an *abhiyan* is more of a network than a movement. In this sense, it might be similar to what Latin American movements refer to as a *rede* (Escobar 2008). For the purpose of simplification, however, I choose to translate the word as "movement".

hydroelectric projects were halted on the Bhagirathi Ganga in the summer of 2010 (after I had ceased conducting fieldwork), Ganga Ahvaan held numerous events. Their programs ranged from impromptu village meetings; informational sessions at Himalayan ashrams; rallies in places like Uttarkashi, Rishikesh, and New Delhi; and co-sponsored campaigns that united a number of movements and non-governmental organizations. During the period of my research, I attended each type of event organized by Ganga Ahvaan. I was most interested in the Uttarkashi-based meetings because one of the issues I sought to assess were the connections that people in the Himalayas expressed about the Ganga and their concerns for the continuity of its flow.

Through the meetings in Uttarkashi, I discovered that there was a core group of twenty to twenty-five people who had consistently rallied around a series of interrelated religious and environmental issues since the late 1980s and the early 1990s, long before the inception of Ganga Ahvaan. Many of these actors began their work in reaction to activities along the Ganga that they found distasteful. These included open-air defecation along the Ganga's banks, the practice of dumping sewage, and the disposal of animal wastes (from butchery) into the river. This collective of people in this locally emergent network called themselves the Clean the Ganga Movement (Ganga Safai Abhiyan). When the concerns over new dams on the Bhagirathi Ganga grew in 2007-2008, the participants of the Clean the Ganga Movement began joining the Ganga Ahvaan programming. When asked about their affiliation, these actors were more likely to say they were river devotees (*ganga ke bhakt*) than to align themselves with one group. During the time of my

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<sup>31</sup> The name Ganga Ahvaan helped people to specify the dam opposition component of the movement in the Himalayas. Elsewhere, such as in the Indian plains, others were using the appellation "Save the Ganga Movement" for campaigns that mostly targeted pollution. This was likely a source of confusion prior to the switch to Ganga Ahvaan.

research, one of original organizers of the Clean the Ganga Movement was trying to encourage people to label themselves as being part of “The Ganga Family”. He felt that the kinship terminology represented the care and devotion that people in the movements express for Mother Ganga and which can motivate their participation.

As many of the Ganga Ahvaan and Clean the Ganga Movement leaders agreed and emphasized in their programming, the main issue was with keeping a constant flow in the riverbed. The significance of accessing the Ganga’s uninterrupted flow, they pointed out, was something even the British were forced to respect during their rule in India. Downstream from the Himalayas, where the Ganga enters the plains, Indians protested British plans to obstruct and redirect waters that flowed by a holy Hindu bathing place on Har Ki Pauri ghat in Haridwar. In 1916, an agreement was reached to leave a minimum flow of cubic meters per second past the sacred ghat (Alley 2001; Drew 2007). This, as some of the other activists interpreted it, equaled “a mandate that the Ganga be allowed to flow unfettered”.<sup>32</sup> Struggles to maintain the flow continued post-independence (in 1947); people complained that their own government would not listen to pleas to leave the Ganga alone. This was unsettling in a situation where the river faced not one but several projects that would have redirected the water out of the riverbed for long stretches. Some feared this would equate to the river’s virtual disappearance:

Today the very existence of the Ganga is threatened by multiple barrages and Hydro-electric projects planned along its Himalayan stretch—the Bhagirathi. First the Tehri Dam and Maneri Bhali were built. Next a series of dams are being built between the Gangotri glacier and Uttarkashi. At these sites water shall be stored, then released periodically through tunnels... The same is repeated again (and again) further downstream. The

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<sup>32</sup>Bhagirathi Bachao Sankalp. 2008. *Threat to Holy Ganges from Hydro-Electric Projects between Gangotri-Uttarkashi*. New Delhi: Bhagirathi Bachao Sankalp.

result will be that in long stretches and over [a] considerable period of time, there shall be no flow in the channel. **THE GANGA WOULD RUN DRY** [original emphasis].<sup>33</sup>

The reason that the government persisted in such a scheme, of course, was to promote development. When I asked people in Uttarkashi about this rationale, some would counter the narrow definition of development that was being posited. Sure, they commented, dam building enhances infrastructure in the Himalayas and adds to the nation's energy supplies. But dams also cause ecological destruction. And they have consequences for cultural and religious practices. As earlier mentioned, for instance, the Garhwal Himalayas have a plethora of regional gods (*devta*) and goddesses (*devi*). The rhythms of the mountains are tuned to the worship and propitiation of these devtas and devis. These entities are also quite fond of the Ganga and they demand regular cleansing baths in the river's flow. In the feared scenario of a Ganga-gone-dry, many worried that these rites would be difficult to maintain. A schoolteacher and local leader in Uttarkashi city spoke to these concerns after first stating the pro-development stance:

The people who are industrialists and bureaucrats, they all feel that power is important for us... for development... They are not ready to listen to this—they consider this a very silly argument: Where will we take a bath and where will we take the dholi [the devta's carriage] and all of that? They don't consider it important... the power is going to go all the way down to Trivandrum [South India] and so many other places... So they feel that, just for the local requirements of the devta having a bath and the beliefs of some people, we can't forgo the national cause. That is what they feel. But the people, I think, have their own local rights over the river. They have rights. I think one day they should take some shovels and go to these bloody dams.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Mahesh on July 20, 2009.

The schoolteacher's response adamantly defended people's rights to the Ganga in Uttarkashi District. He and many others like him also pointed to the precedence of dam decommissioning taking place in the world to save endangered fish and their habitats. "We are ready to do so much for the animal kingdom," the schoolteacher pointed out, "But who will hear the human cry, the cry of the people?"

**Figure 4. 3 A Devta's Carriage Being Ritually Washed in the Ganga**



Priya, a member of an ashram outside of Uttarkashi who was also a lead figure of Ganga Ahvaan, voiced similar critiques of the development ideology that was pushed by the project proponents. In an interview with her at the beginning of the movement in 2007, she talked of the collective efforts that villagers were undergoing to rethink development. Summarizing her personal stance, she said, "You cannot define the development of a society or a person by the amount of electricity that you can consume or something ridiculous like that." Development, in her opinion, needed to be defined by a range of social, cultural, religious, and technological indicators and cannot be reduced

to the proliferation of infrastructure projects. After reminding me of the destructive nature of dam building in the Himalayas, the minimal number of jobs created, and the potential loss of the vital tourism that fuels much of the regional economy,<sup>35</sup> she focused on the non-material costs of the projects: “And at any rate, this whole valley is the Ganga valley... What is the importance of this valley without the Ganga?” Because of the Ganga’s regional significance, Priya claimed that the “identity of the region” was stake. And the development rhetoric, she countered, was “just a sham” to influence villagers and Uttarkashi residents so that there would be less protests.<sup>36</sup>

The idea that the Ganga is linked with the identity of the region and the people of the region arose repeatedly in fieldwork. I explore this claim and its implications in the following chapters. What is important to note now is the way that objections to development reify the importance of preserving the integrity of the sacred landscape through which the Ganga flows. These arguments, I believe, are mounted in a defense of the figured worlds that uphold the sanctity and importance of place in the Himalayas. In speaking of place, I once more draw from Massey (1994) who describes place as a nexus of relations, a patterned logic and ethos of contingent connections rooted in a particular way, anchored in a given space and time. This notion of place is dynamic. Socially, place

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<sup>35</sup> Dam proponents sometimes argued that the projects could promote tourism. Priya found this claim preposterous. She recalled that in the 1970s and 1980s dam builders promised that people would come to see the Maneri lake (a small reservoir above the run-of-the-river project at Maneri) and that it would increase tourism. Priya countered: “People are coming here—the tourists, the pilgrims—because the Ganga is flowing. [But] The people are taking away the Ganga, they are building these small ponds and calling them tourist attractions, the ponds. I say, ‘Tell me one person—I will never fight again with anyone—find me one person from down [in the plains] who has come to see the Maneri lake. Just find me one person’ [laughs]... There is no development in this.”

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Priya on August 6, 2007 in Senj, Uttarkashi District.

continues to be important to human meaning-making wherever people engage with and experience a particular location in connection with their everyday lives (Escobar 2008). As important sites of knowledge and wisdom (Basso 1996), places are articulated within local-global networks of action and interaction (Dirlik 1998). And, importantly, place is a domain where figured worlds are formed and informed through interactions with the environment.

These figured or cultural worlds influence agency. The sacred places that constitute the geography of the Himalayas, for instance, amplify the significance of Hindu rites and cultural practices. This motivates people to come from all over the country and even the world to perform ceremonies at religiously significant locations in the mountains. Reflecting on the value that others place on the sacred geography of the Himalayas, residents of Uttarkashi often stated that they feel lucky to live in such a holy place. They believed that the observance of religious ritual was made stronger by their location in the Himalayas and their ability to interact daily with the Ganga's flow.

### **Daily Practice, the Ganga, and Uttarkashi**

Rites and prayers occur along the river's banks at most hours of the day but especially in the mornings and the evenings. The practices of worship that devotees enact are not necessarily prescribed by religious authorities. Although Brahmin (high caste) priests have standardized mantras (sacred chants) that they recite in Sanskrit at evening ceremonies such as the Ganga Arati, most people approach the river with less formalized prayer. The educated may recite the Gayatri mantra when ritually bathing in the river.

Others emphasize speaking what is in their hearts. Devotees often ask for help, guidance, and blessings from the river.

The people in Uttarkashi who told me about their daily routines would often cite that, upon waking, the first thing they do is join their palms in a gesture of reverence to the Ganga while bowing and saying a quick tribute to the Goddess in Hindi. Many Uttarkashi residents, and the women in particular, would even begin their day by physically interacting with the Ganga. They would either ceremonial wash their hands, face, and feet or they would immerse themselves in a full-body dip in river. In the observance of these early morning practices, people released their fears and worries by offering them to the Goddess Ganga and to Shiva, with whom the Ganga's flow is intertwined. As one woman put it, "I ask God<sup>37</sup> to take care of my family, to give us peace." When I asked the woman why she did this, she responded:

So that god can make me strong. There are a lot of worries. There are a lot of family problems. I do it [go to the Ganga] to ask for wisdom, to get wisdom. To ask for my family's protection... That's why [I go]."

For such respondents, the practice of interacting with the Ganga was very meaningful and soothing. One river devotee described the experience of bathing in the Ganga by saying that it makes the body feel light. "It feels like entering a new perception, a new consciousness... like one has joined with God. It is a joyful experience." And, the man added, the Ganga's waters are healing. Equating

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<sup>37</sup> The woman speaks to the Ganga when bathing in the morning and says the only mantra she knows: *om namah shivaya*. She was embarrassed to tell me this because it revealed her lack of education since she did not know of other mantras to recite. Instead of something more pertinent to the Ganga, therefore, she recites a common refrain in praise of Lord Shiva, the patron god of Uttarkashi and the one whose matted hair the Ganga flowed into when falling from the heavens.

them with medicine, he shared that bathing in the river takes away the chronic back pain he incurred after a near-death experience when a bus in which he was travelling fell into a ravine along the Ganga. He was miraculously ejected from the vehicle even though he was sitting in the back, away from the door. He and a few others landed on the mountainside while the majority of the passengers drowned inside the bus once it was submerged in the Ganga. The man credited the Goddess Ganga with saving him. And the healing he received daily when bathing in her waters further reinforced his connection to her.

Although some might understate these place-based practices of ritual and devotion on the river as prescriptive behavior or habit, such a stance overlooks the ways that interactions with the “environment” are related to its perception (Ingold 2000:9). Put in other words, people’s actions with the Ganga must be viewed within the figured worlds that uphold its importance as a divine entity imbued with purifying grace. In addition to sociocultural framings that help people understand the Ganga’s importance, the need to be in contact with the river/Goddess reflects people’s desire for cosmological balance—even if the order one seeks is tightly confined to wellbeing in personal and familial spheres. Accessing its waters is therefore about much more than religious duty or even spirituality. Contact with the water inserts one into a cosmic play in which a person can affect fortune and ward off tragedy. When one bathes at 4am in the dead of winter; in gushing waters known to sweep away devotees; or in dry summer months when one is forced to step around the filth and wastes of others, these actions represent an intention to win favor in a world where righteous action (*dharma*) is the ultimate guide. The Ganga, in other words, helps people navigate the uncertainties of life. And without the river’s

constant flow, some residents in Uttarkashi worried that they would be deprived of a meaningful entity and a vital tool that enables their epistemological and ontological grounding in the sacred geography of the Himalayas.<sup>38</sup>

### **Counter Arguments**

Some of the dam proponent would likely counter these claims. When I met with the Public Relations (PR) representative of the company building the dam, the National Thermal Power Company (NTPC), he dismissed the concerns of villagers, Uttarkashi residents, and social movement actors who worried that the dams would impact the sanctity of the Ganga and the region. Qualifying that he, too, is a religious man who ceremonially bathes in the river, he negated the localized change as insignificant. “Wherever the Ganga flows,” he argued, “she is holy.” And, being from Kolkatta (formerly Calcutta) where the river flows into the Bay of Bengal, he asserted that millions more go to visit the Ganga there compared to the thousands that journey up to its Himalayan reaches each year. Conceding that faith is an important issue, he offered his perspective on the river’s importance at each point along its flow:

Listen, I am from Calcutta. There is a place there, Ganga Saagar, where the Ganga meets the sea. It is very holy. Every year, millions of people go there to bathe. Many more people go there in one day than they go to Gaumukh all year. [Therefore] Faith is connected to every place [along the Ganga].

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<sup>38</sup> Pintchman (1994) makes a similar assertion. She writes: “The Goddess’s role as the dispeller of illusion who helps one achieve liberation (*moksha*) is indeed fundamental to her identity. Yet this role is essentially epistemological, for in such contexts the Goddess’s salvific power is related to her identity with spiritual knowledge (*vidya*) or her ability to grant or lead one to such knowledge” (7).

Thus saying, the dam representative declared that the hydroelectric projects in the Himalayas could never impact Hindu faith because the Ganga is holy at each and every point along its course. This position was contrary to dam opponents that emphasized the significance of the flow along the Ganga's originating tributary, the Bhagirathi Ganga. It was also dismissive of the framings on the importance of place in the sacred geography in the Himalayas. When I reminded him of these positions, he disregarded them as the thoughts of only a few people, the majority of whom he believed were not even from the mountains. Echoing the thoughts of the angry mob in Gangotri that opened this dissertation, he cautioned that such people come to the mountains with backing and money from non-governmental or right-wing religious organizations. You have to ask, he urged, why are these people are coming up here when they live near the most polluted stretches of the Ganga?

This question is the very same one that the speakers at the pro-dam rally posed in the introduction to this chapter. It is an important one. It leads us to a discussion of the Ganga's pan-Indian importance as well as the value that people hold on maintaining a last stretch of uninterrupted waters for devotees around the world to access. At times conservative Hindu politics influence the discussion. At others, environmental concerns are prominent. I turn to these discourses and debates in the next chapter to further illustrate the contention between distinct and overlapping figured worlds as they speak to the Ganga's condition and management in the Himalayas. The conclusion I offer in the end of the following chapter incorporates the figured worlds of chapters 4 and 5.

## Chapter 5. Contested Practices and Regional Actors

During the period of conflict over dams on the Ganga in Uttarkashi District, a number of people and groups from the Indian plains traveled up to the mountains to meet with villagers, organize rallies, and conduct public events that either promoted or opposed the hydroelectric projects. The ethnographic description in the beginning of chapter 4 describes a moment when a member of parliament for the Congress Party journeyed to Uttarkashi to publicly support the dams and the dam proponents. The better part of the “outsiders” (*bahar wale*) and “people from down” (*niche rehne wale*) that came up to the mountains, however, were opposed to the hydroelectric projects. Their actions in opposition to the dams were a subject of debate and controversy.

This chapter explores the efforts of people from outside the Himalayas to address the management of the Ganga in Uttarkashi District. It examines disagreements over the methods chosen to contest the dams, the degree to which the Hindu religious frame overshadowed ecological concerns, and the discourses of several urban-based actors engaged in the debate over development in the Himalayas.

Among the numerous people from the Indian plains that made an impact on the discussion about dams on the Ganga in Uttarkashi District was the aforementioned Dr. G. D. Agarwal. The retired professor traveled up to Uttarkashi and to the villages where the dams were under construction in 2006-2007 before beginning three fast-unto-death programs in 2008, 2009, and 2009. Dr. Agarwal, an engineer by training, asserted that he

undertook his actions based on purely religious grounds and without organizational affiliation. He did, however, have the support of several groups. The network of people that composed the Ganga Ahvaan, for instance, helped to coordinate and promote some of Dr. Agarwal's fasts. Several prominent Hindu religious figures and the heads of conservative Hindu groups such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (Universal Hindu Council or VHP)<sup>39</sup> also endorsed his actions and expressed solidarity. Even "secular Hindus" like Sunita Narain and Gandhian environmentalists such as Rajendra Singh and Radha Behn supported Dr. Agarwal's actions. The mixed allegiances produced speculation about the retired professor's motivations. He was at once portrayed as a righteous crusader of a just religious-environmental cause and at the same time a tool and proponent of Hindu nationalism who had no right to meddle in Himalayan resource management decisions.<sup>40</sup>

In the course of my fieldwork, people often pointed to Dr. Agarwal and the support he received from conservative Hindu groups to say that the dams were "just a political game". They additionally noted that Hindu politicians selectively used the rhetoric of saving the Ganga from dams in Uttarkashi District as a way to earn the favor of river devotees and to win votes for upcoming national elections. Although I acknowledge the political leverage that anti-dam rhetoric may have afforded politicians, the focus of this dissertation is on the meaning making practices that people enact about the transformations taking place along the upper stretch of the Ganga. My treatment of

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<sup>39</sup> Founded in 1964-1966, the VHP claims to promote and protect Hindu values and it is a group with extensive political influence in India. Gosling (2003), Guha (2008), and Smith (2003) describe the group's inception, objectives, and programming. See also: <http://vhp.org/>.

<sup>40</sup> The mixing of "right-wing" and environmental affiliations is addressed in an article by SMA Kazmi of the Tribune News Service from a September 2009 article: <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2009/20090917/dplus.htm#1>, accessed March 15, 2011.

these issues examines the everyday cultural politics of resource management rather than the politics with a capital “P” that includes the maneuverings of national political groups. Alley (2000), Guha (2007), Bhatt (2003), Cederlof and Sivaramakrishnan (2006), Kuruvachira (2006), and Sharma (2008), are good resources for those interested in the influence of Hindu nationalists on resource management decisions in India. My aim in this chapter, building on the content of chapter 4, is to show the figured worlds about the Ganga’s importance that are in dialogue and dispute.

In the following sections, I describe the motivations that Dr. Agarwal gave for his actions as well as the reception that these fasts-unto-death received in the mountains as well as in cities such as New Delhi. The debates about Dr. Agarwal’s fasting campaigns allow me to address the perspectives of environmentalists who critique his Hindu-based opposition to dams on the Ganga. It also affords the opportunity to examine the rebuttals made by other Hindu activists who perceive that the dams threaten both Himalayan ecologies and the wellbeing of the Goddess Ganga. I address these points of disagreements while concluding with a comparison of Uttarkashi-based perspectives presented in the preceding chapter.

### **Regional Dam Oppositions: G.D. Agarwal and the Politics of Fasting**

Dr. G.D. Agarwal began his first fast in Uttarkashi in 2008 from Manikarnika ghat, a religiously significant place along the Ganga. As I mentioned in chapter 2, this fast inspired counter protests. After a few days, Dr. Agarwal was transported to New Delhi where he continued his protest. He staged subsequent fasts in locations removed

from the Himalayas in the Indian plains. Dr. Agarwal was a controversial character because, among other reasons, he was positioned as an “outsider” to the mountains who’s fasts-unto-death resulted in concessions from the central government to stop the contested dams on the Ganga.

The retired professor Agarwal, as I previously noted, grounded his activism against hydroelectric projects in Uttarkashi District in concerns for faith, culture, and “Hindu tradition” rather than the scientific knowledge of his engineering profession. In his view, these non-material considerations were, and continue to be, primary. He considered the scientific and environmental factors, on the other hand, to be “meaningless auxiliaries” (2008: 6-9) that are limited in their ability to affect politics and government decisions. To protect the river and its Goddess Ganga, he argued that the flow from the glacial source at Gaumukh to the city of Uttarkashi, some 80 miles downstream, must be left untouched.

For G.D. Agarwal, the main issue was that the Ganga is no ordinary river and it cannot be treated as such. For this reason, he denounced the government officials, scientists, engineers, planners, economists and the “so-called educated” of India that have applied the same criteria and Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) to the Ganga that they would use for the management of any other river.<sup>41</sup> They have “never”, he argued, considered it necessary to explore and understand the basis of Indian faith and reverence for the Ganga. “Their real aim and intention,” he proposed, “is to insult, denounce and destroy all that is unique to India’s land, its culture, and its people, (who

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<sup>41</sup> Although Dr. Agarwal negated the need for standard environmental impact assessments for projects on the Bhagirathi Ganga, he also pointed out the inadequacies and inconsistencies of the EIAs conducted for the Loharing Pala and the Pala Maneri dams (2008, 13).

are) to be counted as second rate cousins of other nationalities of the world, far behind those of European origin.” To this, he added: “I wish to be forthright; to me, the effort to equate or consider Gangaji to any other river is an attack by the modern scientific/economic culture on traditional Indian culture, faith and ethos and (it) has to be fought at that level” (Agarwal 2008: 13).

The retired professor expressed similar sentiments at a “Ganga River Convening” (Ganga Sammelan) that took place in New Delhi during his second fast in January of 2009. Well into the second week of his hunger strike, Dr. G.D. Agarwal made a brief appearance to share his perspective on the issues. Frail but animated, he began by declaring that the Ganga is the soul of Indian culture and that those who do not believe in her powers are not (true) Indians. Reminding the participants of the river’s role as a cultural mother, he made clear divisions between those who defend her from dams and those that do not. “When Mother’s life is in danger,” he scolded, “we don’t think about *chapatti* (flat bread/food)... When she is in danger, then we are ready to give our lives... Those that are against us should not be tolerated and with cruelty we should destroy them.”<sup>42</sup> These words received applause from the assembly. People continued to emphasize the river’s cultural-religious significance and the need for its protection long after Dr. Agarwal returned to his fast. Tempering the polarizing rhetoric, however, participants such as the King (Maharaja) of Jodhpur urged the gathering to join forces with people from all faiths in order to save the Ganga. He recalled the unity that was needed in India’s struggle against British occupation during the colonial era. And the

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<sup>42</sup> Speech to the Ganga Sammelan at the Gandhi Smriti in New Delhi on January 28, 2009. Translation by Harsh Vardan and Georgina Drew.

Maharaja appealed to everyone to work together for a common cause: “We are all one. We are all Indian (*Hindustani*). And there is only one Ganga.”<sup>43</sup>

To clarify Dr. Agarwal’s position, I met up with him the following day at the grounds of the Hindu Mahasabha Bhawan<sup>44</sup> from where he was fasting. Navigating a compound replete with iconic Hindu imagery, I found him in a two-room unit made of cement on the side of the main building. He was tired and resting on the floor under woolen blankets so I waited until he had enough energy to talk before posing some questions. When I began to inquire about his motivations, however, more visitors entered the room. These were not the young university students that came the day before to rub his feet and update him with news. More mature in years, the guests included a current environmental science professor of IIT Kanpur, once a student of Dr. Agarwal’s, and a former chair of India’s largest petroleum company. Both came with their wives to wish the professor well and urge him to end his fast before his health was impaired. It was pertinent then, if not a little rude, when I asked the professor why he chose to fast on the basis of faith when he had the training, resources, and networks to fight the dams on environmental grounds.

Dr. Agarwal began by explaining the pressure on scientists and engineers to do the government’s bidding. Their freedom of speech is restricted, he said, and it is hard to go against the dominant agenda. The other problem, from his perspective, is that the masses are not “wise” enough to understand the issues and the appropriate action that is

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<sup>43</sup> Comments of the Jodhpur Maharaja to the *Ganga Sammelan* on January 29, 2009.

<sup>44</sup> The Hindu Mahasabha Bhawan (House of the Great Assembly of Hindus) in New Delhi is a space for the promotion of Hindu cultural heritage. It is also known as a site for the advancement of Hindu-influenced politics.

necessary. In the absence of mass protests, the retired professor took it upon himself to defend the river:

Now one point you raised was why I chose this method? Now here the question is that supposing one has a Lakh—one hundred thousand—people with him. [In that case] then even having a rally or a meeting or shouting, would work. But supposing there are only fifty people shouting or holding a rally, then particularly in a large country like ours, then it doesn't make any impact. Now if it is only fifty people, then probably they have to resort to something violent... But if one doesn't even have five men, then even that will not work... So I felt that there was absolutely no [other] option. And going back to our culture, it is stated that *tapasya*, or penance, can get you anything. In fact, *we believe that Gangaji is not an ordinary river* [my emphasis]. Gangaji was brought down from the heavens by the penance of one of our ancestors. Probably it was many of our ancestors. But particularly the one that succeeded [Bhagirath]... he did penance for all of his life until he succeeded. So I am going back to this method which is well accepted in our culture. And I have full faith that penance of this type will do two things: One, which may be unlikely, is intervention by the almighty or the universal energy. But there is a second aspect: that it may arouse the conscience of some of those people who feel the same way.<sup>45</sup>

The explanation is telling on numerous counts. To begin, it addresses the challenge of contesting policy in a multi-party democracy like India's. To force change, people power is often needed. In lieu of that, as Dr. Agarwal notes, some resort to violent tactics. In the impoverished but resource rich states of Bihar, Jharkhand, and Orissa, a growing Maoist or "Naxal" movement demonstrates the violent means that some enact to challenge government policies. For the peace-inclined, however, a main weapon is the "fast-unto-death" (*bhukh hartal*) method that was popularized by Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi during the pre and post independence periods (Gadgil & Guha 1992; Hardiman 2003). Fasting as a means of protest is frequently employed in the opposition to dam

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<sup>45</sup> Interview with Dr. G.D. Agarwal at the Hindu Mahasabha Bhawan on January 29, 2009.

projects such as the ones on the Narmada River. Medha Patkar and her colleagues in the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Movement to Save the Narmada River) renewed the tactic's prominence in the late twentieth century. In the Indian landscape of contemporary protest, "fast-unto-death" campaigns are now organized for environmental justice issues; to promote or contest the reservation (affirmative action) policies of regional and state agencies; and even for the advancement of some religiously conservative and pro-business movements.

Beyond an elucidation of tactics, what Dr. Agarwal's explanation drew upon is an important aspect of Hindu religious and cultural history: the story of King Bhagirath. By evoking Bhagirath, Dr. Agarwal made parallels between the penance of one ancestor—in that instance, deep meditation below the river's glacial source—and his own sacrifice in order to achieve a higher good: the continuity of the Ganga's flow for the benefit of humanity. Within such a historical and cultural context, Dr. Agarwal's actions found justification.<sup>46</sup> They were further supported by the Hindu belief in reincarnation which holds that death is a just a transformation of material form and not an annihilation of the spirit. When asked about death, Dr. Agarwal replied, "I think that I will not die. That is why I am not afraid of death." Smiling at one point, he even confessed to be looking forward to the next incarnation.

After thirty-eight days, the government ended Dr. Agarwal's second fast on February 20, 2009 with an assurance that the new dams on the Bhagirathi Ganga would be suspended. They also promised to appoint an Expert Level Committee to visit the

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<sup>46</sup> Sunderlal Bahuguna similarly framed his earlier fasts (in opposition to the Tehri dam) in cultural pretexts and religious duty. Calling upon the traditions of ancestors studying *atma gyan* (the inner self) through abstinence, he argued that fasting is a religious (*satvik*) method to solve complex social problems (Sharma 2009).

construction sites and conduct cost-benefit and cultural impact analyses on which basis final decisions would be taken to cancel or resume the projects. This was big news. It received press regionally and nationally. It also sparked counter-protests in Bhatwari, a center of dam construction, and in Uttarkashi. From the mountains to the plains, people were of many minds about Dr. Agarwal's fast and the government actions that it forced.

### **Is Fasting Undemocratic? Contested Practices of Dam Opposition**

Although fasting makes sense in a Gandhian or Hindu heritage perspective, it is very much a contested practice. When I spoke with a leader of a large NGO in Uttarkashi that works on capacity building for women's groups, he expressed cynicism with the social movement processes and the government response. At the time of our interview, only two days had passed since the dam construction was halted. Despite the government's apparent capitulation, the NGO worker was skeptical of the outcome. Yes, he affirmed, the projects are suspended. Echoing an often-quoted sentiment, he tempered this with a caution that the government had already spent too much money on the dams for the decision to hold. Within fifteen days, he promised, the work will resume. "Look at (the history of) Tehri dam," he offered. "They stopped Tehri ten times. Ten times they started it again..." This skepticism was validated within a week when construction on the Loharinag Pala project resumed. It took a few key court decisions for the work to stop completely in May of 2009.

Even though the NGO worker was critical of large hydroelectric projects, he had little praise for Dr. Agarwal. There is no doubt that the dams are destructive, he argued, "but this *bhukh hartal* method isn't correct. It is undemocratic." Rather than seeing it as a

viable method to oppose projects of dubious worth, he saw it as a flawed strategy that forces the desire of the few onto the many. He cited the history of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (and their inability to stop the dams on that river) to support his opinion that fasting does not have long-term policy impacts. Even after listing the legacy of the Tehri dam—up to 200 villages lost, 100,000 people displaced, power generation targets unmet, and a “culture vanished”—he concluded of the activists that, “They can’t stop the dams.”<sup>47</sup> In the inevitability of such projects, the NGO worker advised that one’s efforts could be better spent on fostering resilience instead of opposing development.

Others similarly pushed back on the tactics used by the retired professor. A prominent Swami (a Hindu religious leader) in Uttarkashi city acknowledged that starvation for spiritual purposes has an important role in Hindu religious practice. But, contrary to the idea that fasting unto death is a form of non-violence (ahimsa), he argued that the tactic constitutes violence when it is used to affect political change. This is because it exacts responsibility on others for the bodily harm that can occur. What is more, he cautioned, fasts that are not taken in the spirit of self-restraint and betterment can lead to hypocrisy, something that even Mohandas Gandhi confronted in some of his “experiments with truth” (1927: 176).

Speaking of the fasts, Dr. Harshwanti Bisht, a professor of the Government Postgraduate College in Uttarkashi, critiqued Dr. Agarwal’s actions as shortsighted. In her opinion, the activists that come to protest in the mountains from “down below” are “the least bothered” about the lives and livelihoods of people living along the river. Rather, she argued, they come imposing their own ideas about Hindu culture,

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<sup>47</sup> Interview with a program director of an NGO in Uttarkashi on February 21, 2009.

spiritualism, and purity in relation to Mother Ganga. Pointing out Dr. Agarwal's advanced years—he was over seventy at the time of his fasts—she suggested that the professor spoke against electricity production and development in the mountains after years of urban living at a prestigious university in the industrial section of Uttar Pradesh. “After enjoying such things all one's life, why is he denying them to the mountain youth?” she asked. “We have to think about the people who are living in this area. Unless we consider these people, it won't be a very just, very sincere way to do conservation for Gangaji.”<sup>48</sup> In her recollection of development practice and environmental protest in the Himalayas, the professor's fasts were yet another example of the deep disconnect between the wants of the plains and mountain residents, the latter of which are desirous and deserving of developmental gains.

### **A River is Many Things: The Environmental and Secular Hindu Perspective**

Beyond the politics of fasting, the explicitly religious grounds upon which activists like G.D. Agarwal fight were also a point of disagreement. Although a few NGO leaders upheld the emphasis on faith, numerous environmentalists and institutional representatives criticized the ‘Hinduization’ of the fight over the Bhagirathi Ganga. From such perspectives and figured worlds—often situated in urban centers like New Delhi—the religious aspects of concern are only one of the many issues that need to be addressed. More pressing, in frequent environmentalist formulations, are the ecological and livelihood implications of dam building in sensitive areas like the Himalayas.

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<sup>48</sup> Interview with Dr. Harshwanti Bisht in Uttarkashi on October 26, 2009.

For people like Himanshu Thakkur of the South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers, and People (SNADRP), the emphasis on faith limits the scope of anti-dam protest. In his view, the social and environmental impacts demand more attention. While he recognizes the river's significance for Himalayan residents and the larger Hindu 'community', he notes that many rivers in India are culturally and religiously important. Speaking of a river in South India, he pointed out that the Kaveri is interchangeably called the Ganga and it is revered as such even though the Ganga does not connect with southern waterways. This is true for other rivers and it speaks to the pan-Indian symbolism of not just the Ganga but of water as a divine, life-giving entity. The Ganga's transmutability demonstrates the extent to which all rivers in India are objects of reverence that demand culturally and environmentally sensitive solutions. Following this logic, it is shortsighted to delimit a section of the river's length for preservation. Whereas Dr. Agarwal's fast sought to maintain the uninterrupted flow of the Bhagirathi Ganga from Gaumukh to Uttarkashi, Himanshu and others believe that whatever is good for a particular stretch of the river is applicable to the management of the entire river and even other waterways. Explains Himanshu, "the way the Ganga is treated should be the same for all rivers."<sup>49</sup>

Cautioning that "a river is many things", Dr. Ramaswamy Iyer—one of India's most prominent experts on water resource management—noted from his office at the Centre for Policy Research in New Delhi that even as Indian rivers are equated with Gods and Goddesses, one cannot forget that they supply water needed for human prosperity and civilization. While respecting the sacred dimensions for rivers such as the Ganga and the Kaveri—which, in addition to being called Ganga, is similarly revered as a mother—

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<sup>49</sup> Interview with Himanshu Thakkur at the New Delhi office of the South Asian Network on Dams, Rivers, and People (SANDRP) on November 18, 2009.

he argued (prior to the cancelation of the contested dams) that the religious frames are not likely to influence policy, particularly in light of India's desire for accelerated economic growth and need for ever-greater sources of energy. Although he conceded that sacred places such as temples should not be interfered with, he countered that activists such as Dr. Agarwal are not talking about the submergence of sacred places. Rather, they are contesting the interruption of flow in a holy Hindu river. "Now," cautioned Dr. Iyer, "I don't know how far that (argument) can be pushed because all of human life is an interference with nature." Besides, he added, we call the Ganga sacred but we pollute it. These comments illustrated a figured world that recognizes the significance of religious reverence for rivers but prioritizes resource use and management concerns.

For Dr. Iyer, the most prominent reasons to oppose dams along rivers like the Bhagirathi Ganga are the environmental ones. By manipulating the river's flow, the problem of silt settlements increase. Beyond threatening the life span of reservoir dams such as the one at Tehri, downstream populations are deprived of the vital silts that have enhanced soil fertility in the plains for millennia. Water flows, once redirected to tunnels and trapped in reservoirs, further reduce the prospects for agriculture and river-dependent livelihoods such as boating and fishing. In addition to the ecological damage, he reminded me, biodiversity is impaired. Worse yet are the thousands of human lives that are disrupted due to displacement and resettlement. For these reasons he cautioned, "one should be very very careful about building these huge projects." To this, he added a disclaimer that he is not "anti-development":

I am not saying that no dam should ever be built. I don't take an extreme position on this; some people do. All I am saying is, 'For heaven sake, be very careful about it. Let it not be your first choice.' What it has been so far is our first choice. We think of development (and) we want to build dams. I would say, do everything else that you can. If there are *no* options, or if this is the very best of all options, then you can go in for it... Be mindful of the consequences. Take people into confidence, consult them. But try and avoid it if you can. This is my approach to big dams. Whether on the Ganga or anywhere else.<sup>50</sup>

For water experts like Dr. Iyer, there are numerous consequences with dam building that have to be factored into policy making. While the cultural and religious concerns have their place, they are only one aspect among many to consider. This pertains to the management of the sacred Ganga and to any other river. Noting a key point from his numerous publications, he argued that the larger problem is the mentality with which such projects are enacted; they aim to meet increasing demands that can never be met (Iyer 2003: 132-135). Rather than talking about particular projects and shortfalls in expected water and energy supply, he argued that state should focus on increasing efficiency and managing unrealistic demands.

Other environmentalists echo the sentiments that Iyer expressed. Calling herself a "secular Hindu", the renowned environmental activist, Sunita Narain said of the controversy that, "There is no question that the Ganga is a special river but all rivers are endangered." Similarly noting that the religious significance of the Ganga has not prevented Hindus from throwing trash in the river, she positioned the religious concerns as only one of the many special interests to be considered in the river's management. If one has to make an exception for the Ganga and all that it represents she argued with foresight that it would be preferable to create an "eco region" of the area through which it

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<sup>50</sup> Interview with Dr. Ramaswamy Iyer on November 19, 2009.

runs. Otherwise, she cautioned, integrity is lost in policy formation. When we met in 2009 at her New Delhi office at the Centre for Science and Environment—a lead institution that exposes environmental injustice and promotes responsible government policies—she further asserted that the best course of action would be to focus on the management of entire water basins rather than on particular segments of select rivers. This would entail what she called a “cumulative impact assessment” for the many projects that line India’s rivers. Such measures would combat the shortsighted emphasis on the clearance of individual projects that do not take into account whole river systems.

Although Sunita Narain focused on holistic river management, she did see the importance of individual actions, such as the ones taken by G.D. Agarwal, to pressure the government. A member of the Ganga River Basin Authority (GRBA), she noted that before his fasts the GRBA’s emphasis was on pollution control. Ever since Dr. Agarwal raised the issue that one has to have flowing water to tackle pollution, the dams have been taken under consideration. This, she noted, put the government in a “tight spot” because addressing water requirements compromised the development agenda. As for the critique of Dr. Agarwal’s tactics, she found them irrelevant. “There is always conflict within movements,” she explained. “We are a struggling society. The question is: within all the strife, is the message getting lost?”<sup>51</sup>

### **Ganga Ahvaan Activists Respond to the Environmentalist Critiques**

Activists driven by an urge to protect Indian cultural heritage and the integrity of the Ganga are well informed of the secular and environmental critiques of their faith-

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<sup>51</sup> Conversation with Sunita Narain in New Delhi on May 7, 2010.

based stance. While many understand the environmental issues, they choose to place emphasis in the river's divine qualities to highlight the importance of cultural, religious, and spiritual practices linked with the Ganga. When asked about the disagreements over the emphasis on religion in the dam oppositions, a main leader of the Ganga Ahvaan, based out of New Delhi, quickly summarized the predicament when I interviewed him at the house of another activist in Uttarkashi. "They are environmentalists," he said in a moment of rest between meetings with local officials and dam opponents. "They see everything from the perspective of the environment. We see that, too, but we go beyond that." Sipping on the sweet milk tea that our hosts offered, he suggested that a more appropriate frame would be a "holistic humanism" that includes the long tradition of reverence for rivers, trees, and rocks that extend back to holy Hindu texts such as the Vedas. Contrasting the views of Ganga Ahvaan with those of the secularly inclined, he reasoned that development proponents and the environmentalists see a separation between nature and themselves. Holistic humanism, on the other hand, considers humans to be intimately connected to nature. In this perspective, God is recognized as residing within all living and inanimate entities.

A PhD student in nanoscience at the acclaimed Jawaharlal Nehru University, the activist went on to explain the science behind his position. "What, after all, is the atom?" he prodded. "'A' means 'not' and 'tom' means 'dividable'. So the atom is that which is indivisible." But, he added, we have divided the atom and found that it contains neutrons, protons, and other elements. Despite these feats, we know that something else is there, something that we can't pinpoint. "That," he pronounced, "is consciousness... This consciousness is everywhere—in these plastic chairs and the floor beneath us." Within

the layers of consciousness, he offered Ganga as a symbol—a famous symbol about which people all over the world know—of Indian “traditions” for honoring the intertwining of nature and human existence. Given the river’s paramount symbolism he concluded that, “this (river) should not be damaged; it is our cultural heritage. We can compromise on other rivers *but there is no compromise for the Ganga* [original emphasis].” Besides, he added, they can make less than one percent of the nation’s power with all the dams on the Bhagirathi Ganga. Pointing to a stack of papers in his lap, he repeated, “Less than one percent—I have all the files here... We don’t believe that the Ganga should be sacrificed for something so little.”<sup>52</sup>

Similarly noting the modest energy production potential of the dams, another lead activist of Ganga Ahvaan—the aforementioned Priya who is a female *sadhak* or spiritual aspirant from an ashram near Uttarkashi—pointed out that there are alternatives to energy production. These include solar, wind, and thermal technologies. But, she cautioned, “there is no alternative for the Ganga.” Once the dams are completed, the river’s flow will be redirected into long tunnels, leaving little water left to pass through the valleys. In her estimation, this would change its temperature, deprive oxygen to the beneficial organisms in the water, and destroy the river’s ability to self-purify by interrupting the interaction with rocks, minerals, and soil that make the waters dynamic. Noting the deterioration of water quality in the Tehri reservoir she argued that it was vital to preserve the upper segments of the river. Otherwise, if the water quality declines near the source, then no water from the Ganga (*ganga jal*) would remain.”<sup>53</sup> In her opinion, this

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<sup>52</sup> Interview with Himant in Uttarkashi on November 24, 2009.

<sup>53</sup> Conversation with Priya in Senj on July 11, 2008.

would impair the continuity of cultural, religious, and spiritual practices that depend on accessing the river's water.

A third organizer of the Ganga Ahvaan movement to save the Bhagirathi Ganga summarized the feelings of some dam opponents when she exclaimed that losing the river “is a threat to our existence.” Emphasizing the river's paramount importance in rituals, validated by the presence of bottles of *ganga jal* in Hindu homes throughout the world, she said of the water that, “we just can't think of being without it.” The woman, who runs a successful business that tests water quality and checks compliance with environmental standards, was adamant that the cultural and religious concerns of the river's loss cannot be understated. Speaking from her home in Jodhpur, Rajasthan—a desert state far removed from the flow of the Ganga in Uttarkashi—she lamented that the scientists of India are misguided. “In the name of secularism,” she explained, “they are saying, ‘Oh, we don't want to promote Hinduism’... But (being) secular doesn't mean that you go away from your roots.” After all, she reasoned, the river is something that people have worshipped throughout the ages. With passion she beseeched that the dams be canceled:

They are playing with the sentiments of people... Scientists, the so-called scientists talk of development, they talk of prosperity. But what type of development is this? Where are we going to? Do they need so much electricity to light the malls in the big cities? The whole night, these malls are running. Instead of wasting so much energy, if they just save energy and if they can manage energy properly, I think they will produce more than what these dams are going to produce. No sensible person would like to go for this type of an option.... to sacrifice a river like [the] Ganga... They are attacking right at our soul. A physical abuse is tolerable but attacking at the soul is something beyond tolerance.<sup>54</sup>

The above utterances point once more to the high stakes that people perceive in dam building along the Ganga. And, as Meeta points out, much of the electricity created

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<sup>54</sup> Interview with Meeta in Jodhpur, Rajasthan on November 10, 2009.

is at any rate wasted due to inefficient use. In her view, the bright, air conditioned malls that cater to the economically affluent are a symbol of that waste. The “all night” use of energy to fuel these malls, Meeta argued, is not worth sacrificing an irreplaceable entity like the Ganga. Given the Ganga’s paramount importance, she reasoned that the failure to protect the river and the sentiments of its devotees is a sign of the rampant materialism that has colluded with corruption to erode the very fabric of society.

### **Figured Worlds in Dialogue**

Given the varied perspectives, what is to be made of the conflict over the river’s management and the emphasis on faith in the comments of activists? These discourses, I argue, demonstrate the contested meanings that are associated with the Ganga and the dams that were planned for development along the river’s course. They also challenge the ‘Hinduized’ and ‘secular’ framings that influence ideas about how the river should be managed. My engagement shows the extent to which the discourses, and the figured worlds with which they are associated, are in conversation and debate with one another.

A review of the various stances from this chapter and the previous one reinforces the point. For many dam opponents living on the Ganga’s Himalayan stretch, the focus is often placed on the cosmological significance of the river’s flow in the sacred geography of the mountains. Linked with this is an emphasis on daily practice. Proponents of development, for their part, deny that the alternation and manipulation of the river’s course will affect the practices of devotion and the faith that people feel for the river.

From the comments of urban environmentalists and NGO leaders, we see a desire to focus on known variables, the ones that can be calculated and quantified. These

include concerns about water quality, silt management, biodiversity, displacement, and human livelihood challenges. In their assessments, these factors were more likely to influence policy and promote a more ecologically sound approach to the river's management. In the environmentalist view, the religious concerns were "just" one factor among many. And the Ganga, they argued, is not more important than other rivers.

The responses of urban Hindu activists pit secularism (or attempts at promoting a secular state) against Hindu cultural and religious concerns. From their perspective, the environmental issues were pertinent, even pressing, but they were not paramount. For them, the ecosystem concerns were usurped by the non-material religious hazards that they believed the projects posed. As a profound symbol of humankind's ability to revere and connect with the natural world, they perceived the river's flow to be deserving of exception in a landscape where dam building is a popular option for energy production.

Regardless of geographical location, social standing, or religious predilection, most respondents acknowledged the "need" for development. While many affirmed its importance, some critiqued the technocratic means by which energy is produced in ecologically sensitive and culturally significant areas. Others argued that modestly sized dams are acceptable under certain circumstances and especially on rivers other than the Ganga. For the Hindu devotees of the river, these projects were evaluated not merely on energy produced but on the extent to which they allow for humankind's ability to access and connect with an agentive nature that adds meaning to daily life and is capable of elevating consciousness.

If there was indeed a contest between figured worlds, it was the religious-cultural framings of the river that, combined with social movement activity, proved to have the

biggest influence on policy. Because of the contested meanings and interpretations of hydroelectric development on the Ganga, the Indian government was forced to reevaluate their stance. After extensive pressure from people such as G.D. Agarwal and activists working within networks from the urban areas to the Himalayas, the government ultimately revoked their support of the projects. In a letter to these activists, the Finance Minister of India, Mr. Pranab Mukherjee, and the Minister of Environment and Forests, Shri Jairam Ramesh, acknowledged the Ganga's "special features" and its "unique status... in our culture and our daily lives" when they announced the decision to cancel the three contested dams. Their statement affirmed, moreover, that the Ganga is the "very foundation" and "core" of Indian civilization. And they made the following concession: "Our Government is very conscious of the faith that crores [tens of millions] of our countrymen and women have in this most holy of rivers and it is in keeping with this faith that these decisions... have been taken" (Mukherjee 2010).

The cancelation of the dams was a huge success for the people that opposed them. On the other hand, the government decision also drew strong criticism from those that felt that the officials erred by favoring religious sentiments in a nation that otherwise praises secularity and aspires to accelerate economic growth at all costs. The criticisms are parallel to those waged by the critics of the Tehri dam opponents, outlined in Chapter 2. Instead of repeating that stance, I next turn to the practices of faith, devotion, and activism in the Himalayas that contributed to the government's decision. This helps to further explain the regional motivations for opposing dams on the Ganga. Since women were an important part of movements, I focus on their involvement. In so doing, I explain

the particular concerns that they expressed, the challenges that they confronted, and the activist precedents upon which their efforts built.

My discussion in the following chapters demonstrates that the concerns of mountain residents were for the continuity of cultural-religious practices as well as livelihood preoccupations. The linking of these issues is important and it affirms a main assertion in this dissertation that the conflict over the Ganga was inextricably linked with cultural, religious, and environmental concerns. Despite the efforts of some urban activists (such as G.D. Agarwal) that framed their opposition to dams on the Ganga on purely religious grounds, this focus on religion alone was often unpopular with mountain residents. I touch upon the reasons for this when I share some histories of activism in the Garhwal Himalayas. I also address the enduring struggles and ongoing contested practices that mountain residents now face after the cancelation of dams on the Bhagirathi Ganga in chapter 9.

## **Chapter 6. Defending the Ganga: Social Movements and the Role of Women**

In the last two chapters, I've shown how a number of people are making meanings about the implications of dams on the Bhagirathi Ganga. For this, I used a dialogic approach to present different views and voices that are in conflict over the river's management. I endeavored to contextualize issues in the debate as embedded in contention between distinct and overlapping figured worlds. The discussion so far has established the stakes involved in hydroelectric development on the river as described by mountain residents and people living in urban areas like New Delhi.

In this chapter, I hone in on the divergent ways of approaching and expressing faith in, and concern for, the Ganga as they vary among movement participants in Uttarkashi city and its environs. This leads me into a discussion of the gendered dimensions of resource use, human-nature relationships, and activism. It also allows me to explore the particular aspects of connection to the river that motivated women to participate in movements. Although women's movement involvement was often framed within ideas of righteous action, or *dharma*, I argue that their participation was also influenced by historically grounded practices of interaction with, and devotion to, the Ganga. These practices help give meaning to women's lives. As I show in chapter 7, a product of some women's efforts to address the Ganga's management is a transformation of their self-understandings.

This chapter begins with two moments of exchange among movement participants in Uttarkashi that I documented during my fieldwork. Unlike the introductions to chapters 1,4, and 7, I do not set aside the description of these moments in italics. I present the following experiences as a discussion rather than as an analysis-neutral description in order to share the process through which I learned of movement histories and the challenges that some participants, such as Sita, struggled to overcome. My particular aim in sharing two moments—one at meeting of the Clean the Ganga Movement and the other at a meeting with Uttarkashi’s District Magistrate—is to demonstrate how movement participants were in dialogue with one another and the ways that women’s discourses are seemingly undervalued as compared to the utterances of men. This allows me to pose a question: If women have to fight to be heard in the movements, why do they persist? The answer, as I earlier stated, is grounded in contemporary history. I explore movement trajectories in the Garhwal Himalayas in the latter part of this chapter while drawing upon feminist political ecology to explain the influence that the division of labor and women’s daily practices have on their participation in movement processes.

### **Movement Actors in Uttarkashi: Engagements and Motivations**

In April of 2009, a group of Uttarkashi residents, most of whom I recognized from their involvement in Ganga Ahvaan, gathered under the auspices of the “Clean the Ganga Movement” (Ganga Safai Abhiyan) to plan the trip to Gangotri that I described in the opening of this dissertation. For the organizing meeting, we convened in a recently constructed room on the rooftop of a mechanic shop that belonged to a very vocal environmentalist. The meeting helped me to better understand the connections between

the contemporary movements on the Ganga and their relationship to prior movements in the region. I describe my experience at the meeting in order to share these linkages along with the motivations that movement participants expressed and the challenges that the women confronted in their attempts to earn equal inclusion in movement processes.

The meeting in mid-April of 2009 was supposed to begin at noon. Many people arrived late. As we waited for people to trickle in, Nirmala and a few other women who had come on time told me a bit about the Clean the Ganga Movement. They shared with pride that they had over two decades of experience picking up trash along the Ganga in Uttarkashi. Much of their annual work took place in the weeks before the auspicious occasion of Makar Sankranti that happens every year in the middle of January. For the people that live along the river, this day—often occurring on the 14<sup>th</sup> of the month—is the most important day of the year to bathe in the Ganga. Even though it takes place in the dead of winter, people get up at 4am for a numbing full-body dip in the river before the sun rises. The education and cleaning campaigns were first initiated to honor this event and to make the act of bathing in the Ganga more enjoyable for river devotees. As Nirmala related this history, she also recalled that a number of the participants in the Clean the Ganga Movement had been involved in anti-liquor and anti-meat campaigns before they started cleaning the river. Movements against alcohol consumption were especially prominent in the 1980s and some of the campaigns in the Himalayas were particularly successful (Pathak 1984, 1998).

When I tried to get a clear timeframe for these activities from the women present, I realized that the dates blurred for many of the participants. They argued amiably over their mixed chronologies. And they remembered their actions fondly as we looked over

photos of past events that lay on a table in the middle of the room. Many of the images showed people grinning self-consciously at the camera as they picked up trash from the riverbank in Uttarkashi city. Others showed modest to large gatherings at what appeared to be public meetings.

Nirmala was the one who seemed most fond of the images. She rifled through the photos and detailed her involvement in each event. In a few of the pictures, she sat with other women from Uttarkashi. The women wore sweaters over their saris<sup>55</sup> and on top of these layers they displayed the thick-beaded necklace called a *mangal sutra* that denotes the woman's married status. They all had their hair parted and tied back in braids with a decorative dot (*bindi*) on the third eye region on their foreheads. In some of the photos, women such as Sita and Nirmala were speaking at a podium in front of a crowd. In the majority of the images, however, they sat in the audience as men spoke. When Nirmala saw a photo of herself handling litter on the riverbank, she laughed and showed it to the people around her. They chuckled at the scene.

Many of the photos featured women receiving or wearing ribbons that they pinned to their sweaters and saris. These ribbons had round pins at the top and two large streamers sticking out the bottom. They reminded me of the award ribbons that American students get for winning a science fair. When I asked about these items, Nirmala commented that they were given out to those who were active in the campaigns. They weren't quite awards but they were symbols of recognition for their hard work. Nirmala

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<sup>55</sup> A sari is a 3.5-meter cloth that women in South Asia wrap around their bodies. It is the only dress that most householding women can wear in places like Uttarkashi. Unmarried women can wear the long tunic and baggy pants of the *salvar kameez*. Or, increasingly, they can wear jeans and t-shirts. But they are expected to trade in these garments for the sari after they are married.

proudly commented that she kept all of her ribbons. And, she added, she had every newspaper clipping about their events that had ever been printed. These images were very important to her. And, noting the camera in my hand, she extracted a promise from me that I print and return each photo I took of their campaigns.

Our conversation was cut off when the male participants arrived around two in the afternoon. There were six or so men compared to about twelve women.<sup>56</sup> The three middle-aged men sat on a sofa against the wall. The younger men sat beside the sofa. The women spread out in a circle around this central piece of furniture, sitting on the floor. They made my research assistant and I sit in plastic chairs next to the sofa and elevated from the rest of the women. This seating was awkward for me. But it was meant to express the group's respect for me, the foreigner who had come to study their work. The meeting's organizer, a male by the name of Shankar, also wanted my audio recorder and I to be closer to him so that I could document his comments.

The introduction to the meeting was long. It was mostly for my benefit since everyone else in the room knew the details he shared. But Shankar's mini-speech was also revealing. He, like most of the other people in the room, was a first-generation resident of Uttarkashi. Whereas many of the women in the campaigns had moved to Uttarkashi after marriage (following the careers of their husbands), Shankar arrived alone in 1982 and of his own accord. By that time, a number of new roads made travel up to the region convenient from places at the base of the mountains such as Rishikesh (the town from which he hailed). Although there were likely economic motivations for his move, Shankar stressed the location's religious importance. "This is the Kashi area (*chhetre*),"

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<sup>56</sup> I did not take an exact count at the time.

he stated before elaborating on the prominent events that had taken place in Uttarkashi over the centuries. For instance, he itemized, Parsu Ram (from the Hindu epic the Ramayana) did penance (*tapasya*) here. Lord Shiva once fought demons in Uttarkashi and his weapon (a trident or *trishul*) is on display in the Shiv Vishwanath Mandir. Each year because of Uttarkashi's importance, he added, people come from all around the region to do a five-mile circumambulation of the main religious sites.<sup>57</sup>

In light of Uttarkashi's significance, Shankar continued, he and others have been working to protect the historic city since the late 1980s. Their efforts began, he said, with planting trees. They added thousands of trees to the hillsides above and around Uttarkashi. And they didn't plant the rampantly proliferating pine trees that one sees all over the mountains.<sup>58</sup> Their plantations included trees such as cedar, oak, and, in moderation, eucalyptus. These forestation measures overlapped with the river cleaning events. There are many organizations involved in these efforts, he noted. No one has

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<sup>57</sup> This comment is in reference to events such as the *varuni yatra*. It usually takes place in the winter month of March. The religious pilgrimage entails waking up around 4am to dip in the Ganga. Following this, one begins a long walk up the Varunavrat mountain that leads high above the flow of the Bhagirathi Ganga. The somewhat arduous trek, which I did with thousands of river devotees in March of 2009, meanders through many hillside villages and involves pouring water from the Ganga (*ganga jal*) in each temple to Lord Shiva that one finds along the way. The journey winds back down to the riverbed and culminates at a point where a tributary by the name of Assi Ganga meets the Bhagirathi Ganga upstream from Uttarkashi. Pilgrims often undertake this journey with a wish in their hearts. They believe that the effort helps them accumulate merit.

<sup>58</sup> Pine trees are a legacy of the British colonial era that post-independent India has continued to plant for their fast-growing properties and for the commercial prospects of pine resin (Guha 1989; Agrawal 2005). The needles that fall from these trees, however, cover the ground and make it difficult for other plants to grow. This reduces biodiversity. To counter this, cattle herders are known for lighting fires to remove pine needles from the forest floor. This, they believe, will allow for the quick growth of grass. Some, I was told, also think that the smoke from the fires creates clouds that will generate rain in periods of drought. The result is that, often in the driest months of the year, the mountains are covered in forest fires and a thick haze.

received any money for their involvement. Rather, he insisted, everyone chips in what they can—ten to twenty rupees (\$.20-.40) per month—to support the programming. Why? Because, he answered, Uttarkashi is at the center of the region’s sacred geography. Propelled by their faith and religious emotion (*bhavana*), devotees of Ganga and Shiva come from all over the world to worship here. And their devotion will be challenged by the degradation, “Unless,” he cautioned, “we keep the Ganga pure (*swacch*) and the environment pure (*swacch*).” Shankar elaborated on the dangers of inaction:

When people come here and see that there is a dead goat and dead chickens hanging about, then you can imagine what people might feel... And when you enter [Uttarkashi], you can see taverns and alcohol shops. So the person that comes with great faith will see this... He will see that blood from the butcher shops goes into the Ganga and then finds its way to the Shiv Vishwanath Mandir [when people offer *ganga jal* to the God]... Seeing this, his faith will be broken. We sought to correct this situation and make the environment pure.

In this work, Shankar acknowledged that ten to fifteen women from Uttarkashi have been key players. When saying this, he pointed to two women present—Sita and Nirmala—saying that they have been some of the most devoted participants. Because of their collective work, he proclaimed proudly, the butcher shops near the river were closed. Based on this early success, the group had decided to clean the Ganga in the days before Makar Sankranti. After all, the village women come to Uttarkashi on that day, he reminded us, and they bathe at Manikarnika ghat to purify themselves.

For the cleaning campaigns to be successful, however, people had to be united: “I requested everyone to join... Our faith in Ganga is the same, why don’t we work together? [It is important to do so] Because Ganga is a Mother for everyone. And this is a religious site.” The call urged collective action around an object (or, depending on the perspective, an agent) of common interest and it was meant to encourage people to see

past the minutiae of movement politics. By urging people to join the efforts because of their devotion to the Ganga, people such as Shankar were emphasizing their common faith and identity as Hindus to motivate movement involvement. This echoed the tactics of other Indian social movements that mobilize around shared identities to address issues of concern (Rangan 2000: 159; Mitra 1992).

When Shankar commented that they all needed to do this work, “without concern for politics,” everyone in the room agreed. The mention of politics, however, got people talking about the dams being constructed along the Bhagirathi Ganga. At that point, many jumped into the conversation:

Deepak: They shouldn't do this [build the dams]... People come here from all over the world like our sister Gina [Georgina]. Everyone is worried about the Ganga.

Nirmala: [With all those dams] the Ganga will be lost in the tunnels. Then who will come here? There will be no one in the hotels. Where will people get their daily bread (roz ki roTi)?

Sita: We want our entire Ganga. We don't want part of it!

Shankar tried to reign in the flurry of grievances that these sentiments ignited. In that effort, he steered people towards planning the upcoming trip to Gangotri that they would take a few days later. With a mentality that would later anger the residents of that holy pilgrimage site he proclaimed, “We will go there and educate all the devotees. We will make them aware that Gangaji is theirs (*apni*) and that they should save her.”

This comment was followed by a strategizing session led by the men. The women tried to interject suggestions. But their comments were often ignored and, at times, they literally had to shout to be heard. Their voices sounded aggressive. I noted, however, that their loud tones were effective in gaining attention. The women who were unwilling to

shout, by contrast, were forced to let their moderately toned comments fall on deaf ears. Only in a few instances were the more self-assured women able to demand that the group listen to these soft-spoken utterances. When they achieved this, however, it was often to the gentler woman's dismay. One woman looked deeply embarrassed after someone by her side succeeded in getting everyone's attention for her. And when she repeated her idea, her head was down and the comment was barely audible.

Even though Shankar had acknowledged Sita and Nirmala as important participants in the movement, even these two women had to shout to make their comments heard. They were more successful than the other women. But they had an especially difficult time getting the group's attention when they made several attempts to share a song they'd been working on. They wanted to sing it at the next big event. Shankar told them they could save it for later but they persisted. With they extracted his reluctant permission, they broke into an elaborate song that sang the Ganga's praises. The tune—which I feature in the beginning of Chapter 7—emphasized the river's creation story, its saving grace, and its role in the sacred Himalayas. At times, the women faltered in their recollection of the lyrics. Each time, Shankar cut in to prematurely thank them in the hopes that they would stop singing. They continued, determined to share the melody that they had composed. After a few minutes, he and the other men lost interest. They began to make phone calls on their cell phones as the women sang in front of them. When the singing made their conversations hard to follow, the men shouted over the noise. They looked relieved when the song was finished. But they praised it all the same.

### **What Motivates Women's Activism?**

It was difficult to identify the many reasons why women in Uttarkashi were involved in the organizing meetings and the campaigns that I just described. To understand their motivations, I conducted dozens of semi-structured interviews with women involved in the river cleaning and dam opposition campaigns. I also recorded ten of the life histories of women active in the movements. These interviews and personal stories I compared with the similarly extensive conversations, interviews, and life histories that I documented of the men involved in the campaigns. Based on my exchanges with the women, it appears that their involvement in the movements in and around Uttarkashi were not explicitly motivated by demands for the “right to speak” that can motivate the participation of women in movements in other locations such as Latin America (Stephens Forthcoming). Nor were their efforts an explicit attempt to upset or undermine patriarchal practices. Although women complained that men did not often take their suggestions seriously, they explained that this was because they were uneducated and/or illiterate. They perceived this lack of education to be a main hindrance in their efforts. And, since many of the men were more literate than the women, they often deferred to them when it came to strategizing and producing written text.

As a woman with advanced degrees in higher education, it was challenging for me to comprehend what life for these women was like. It took me several months to begin to understand the discomfort and stigma that illiteracy or even semi-literacy entailed for them. My initial inability to comprehend their struggles reminded me of my own privilege as an educated female from abroad. I was humbled by my exploration of these women's challenges and reminded of the introspection that other scholars working in

South Asia have had to undergo while exploring gender privilege and while undertaking feminist ethnography (Enslin 1994; Holland and Skinner 1995; Visweswaran 1997). In my efforts to understand the challenges that women with low levels of formal education had to navigate, there were a few instructive moments. I share these before expanding the scope of discussion with feminist political ecology and the role of gender in movements past and present in the Garhwal Himalayas.

In June of 2009, the same group of people from the Clean the Ganga Movement joined with some of the New Delhi-based activists from the Ganga Ahvaan to express their opposition to the contested dams to Uttarkashi's most important official, the District Magistrate (DM). When we gathered at the DM's office, we were told to wait in a room adjacent to his office. The Ganga Ahvaan activists debriefed us on some of the latest dam opposition campaigns taking place in New Delhi along with some of the recent legal developments. While we were listening to this, someone passed around a sheet of paper to gather the signatures of people opposed to the projects. I happened to be sitting next to Sita when it was handed to her. Instead of looking at the sheet, she interrupted those speaking to ask what it was. They explained that they wanted her to sign it. She looked down and, after a few moments, announced that she wasn't feeling well. Taking this as a cue, her son Ravi came over with a pen and pointed to where she needed to write. Her hand shook as she tried to compose the four characters in Hindi that spell her name. At one point, she seemed to doubt that she was composing it correctly. A younger, educated woman sitting next to her gave her a few encouraging prompts before taking the pen to complete the signature herself. Sita nodded her head when the women finished writing it and complained again of fatigue.

When we eventually met with the District Magistrate, our group numbered nine to ten people. There were some at the meeting who were unfamiliar to me. As each person spoke their complaints to the DM, I learned that several of the men in attendance were Hindu religious and spiritual leaders from some of the more prominent ashrams in Uttarkashi. These men focused their comments on the important role that the Ganga plays in the Hindu faith. One of them brought out a copy of the Skand Puran<sup>59</sup> to cite a passage (*shloka*) itemizing the intertwining significances of the Ganga and Uttarkashi. The DM was interested in the quoted lines and he asked to see the book. He read a few lines aloud in praise of Uttarkashi. I didn't record the exact passage but I did later copy the quoted pages. The line he recited was similar to the one below. I offer it here to give a sense of the discourse on the location's virtues that the District Magistrate helped to reify:

This holy *tirth* [Uttarkashi] is powerful enough to fulfill all worldly desires; just by looking at it, one is released from the cycle of birth and death. This Uttarkashi is a center of salvation for mankind. Those people that live there are very great and fortunate (1983: 349 [17:93]).<sup>60</sup>

The people assembled in the room delighted in the District Magistrate's recitation of these lines. Since he was originally from South India and Hindi was not his mother language, the reading palpably increased his esteem in the eyes of the activists and Hindu religious figures present. They murmured words of praise to him as he handed back the book.

There was a lull as the book was being passed back to its owner. At that moment, Sita stood up to share her concerns. She was enthused and encouraged by the lines he

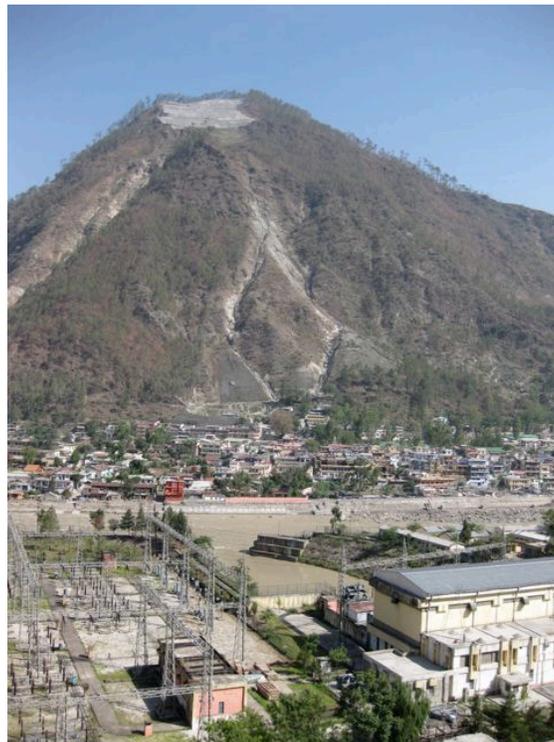
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<sup>59</sup> The Skand Puran (*Skanda Purana*) is one of eighteen puranans or "old" texts that form a core of Hindu religious teachings along with the Vedas and the Upanishads. Generally speaking, the puranas extoll the virtues (*punya*) of helping others.

<sup>60</sup> Translation from the Hindi text by Rajesh Kumar.

quoted and wanted to emphasize how vital it was to protect the sacredness of Uttarkashi. Initially her comments repeated what others had stressed, saying that the dams changed the Ganga's flow, threatened people's access to the Goddess, and could diminish Uttarkashi's significance because its virtues are linked with proximity to the river. And then she shared a vision she had recently seen. "I dreamed of darkness," she explained. "And falling rocks. It was like the dream I had before the top of Varunavrat came crashing down." This comment was meant to share Sita's worry that the dams were an ominous development, one that could cause more destruction in the region. Her concern built on locally circulating commentary that the massive landslide that occurred in 2004, when the top of the Varunavrat mountain suddenly toppled into the main road in Uttarkashi, was an effect of moral transgression

**Figure 6. 1 A Denuded Varunavrat Mountaintop Above Uttarkashi**



The dream that Sita presented also reflected the practice, common among Uttarkashi residents, of interpreting natural calamities as being a punishment for sinful behavior. Unlike the seriousness with which the DM treated the Hindu text, he made light of Sita's concerns. "I hope I wasn't in that dream," he joked. The men in our group chuckled and Sita looked to them while smiling hesitantly as she assessed the tone of the laughter. Smoothing over what for Sita was becoming an awkward moment, the DM took on an authoritative tone and assured her: "Don't worry, as long as I am here nothing bad will happen."<sup>61</sup>

The ignored comments and the unwanted singing from the Clean the Ganga Movement along with the disregard of Sita's vision by the DM and men in the activist networks convey the kind of reception that women's discourses often received. This, combined with their criticisms of themselves as illiterate and lacking sufficient education—which I describe in further detail below—lead me to question why the women persisted in their decisions to participate in the religious and environmental campaigns. To begin explain this, I defer first to the reasons presented to me by villagers, activists, and interviewees. Their comments pointed out the enduring struggles that inform women's activism such as past environmental movements and the movement for an independent state of Uttarakhand. I then draw from feminist political ecology to explain the divergent practices and responsibilities that women navigate and which influence their concern for the Ganga.

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<sup>61</sup> Comments by the District Magistrate on June 7, 2009 at his office in Uttarkashi.

### **In Every Movement a Majority: Tales and Hypotheses of Women's Activism**

During the period of my research in Uttarkashi, I asked nearly everyone I spoke with why they thought that women were so devoted to the Ganga and so involved in efforts to address its management. In response to these queries, I encountered a variety of responses. Many people, particularly men, were likely to give brief answers citing women's "natural" affinity with, and strong devotion to, the river. As one male respondent explained, women are more "emotionally involved with the river and the ceremonial part of the Hindu religion."<sup>62</sup> Women activists were apt to summarize the reasons for their involvement by stating, "Because women are strong!" while adding that the river is a cultural mother who must be defended. These typical responses demonstrated a basic understanding that gender plays a role in influencing people's perceptions and motivations for movement participation. As stand-alone answers, however, they were incomplete.

The anti-dam campaigns that verify women's strong engagement are numerous. So far, I've highlighted the involvement of women in Uttarkashi in river-cleaning programs, organizational meetings, and awareness-raising campaigns. In addition to these local events, there were also high-profile programs that entailed a large volume of women from a range of social and economic backgrounds in the Himalayas.

One such campaign took place in February of 2008, several months before my research began. It entailed a march from the glacial source of the river to New Delhi. From the anecdotes I'd gathered, a prominent Hindu storyteller (*kathawala*) led the rally to protect the river's flow and the sanctity of Hindu spiritual practices that are dependent

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<sup>62</sup> Interview on 3 February 2009 with the head of an NGO opposing dams on the Ganga.

upon accessing the waters. With a following of mostly women,<sup>63</sup> he took a procession of some 5,000 people on a three-week journey by foot (a tactic known as a *padyatra*) to protest dams on the Bhagirathi Ganga in the capital city. In some of the recollections of that campaign, I was told that women abandoned their fields and homes as the march passed by and that they walked with homegrown rice and wheat provisions tied to sacks or tucked into their saris. The descriptions of hardship and perseverance underscored women's devotion to the cause of saving the sacred Ganga.

When I met with the procession's leader, I asked why he thought so many women were involved. The answer seemed obvious to him but he obliged me with an explanation of how the river's essential elements (*tattva*) transfer to the women who reside along its banks. "They live by the Ganga," he said. "When the air blows over it and touches them, they emotionally become just like the Ganga. They are connected. In each and every fiber; in their blood; and in every pore." Because of this, he concluded, "There is no difference between them and the Ganga." Perplexed by the implications of such an argument, I inquired what this had to do with women's activism. Amused by my lack of understanding, he repeated that women are one with river and that they therefore see their own death in its demise. "That is natural," he added. "This is their love." Although the response initially struck me as essentialist, I later concluded that it was not entirely so. The storyteller at least pointed in the direction of women's emplacement in a region where many rural women (unlike men) live their whole lives in a restricted area, moving only between select villages and forests. He also acknowledged their experience; in addition to the religious motivations, women are concerned about the river because they

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<sup>63</sup> The storyteller recalled that women constituted "95 percent" of the procession.

live near it, observe it, and worry about the impact that its potential loss could have on livelihoods and ecological integrity.

After witnessing numerous instances of devotion to the river and documenting statements of emotion and care for its waters, I began to understand the degree to which everyday practice, along with enduring struggles and socio-economic considerations influenced gendered relationships and concerns for the Bhagirathi Ganga. While this insight could be supported by a social practice theory approach (Bourdieu 1977; Mead 1937; Holland et al. 2001; Holland and Lave 2009) as well as by strains of political ecology that draw from practice theory to address agency (Biersack 2006: 5), the ethnographic data was initially more confusing than it was illuminating. It took many long months of observation, conversation, life history interviews, and literature review to understand the dynamics at play. Each of these sources had to be weighed against others in order to avoid overgeneralizations or inaccuracies. This was especially true of the ethnographic encounters.

A conversation in February of 2009 further illustrates the difficulty of identifying women's motivations for participating in movement activity. The exchange took place at a time when I was still forming relationships with women and other activists in Uttarkashi. It was set in a modest two-bedroom unit that housed Sita and her family. Since it was my first visit to Sita's house, the meeting was accompanied with the formality of tea and snacks, the consumption of which signaled mutual respect. For the interview, I was joined by a friend and former NGO coworker who wanted to help me to "get the facts" about the potential impacts of dam building.

In a pause between sips of sweet milk tea, I asked in Hindi about the movement activities I'd heard rumors of. I was curious to learn of Sita and her family's views on the march to New Delhi. Did they concur that the majority of participants were women? And did they share the argument I'd heard that women's intimate relationships with the river inspire their activism? While they agreed that women constituted the majority of the procession and that they are very attached to the Ganga, they also added their own hypotheses.

The first to speak was Sita's youngest son Ravi, a man in his early 20's who was also heavily involved in the dam opposition. "Sister," he offered, "in Uttarakhand women have played an important role in every successful movement. For instance, it was Gaura Devi (a woman) who started the Chipko movement... Whatever movements have taken place here, like when Uttarakhand became a state, the maximum number—90 percent—of supporters were women." Nodding her head, Sita, exclaimed, "We women!" while thumping her chest in pride. Encouraged, the son repeated the percentage of involvement while adding that they persisted even when subjected to violence. "Now also, if there is anyone with us (in the dam opposition), then it is mostly women." When pressed to explain this, he speculated that the mountain women view the opposition efforts as morally righteous or, in his words, part of "God's work" (*bhagwan ka kaam*). Sita agreed. "Tell her this," she suggested, "the women here are simple<sup>64</sup>... they have little reading and writing skills but they respect what their gurus (religious teachers) say."

Interpreting Sita's words, my friend commented that the women involved in the dam opposition "are following their religion" before inserting his own opinion. Offering

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<sup>64</sup> The word used was *seedhi*. It can be translated as either "simple" or "honest". The NGO friend used the second translation when he expands upon Sita's utterance.

that the mountain women are very “honest” and that they “listen to their hearts”, he contrasted female integrity with his observations of male misbehavior. “The men,” he explained, “in the morning they talk about work and in the evening they drink wine and they forget about things. That is why we got all successness (sic) because of women.” Following this comment, the discussion drifted into a tirade against male alcoholism and lassitude.

The conversation illustrates several tensions. While there is agreement on the historical precedents of women’s activism, their high involvement in previous efforts was cited as a reason for their dam activism in and of itself. Women, in other words, were acting because they had been active before. Even when additional points were offered, the logic was imprecise. These answers were not restricted to my informants and, as I show below, scholars are still debating about the gendered dimensions of environmental activism. In the opinion of Sita and her son, women are following what they believe (and are taught to believe) is right action, also known as *dharma*, in the Hindu religion.

The limitation of these positions, from my perspective, is that they fail to account for the motivations that drove women’s involvement in other movements such as Chipko and the campaign for the independent state of Uttarakhand. Although there may have been religious currents in those efforts, they were not driven explicitly by concerns of Hindu cultural heritage or cosmological balance, as can be the case with the defense of the Ganga River. For others, like my NGO friend, women’s activism is a counter to what he perceived to be a pressing social ill in the region—male alcoholism. While his experiences may have sensitized him to the problems that result from alcohol consumption, this explanation did not engage the range of men’s practice, including the

fact that many (but certainly not all) mountain men work as hard as women in the fields, in day labor, and in social movements.

To better understand the particularities of women's participation in dam opposition, and to address gendered difference in activist practice, I found it necessary to elaborate on the precedents upon which their activism builds. While some of the movements are well documented, discrepancy persists when it comes to the theoretical implications of women's participation in development and conservation efforts. I give an overview of these debates and situate the contemporary protests within ongoing theoretical discussions.

### **Women's Activism in the Garhwal Himalayas: An Overview**

The environmental activism of the Garhwal region is most commonly associated with the legacy of the Chipko movement. The now-famous effort to resist commercial logging in that region of the Himalayas began with a well-cited, perhaps legendary, encounter in 1974 when women defended their forests by clinging to trees. As the story goes, when contracted laborers arrived in Reni village to start logging, the men were away in a distant location (Chamoli) on a mission to collect overdue compensation in what some speculate was a ruse meant to diminish the opposition to the logging. What the laborers found when they arrived, however, were some twenty women ready to fight for the trees with their lives. A confrontation ensued and one drunken laborer threatened a female leader, Gaura Devi, with a gun. "In response," Haigh (1988) recounts, "she bared her breast and challenged him to fire: '... Shoot and only then you can cut this forest which is like a mother to us...' (101). Deterred, the male laborers left the site and

the Chipko Andolan began. The movement lasted into the 1980s when counter-movements formed to oppose post-Chipko government policies of forest “protection” and enclosure (Sarin 2001).<sup>65</sup>

Since the first encounter and the ones that ensued, much has been written on the Chipko Andolan. In the scholarship, there is a lack of consensus on the gender dynamics and politics behind the movement. For Haigh (1988), it was a people’s movement that played an important role in women’s emancipation. To Shiva (1988), the Chipko Andolan was a women’s movement in defense of a feminine nature whose productivity and creativity is subject to control by a patriarchal society. Such arguments helped to foster the “ecofeminist” approach that, among other things, draws parallels between the exploitation of women’s bodies and the destruction of nature. For Guha (1989), Chipko was a peasant movement that builds on anti-colonial resistance. He notes, however, that women have always played an important part in rural life and that this historic level of participation can help explain their involvement in contemporary social movements. Demystifying what she considers the “myths” of Chipko and other tales about life in the Himalayas, Rangan (2000) argues that villagers—men and women—were insisting on regional rights and discretion in the use of forest resources. Despite disagreements over the impetus for the Chipko movement and the extent and significance of women’s roles, each of these accounts acknowledge that women were highly involved.

Almost two decades later, the effort in the area to break away from the state of Uttar Pradesh and its capital in the Indian plains again saw the participation of mountain

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<sup>65</sup> Policies such as the Forest Conservation Act angered many, including Chipko activists, by creating enclosures that restricted villagers’ use of forests resources. This prompted villager-led deforestation in areas demarcated for preservation (Sarin 2001).

women. In the campaigns for an independent state, however, the stakes and the number of agitators was greater than previous movements. Gaining momentum in the mid 1990s, the desire to form an independent state of Uttarakhand unified a wide demographic of people in the regions of Garhwal and Kumaon. Although the call for regional state rule may have extended as far back as India's independence from the British in 1947, movement participation grew when mass agitations arose in response to a state decree sharply expanding the number of reservations (the equivalent of affirmative action) for Other Backward Castes and Scheduled Tribes. In the predominantly upper-caste mountain regions where unemployment rates are high<sup>66</sup>, this triggered numerous protests that coalesced into a large-scale movement (Mawdsley 1997: 2224).

When the agitations expanded in scope and membership, the separate state movement began to include preexisting concerns for the environment and women's rights. The latter entailed appeals to check the sale of alcohol that is often bought with limited finances by men to the detriment of household nutrition. Beyond these issues, Mawdsley (ibid.; 2000) asserts that a deep-seated point of contention was the perception of "internal colonialism". The sentiment was fueled by legacies of rampant resource extraction along with hostility over the rule-by-distance of people living in the Indian plains. These outsiders were viewed negatively for their lack of understanding and indifference towards the special needs of the mountain people.

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<sup>66</sup> At the time of the Uttarakhand State Movement, some 85% of the population in the Uttarakhand hills were upper-caste Brahmins or Rajputs; only 2-4% were Other Backward Castes. Under the government reservation scheme, the majority of Uttarakhand's youth would be eligible for only half the college seats in a region with few opportunities (Mawdsley 1997, 2224).

As the Uttarakhand State Movement progressed, so did the involvement of mountain women. According to Radha Behn, a Gandhian activist who was part of the campaign, many of the female agitators showed exceptional determination. At times when men had abandoned sites of opposition, she recalled, women persisted in their resolve to sit in protest. Citing this along with other efforts in Garhwal to oppose mining and the Tehri dam, she observed: “Women had a very great involvement... Everywhere the women were in the forefront.”<sup>67</sup> <sup>68</sup> Mawdsley’s (2000) research concurs with this observation. In an article on the role of women in the Uttarakhand State Movement, she writes that women played a part at every level. Their activities included formulating, leading, and participating in the protests and demonstrations; contributing to its ideological strength and direction(s); and acting as a point of resistance. This was true despite the hardships involved. The significant contributions made by women added to the numerous physical and time constraints that women in Garhwal face as the main domestic and agricultural laborers (*ibid.*). Their efforts also put their personal safety at risk, a factor that weighed on women and their families.

In 2000, after years of struggle, Uttarakhand gained independence. Since its formation, residents state that the government has improved infrastructure, including roads, schools, and hospitals. A common lament, however, is that many policies remain driven by elite forces, now residing predominantly in the new capital of Dehradun at the

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<sup>67</sup> Interview with Radha Behn at the Gandhi Peace Foundation on 15 December 2009.

<sup>68</sup> Radha Behn’s use of “women” here refers to mostly illiterate or semi-literate women, a demographic she believes were more involved than others. She explains: “The educated women think of rules and regulations and about the consequences of their actions like getting arrested. But the farmer women who work in the fields and forests, they think only that the forests and land should survive and be saved.”

base of the Himalayas, that are focused on the provision of goods and services for urban centers. It is within this context that the opposition to the run-of-river dams on the Bhagirathi Ganga must be situated. For although Uttarakhand State was to receive 12% of the electricity for free, the power—most of which was earmarked for use in the plains—would only be produced after directing precious water resources through the mountains, leaving little behind for riverside residents. This nationalist manipulation of the sacred Ganga, a feature of cultural heritage and a point of regional pride, angered many who earn revenue from religious tourism as well as those who rely on its flow for a myriad of material and spiritual needs. As in the case of Chipko and the Uttarakhand State Movement, therefore, regionally sensitive and equitable development was a key issue in the opposition to dams on the Bhagirathi Ganga.

### **The Relationship between Gender and the Environment: Some Analyses**

The preceding historic overview, besides summarizing women's long-standing participation in the social movements of the area, also underscores the ongoing struggle for equitable development in the mountains. The fight is waged by women and men alike but to differing degrees. I aim to show that the variations are due to differences of practice as influenced by cultural, religious, and socioeconomic considerations. This builds on previous scholarship, some of which draws from Himalayan movement histories. Influenced by the legacy of Garhwali women's activism, for instance, numerous scholars have addressed the gendered dimensions of environmental resource management.

Writing in the early 1990's, Bina Agarwal's "feminist environmentalism" helped advance the discussion of gender and the environment while moving beyond some of the quagmires of ecofeminist thought.<sup>69</sup> Drawing on the practice and commentary of Himalayan women, Agarwal joined many others in rejecting the idea that men and women have predetermined relationships with nature. She suggested that understandings of the environment are best approached through the examination of different levels of access to, and dependence on, natural resources because our knowledge of "nature" is experiential. In her formulation, gender and class (including caste/race) are important to the extent that they influence the distribution of labor, property, and power since, she argues, these factors shape the experience-knowledge interface as well as responses to environmental challenges (2007: 323-324). She explains her stance while speaking of women's movement involvement:

In emphasizing the role of poor peasant and tribal women in ecology movements, I am not arguing, as do some feminist scholars, that women possess a specifically feminine sensibility or cognitive temperament, or that women *qua women* have certain traits that predispose them to attend to particulars, to be interactive rather than individualist, and to understand the true character of complex natural processes in holistic terms... Rather, I locate the perspective of poor tribal and peasant women (perspectives which are often holistic and interactive) in their material reality—in their dependence on and actual use of natural resources for survival, the knowledge of nature gained in that process, and the broader cultural parameters which define people's activities and modes of thinking in their communities (ibid.: 348-349).

Several scholars built on the political economy aspects of Bina Agarwal's feminist arguments. Notable for this discussion are the contributions of Feminist Political

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<sup>69</sup> Ecofeminism attracted praise and criticism. Although the ecofeminist position highlighted women's relationships with the environment, a few writers within the approach were charged with making essentialist generalizations about "women" and romanticizing a "natural" relationship between women and nature (Baviskar 1995).

Ecology. In the introduction to an edited volume that elaborated on the approach, Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, and Wangari argue that there are *real* (as opposed to imagined) gender differences in the experience of, responsibilities for, and interests in “nature” and environments but that those differences are not necessarily rooted in biology. “Rather,” they argue, “they derive from the social interpretation of biology and social constructs of gender, which vary by culture, class, race, and place and are subject to individual and social change” (1996: 3). Their formulation draws on feminist approaches to cultural ecology, political ecology, political economy, and geography to understand and interpret situated experiences of global environmental and economic change. Feminist-influenced political ecology overlaps with assertions made by Massey (1994) and Harcourt et al. (2005) that gendered rights and responsibilities with respect to the environment are experienced differently across space and place (1996: 10-11).

There are some who agree with the focus on disparate daily practices but caution us from overly relying on gender as an analytic for understanding concern for the environment. Arun Agrawal’s work on environmentality is particularly opposed to the emphasis on gender as a category that alone influences environmental subjectivities (2005). His writings counter reifications of “identity” and “social categories” such as gender, caste, and class because he believes that practice, such as involvement in forest protection or forest governing councils, is more influential for environmental subject formation and concern for the environment. The “external signs of belonging” such as gender/caste/class, he posits, are not as important as the contingent practices that span categorical affiliations (Agrawal 2005: 163). In his work on the “intimate government” of forest councils in Kumaon, a region that neighbors Garhwal in Uttarakhand, he focuses

on the ways that institutional regimes of environmental regulation lead to the emergence of “environmental subjects,” a term that refers to “people who care about the environment” in the way that the government wants them to (ibid.: 161-162).

Acknowledging that the residents of Kumaon vary in their beliefs about forest protection, he argues that these variations are related to their involvement in regulatory practices rather than their “social-structural location in terms of caste or gender” (ibid.: 163).

Arun Agrawal’s aversion to emphasizing gender and class/caste categories is important to the extent that it reminds us to focus on practices, or perhaps even communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991), rather than “external signs of belonging”. I think, however, that we should also not overlook the ways that social inequality shapes differences in practice and experience, including access to and integration in institutional domains (Hathaway 2005; O’Reilly 2007; Sundar 2005). These inequities have gendered and class/caste components.

Put in other words, there may not be a lot of similarities internal to some gender categories. Women from different socioeconomic groups, for instance, may not share a lot of the same ecological concerns because of disparate practices and exposure to experiences that foster knowledge about the environment. This does not mean that there are *no* gendered dimensions to environmental subjectivity. Rather, it means that gender is not the sole determinant of concern for, or knowledge about, the environment. We could expect to find, for instance, that low-income women who spend their days looking for fuel and fodder in the Garhwal Himalayas will have relatively more knowledge about the condition of the forests in which they forage than low-income Garhwali men who spend

their time away from the forests engaging in wage labor or even the middle and upper class women who never enter the forests.

The present discussion asserts that gender and socioeconomic difference impact daily practice and that these differences in practice significantly influence people's perceptions of and actions towards the environment. This is important because practice is something that we do in bodies that are socially differentiated. This differentiation affects our social locations, which in turn shape our experiences and our "situated" and partial knowledges of the world (Haraway 1991).

### **Gender, Practice, and Activism on the Bhagirathi Ganga**

Before delving into gender dynamics along the Bhagirathi Ganga, it is important to identify broader socioeconomic conditions that influence activism. This heeds Sharma's (2008) call to address the minutiae of women's daily struggles so as to better contextualize the micro politics of resistance and mass mobilization. It also attends to Mohanty's (1991) demand for careful attention to differences of class, caste, age, and geographic locales in representations of "third world women" (as they were once called). For now, however, this discussion leaves aside the questions of caste as it did not appear to be highly influential.<sup>70</sup> This is likely due to the fact that, as earlier noted, the residents of the area are predominantly upper caste. Socioeconomic standing, on the other hand,

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<sup>70</sup> I occasionally asked about caste but it was not a focus of my research and it did not often come up in conversation. Since I was reticent to reify caste, I usually let people share their socioeconomic position on their own. Although I did not find that caste played a paramount role in movement participation, it did influence socialization opportunities. People from different castes did not often meet outside of movement events. One low-income but high-caste woman said she would never so much as enter the home of lower-caste movement members.

was very significant. It was no coincidence that the core group of women activists—whom I could count on both hands—all lived in Uttarkashi, the district capital. Although many of them came from village backgrounds, they enjoyed much more leisure than the women of the surrounding rural areas. While they were often busy with domestic affairs and even some agricultural duties, their more urban location allowed them to attend more meetings and rallies than the village women. Personal and family factors were also likely to influence the degree of activism. Almost all of the lead activists were middle-aged women with supportive husbands and grown children.

Although most of the core women activists were located in Uttarkashi city, the larger base of support for rallies and demonstrations came from women living in villages along or near to the river. For many such women, frequent travel to routine meetings and minor movement events was simply not feasible. While local transportation is affordable by living standards outside of the mountains, it is difficult for many women to regularly find 20 to 40 Indian Rupees (.45 - .90 USD) for a round trip ticket to Uttarkashi (let alone to other locations). Time was perhaps an even bigger constraint as travel along winding mountain roads involves too many delays for women who have busy daily schedules from early morning until late at night. Out of concern for the issue, however, rural women did mobilize in masses for the larger events. In some cases, bus transportation was arranged by other activists or ashrams invested in stopping the dams. In other cases, rural women paid out of pocket and sacrificed precious time to oppose the river's obstruction and manipulation.

In addition to affecting movement involvement, women's different socioeconomic and geographic locations influenced the kind of concerns they had for

development along the Bhagirathi Ganga. When Sita said that illiterate women follow the teachings of their Hindu religious leaders, she was indirectly revealing her position in society as well as the pastimes available in places like Uttarkashi city. Although Sita came from a village and remembered the hardships of rural life, her daily practice followed the routines of life in the district capital rather than the agricultural cycles that dictate practices in the rural areas. A religious woman who no longer has to engage in agriculture, she spent a good portion of her free time gathering with other women to engage in the recitation of devotional song and to listen to the Hindu epics told by storytellers. These practices, I argue, fostered a particular form of religious concern for the river—one that elicited emotion (*bhavana*)<sup>71</sup> and drew from ancient texts in which the Ganga is frequently positioned as a divine entity of paramount importance for Hindus.

While rural village women did sometimes find time to listen to Hindu storytellers (especially when they travelled to the rural areas), their concerns for the river were more often fostered through direct observation of the changes to its flow and through experiences of growing water stress in the region. For although Uttarkashi enjoyed the river's constant (although highly variable) flow as well as water that came from municipal taps, upstream projects and dwindling springs reduced the average flows in the river. This gave village women a contrasting experience and a different perspective on the potential for disruption that the new dams could entail. This meant that the discourses of concern provided by women activists varied based on their place of residence, daily practice, and associated experience.

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<sup>71</sup> The singing of devotional hymns (*bhajan*) evokes spiritual feeling and connects participants to the object of worship. As Sita explained during a life history interview in September of 2009, “When we sing *bhajan*, it feels like Ganga is there with us.”

## Figure 6. 2 Gendered Work: Foraging and Cultivation



Women collecting wood for cooking



Women threshing rice manually

When asked about the dams, Hemu, a female anti-dam activist and village leader who lived upstream of Uttarkashi, highlighted the issue of equitable development before expanding on the cultural-religious implications. Although she affirmed that hydroelectric projects do entail development, or *vikas*, she qualified that, “It is the kind of development that harms us tenfold.” In explanation, she listed the damage, or *vinas*, caused by the dam building that was already underway: blasting, messy road construction, deforestation, landslides, and disappearing springs. This was making life even more difficult for people, and women in particular, because it reduced the availability of, and access to, vital supplies of water and timber. Elaborating on the resource concerns, she added that it is because of the desire to see a flowing, energetic, and pure Ganga that people travel to the mountains, infusing the region with much-needed income. “They come here for the sacred pilgrimage (*tirth yatra*), not for anything else.” That will all be lost, she cautioned, if the river’s flow is impaired.

In regards to the dam’s non-material implications, she explained, “We are residents of Uttarakhand and Gangaji is our greatest heritage. She is needed for all the work that we do in life.” Adding that the river is part of their cultural identity, or

*pehchaan*, she lamented the interruption of cultural-religious practice that residents could face if the flow “disappears” into the mountains. “When children are born, they are made “pure” (*pavitra*) by swallowing Ganga water. And when we die,” she explained, “our bodies are cremated and put in the water to merge with Mother Ganga.” In between these ceremonies are a lifetime of rituals, or *sanskar*, that connect people with the river and the Goddess. The need to access the waters is especially important for women as being a good mother and wife entails periodic fasting, prayer, and worship for familial wellbeing. The river plays a central role in these rites as the one who listens to, receives, and transmits human concern and desire. These practices demonstrate the ways that the Bhagirathi Ganga infuses life with meaning while being subject to human practices of meaning making.<sup>72</sup> The symbiotic relationship helps to foster connection with, and concern for, the river’s flow and the landscape of which it is a part.

Responding to why women are predominantly involved in the social movements to contest the dams, Hemu replied, “The entire mountain area depends on women.” To this a female friend, listening to our conversation, interjected that, “Women do all the work... Men just eat their fill and rest.” Stressing that the Garhwali men lack “wisdom” and that few understand how hard life is for village women, they argued that women feel the region’s pain (*shetre ka dard*) and are motivated to defend it, their sacred land (*dev bhoomi*), from harm. It is not easy to do so, they qualified, because women are already overburdened and they can only join movements after attending to their many chores.

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<sup>72</sup> This engages Roy Rappaport’s comment, repeated by Biersack (2006), that ecology studies must account for, “...meaning as well as cause, and of the complex dynamic of their relationship” (7-8).

The idea that rural women do ‘all the work’ became a theme in my fieldwork, one that I coded as the “backbone hypothesis” because so many people referred to Garhwali woman as the region’s biggest strength. This arose in numerous conversations and interviews as well as in literature. When they didn’t use the English word “backbone”, people would employ its Hindi equivalent, *reed ki haddi*, or some other substitute. This terminology was sometimes used to praise village women; sometimes to lament the arduous conditions that define their everyday lives; and sometimes as a way to position women’s contributions against those made by men. One female respondent added a complication to the argument, claiming that since Garhwali women work like “donkeys” they must have sinned terribly in their past lives. In their more exasperated moments, some women echoed the idea that they were undergoing penance. In the better moments—often the ones of rest—they would ponder their achievements. “If it weren’t for us, nothing would get done here,” said one villager while taking a tea break at her home between chores. Tapping on her forearm for emphasis, she pronounced that the women of Garhwal have bones made of iron.

When men are not being portrayed as less productive vis-à-vis women (as in the case above and the comments by my NGO friend), they are often described as having more dependence on the cash economy. This dependence on the market has historical precedents. The balance of domestic and agricultural workloads began to tip towards women in at least the nineteenth century as state and British armies drew heavily from the male population of Garhwal to build their armed forces. As Rawat (2002) notes, this forced men to leave their villages to earn wages during the productive years, leading to the “intense participation of females” in agriculture (299). The memoirs of a former

officer stationed in Uttarkashi show that the gender imbalance persisted throughout the twentieth century. In describing women's hardships versus the pressures that men face, he explains:

The hill women are the backbone of this agricultural economy... Their day begins with grinding flour, fetching water from the village spring, husking rice, milking cows, collecting fuel and fodder, cooking meals, tending cattle, and rearing children. They attend to various agriculture operations like sowing, weeding, hoeing, paddy transplantation, harvesting, threshing, and winnowing. Males just do the ploughing and some other work like mending the irrigation channels or keeping watch over the harvest. Most of the males migrate to the plains to earn money to support the family as the produce is not sufficient for the year... This migration of males adds to the workload and responsibility of the women.” (2007: 252-252).

This commentary held up to my observations in 2008-2009. In some ways, life seemed even harder for women as expectations and responsibilities were shifting. Whereas village women would earlier be assisted with chores by their children, in many areas parents now prioritize education for their sons—and increasingly their daughters—so that they can secure office and administrative jobs later in life.

Although some label the age and gender imbalance in the rural landscape “the feminization of agriculture” (Kelkar 2010), it is important to recognize that men can also suffer. Since earning cash is frequently considered to be part of men's “responsibility” and it is often not viable to do so through agricultural production, some men have to leave their families for long periods to earn money for household needs and the fees associated with children's education.

The pressure to earn income can limit men's involvement in movement activity.<sup>73</sup> As one villager summarized the situation, "Men don't come (to the movement events) because there is a problem of employment here... Sure, not everyone gets jobs from the dams, but there is hope." And, he reasoned, since the "men's work" of plowing only takes a few weeks, the prospect of earning 2,000 to 10,000 Indian Rupees (45-220 USD) a month with the dam company is attractive since the other alternative is to leave the mountains in search of seasonal employment. He asserted, however, that even though the men might not be as visible in the movements, many do encourage the women activists because "everyone wants to see Gangaji flowing."

Although I did observe women defying their husbands to join movement events, it is also true that men can be supportive of women's participation. In one village, I met three women who had traveled to New Delhi in 2009—most of them for the first time—to join an a dam opposition meeting organized by NGOs. The women spoke of the difficulties they overcame to attend the convening but noted that their families gave them permission. Looking from my assistant to me in the dimly lit room, they explained that this was necessary because they do not enjoy as much freedom as women elsewhere. Elaborating on the gender theme, one woman shared that two of her sons encouraged her even though dam construction was his source of employment. In reference to her activism, she recalled that they said, "Go and fight, Mom. What is the company giving, anyway? It will leave after a few days. We want permanent jobs."

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<sup>73</sup> Conversation on December 3, 2009 with a male activist explaining the relative lack of Garhwali men in the anti-dam movement.

### **Conclusion: Untying the Knots of Generalization**

Why have so many Garhwali women joined the anti-dam movements? My research suggests that answers lie in the importance of past and present struggles plus the added potency of cultural-religious considerations. Drawing from the earlier precedents of women's activism, the campaign overview that I provided in this chapter showed that many efforts were grounded in desires for equitable development in the region. Given that the dam building often has unequal benefits, this is also a point of concern in the opposition to dams on the Bhagirathi Ganga. As the discussion shows, however, the comments go beyond debates over development and its beneficiaries. In addition to worries for the welfare of the Goddess Ganga, people (as emphasized in the previous chapter) also expressed concern for the maintenance of religious practices of devotion in which the river plays a prominent role.

What the exploration of gendered practice also indicates is that not all women have the same concerns and practices in relation to the river. The women residing in Uttarkashi can be first and foremost motivated by the cultural-religious implications of the river's interruption while village women were more likely to highlight the water scarcity, biodiversity, and income generation challenges ahead should the Ganga be seriously disrupted. Socioeconomic and geographic places of residence additionally influence the degree to which women can leave their daily work schedules and involve themselves in dam oppositions.

By looking at disparate responsibilities and struggles, this chapter has highlighted conditions that influence the daily practice of the different biological sexes. Although numerous mountain men do spend considerable time engaging in alcohol consumption,

many are industrious householders who have to migrate to earn income and therefore have limited firsthand experience of the challenges associated with local changes in the river's features. The prospect of employment also influences men's perspectives on the value of hydroelectric development because some men believe the jobs created by the projects could help them to stay in the region (as opposed to migrating to the plains for work). These observations indicate why Garhwali men may have had less involvement in movement activities to defend the Ganga.

By way of summary, I wish to itemize my argument. Note that I am not arguing that women have a "natural" connection with the Bhagirathi Ganga. I have argued that their preoccupations are grounded in concerns for the continuity of cultural and religious practices along with livelihood considerations (which vary depending on socioeconomic standing). Moreover, women in the area have a history of prior movement involvement. They cite an expectation that women will act in response to imminent threats.

What I have attempted to show here is an overlapping of forces that include the historical, socio-cultural, and economic conditions that women and men in the Garhwal Himalayas navigate. These pressures are gendered. They assert themselves on gendered bodies in different ways, influenced by a division of labor that shapes practice and mediates the development of knowledge about, and preoccupation with, the changes taking place along the river. The differential involvement of women and men in the opposition to dams on the Bhagirathi Ganga further demonstrates that socially dictated gender differences do indeed impact the development of concern for the natural world as well as the outlets and opportunities to act in its defense.

In the next chapter, I turn to the specific ways that women speak of and express their concern for the Ganga. I do this while focusing on the use of devotional song as an accepted cultural form of expression that some women use in movement events and dam opposition campaigns. The discussion illustrates the ways that women's movement activities influence self-understandings and the transformation of subjectivities.

## **Chapter 7. Women, Practice, and the Performance of Devotional Song**

*June 9 2009: There was a big meeting on climate change in Uttarkashi today. All the members of the Clean the Ganga Movement were in attendance along with students, teachers, and the members of several NGOs in the district capital. About one hundred people showed up, a good number for an environmental event in Uttarkashi. Awareness about climate change is growing in the region even though there is considerable disagreement about its primary forces and effects. Perhaps the biggest draw was the meeting's main speaker, the internationally famous environmentalist Dr. Vandana Shiva. The event was, in fact, her idea. She organized the meeting through her NGO, Navdanya, and hired local members of the movement to arrange the logistics.*

*Ravi, Sita's son, was one of the main organizers. He booked the large hall above the university library in the center of town, helped with the invitations, and served as the Master of Ceremonies. It was no small feat for an undergraduate student in Uttarkashi to carry off such an event. But he handled it well.*

*The high-profile location and the speakers notably impressed the women of the Clean the Ganga Movement. They were particularly pleased when snacks were served; they giggled at the fried treats, bananas, and sweet juice that the Navdanya staff handed them. They later told me that, in all the many years that they had attended environmental events in Uttarkashi, the climate change meeting was the first time anyone had ever*

*offered them refreshments. The comment was meant to indicate their dedication to the cause of keeping Uttarkashi and the Ganga clean.*

*The first five speakers were men from Uttarkashi who'd been involved in various environmental programs over the years. They welcomed Dr. Shiva profusely and repeatedly. And they elaborated on the efforts they'd made to address pollution, deforestation, and development in their part of the Himalayas. Most talked about the importance of preserving the Ganga. One of the speakers, a poet, used his time at the podium to denounce the dam opposition, asserting that as a scholar he knew from the scientific reports that dam building does not contribute to climate change. Dr. Shiva seemed to bristle at these remarks. But she handled them diplomatically.*

*Sita was one of the first female speakers to address the audience. And she was the only woman from the Clean the Ganga Movement to talk at the podium. She prefaced her remarks with a homage to the Ganga, as she usually does, and then followed it with a refrain in reference to Uttarkashi's most famous temple. She cried loudly into the microphone: "Jay Ganga Maiya! Jay Kashi Vishwanath!" Once she had everyone's attention, Sita spoke for a brief three minutes compared to the lengthy fifteen to thirty minute speeches the men made. She, like the others, thanked Dr. Shiva (whom she referred to as her "big sister") for coming. And then she quickly asked her to help them in their efforts to protect the Ganga. You travel the world, she said, and you save the forests. Now please help our Ganga. Then she declared, "If we all work together, we can save Mother Ganga." Glancing fiercely at the poet who denounced the dam opposition, she continued: "We have to do good work, we have to do it honestly. Then we will be successful. These other people aren't doing that. They are selling off our Ganga."*

*When Sita had said what she wanted to say, she turned to Dr. Shiva and asked if she could sing a song. Dr. Shiva nodded her head approvingly. Beaming, Sita looked out to the audience and called Nirmala up to the podium to sing with her. Nirmala shook her head in refusal, giggling and squirming in the plastic chair upon which she sat in the audience. Sita reprimanded her for this, saying that it was their duty to sing for their big sister. Nirmala obliged. Once she reached the podium, they began to sing:*

*Shining like a metal plate, shiny like a plate<sup>74</sup>  
O Mother Ganga, Queen Mother, shiny like plate*

*King Bhagirath did penance for you Mother Ganga, penance for you  
O Mother Ganga, Queen Mother, penance for you, [Refrain]*

*Mother you are like cream and yogurt, cream and yogurt  
O Mother Ganga, Queen Mother, cream and yogurt*

*Celestial Mother, you were retained in Shiva's matted locks  
Celestial Mother, retained in Shiva's matted locks...<sup>75</sup>*

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<sup>74</sup> I asked Sita, Nirmala, and many other women what they meant by *thakula ki thali*. I was confused by the symbolism because a “thali” is a large round metal plate with a wide brim from which people eat. When I asked Sita about the lyrics to this song on November 28, 2009, she said that plates are shiny (like the Ganga) and round like the moon. Beyond symbolism, however, she stressed that the word selection was mainly for the purpose of making a nice rhyme.

<sup>75</sup> “Thakula ki thali maa, thakula ki thali  
Heh ganga maa rani rani maa, thakula ki thali  
Raja bhagirath ne ganga maa, teri tapsya kari  
He ganga maa rani maa, teri tapasya kari  
Raja bhagirath ne ganga maa, teri tapasya kari  
Heh ganga maa rani maa, teri tapasya kari  
Dahi ki jamani maa, dahi ki jamani  
He ganga maa rani maa, dahi ki jamani  
Surangana choti maa, Shiv jata samai  
Surangana choti maa, Shiv Jata samai...”

*Whereas Sita's commentary only lasted a few minutes, the song went on for five. The four stanzas quoted above give a sense of the song's rhythm and flow. The main refrain—which repeats throughout the song—highlighted the role that King Bhagirath played in bringing the river to earth. The song then reminded the audience that “Mother Ganga” fell from the heavens through Shiva's matted locks and that he kept her in his hair. It is not stated but listeners familiar with the story understand that the Ganga was retained in his hair because Shiva so loved the sensation of the Ganga flowing through his dreadlocks. It wasn't until King Bhagirath pleaded for the river to flow all the way to the ground that Shiva let the Ganga descend to Gangotri where the Goddess is believed to have first touched the earth. Highlighting the river's journey through the world, the song shared by Sita and Nirmala listed the people and places that the river blesses with its flow. It concluded with mention of Ganga Saagar, the point where the Ganga meets the Bay of Bengal near Calcutta.*

*Many in the audience, including myself, had heard Sita and Nirmala recite this song before. While some were attentive to the performance, others were not. Members of the audience conversed with one another in audible tones and some milled about. A couple of minutes into the song, someone turned on the overhead fans. The twenty-odd metallic devices buzzed loudly in the auditorium making the lyrics difficult to hear. The microphone picked up on this sound and amplified it through the room along with the voices of Sita and Nirmala. This hampered the already poor sound quality coming from the speakers. When the women were over halfway through the song, Ravi came up to the podium and tapped his mother on the shoulder to signal that she should wrap things up. She brushed him away briskly, singing on. He blushed at this public reprimand and slunk*

*to the side of the stage. Sita, unperturbed, continued until the words of her song safely delivered Mother Ganga to the sea.*

*Several more speakers took to the podium, including Dr. Shiva. Her talk focused on some of the mechanics of climate change (with emphasis on the carbon cycle and global pollution inequities) and the need for proactive adaptation measures. Numerous others urged people to harvest water, to plant trees, and to protect the Ganga's flow. Loose plans were made for a follow up meeting or an action-oriented workshop. And, after nearly four hours, the event was over.*

*The next day, I passed an acquaintance in the streets of Uttarkashi's main market that had been at the meeting. He was a friend of the family that I lived without outside of Uttarkashi and a documentary filmmaker who was working on a project about the Ganga's condition. "How did you like the meeting?" I asked. "It was good," he replied, "But the song was too long." I must have looked perplexed at this comment because he quickly qualified that it wasn't the venue to share devotional hymns. I teased him for this, reminding him of all the music he uses to influence emotions in his films. He smiled at this as we parted ways. And I thought: "After all the hours of listening to people repeat one another, he complained about a five minute song!"*

This chapter examines the performance of devotional songs by women living along the Ganga in Uttarkashi District of the Garhwal Himalayas. By exploring women's employment of *bhajan* and *kirtan* (both words for devotional song) I focus on how these melodies are an important part of women's daily practice. I do this by establishing the historical significance of these songs, by discussing the use of devotional song at a dam

opposition rally, and then by sharing the life histories of Sita and Nirmala, two women who regularly use devotional song in public events such as the one detailed in the ethnographic description above.

To explain the use of song in activist space, I employ a social practice theory approach (Holland and Lave 2001, 2009) that builds on the previous chapters to examine the influence of historical, institutional, and socio-cultural domains on actions and subjectivities. The songs and their performance, I argue, demonstrate how women narrate, and thus remind others about, the Ganga's importance. I also show how the use of devotional songs helps women such as Sita and Nirmala situate and "author" their own significance. This activity helps to inform and even transform women's subjectivities. And, continuing to employ a dialogic approach, I address throughout the chapter how the utterances expressed through devotional songs are received or disregarded by others.

Before I offer more examples of devotional songs in activist and organizational events, I will add context. Goddess worship has a particular history in what is today North India. That history is an amalgamation of contested practices, gender divisions, and power struggles. It was through the interweaving of these processes that Goddess worship and the singing of devotional songs emerged as acceptable forms of practice in India. Because I draw from social practice theory to make sense of women's devotion and performance vis-à-vis the Ganga, this background is important. It helps me establish the historical development of genres such as devotional song that women draw from and adapt to oppose the construction of dams on the river.

## Situating Women's Devotional Practice: Historical Context

Why do people worship the Ganga? And why do they often choose to praise the river and its Goddess through the use of devotional songs? So far, I've talked about the river's mythological and cosmological importance to help explain this. But, behind the Ganga's special powers, there is something more. The Goddess Ganga embodies the divine feminine energy that is ultimately a part of every Hindu Goddess. While the Ganga is a distinct entity, she is also a symbol of a sacred feminine force that characterizes all Goddesses. This divine feminine energy is found both in anthropomorphized forms and in "nature". Pintchman (1994) calls this force the "Great Goddess" and she attributes to it an impersonal cosmic power that transcends the particularities of specific deities.<sup>76</sup>

A principle of energy, the Great Goddess is identified by the term *sakti* or *shakti*. This term denotes the divine feminine force to which the masculine energy is *shiv*. The notion of *shiv-shakti* has parallels to the Taoist concept of *yin-yang* because it recognizes that both forces are compliments of one another. They are also inextricably linked and inseparable. This is why Lord Shiva (the epitome of masculine energy know as *shiv*) looks both male and female in many popular pictorial representations.

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<sup>76</sup> Pintchman identifies the classical and post-classical period between the fifth/sixth century C.E. and the sixteenth century C.E. as the timeframe in which reverence for the Great Goddess increased in "Hindu" practice. These eras followed Vedic and post-Vedic epoques. She explains: "Toward the end of the classical period and in the post-classical and medieval periods... different conceptual and mythological threads are woven together in the Puranas, and there emerges a notion of the Great Goddess, Devi (Goddess) or Mahadevi (Great Goddess), who is consistently identified as *prakriti*, *sakti*, and *maya*" (1994, 5).

**Figure 7.1 A Statue of Shiva on Manikarnika Ghat, Uttarkashi**



It is due to the multiple and overlapping ideas of the Goddess that her energies can inhabit, and be represented by, numerous forms. As Prasad (2003) notes: “The goddess in Hindu traditions is imagined in a variety of ways: a compassionate mother, an ideal consort, a model devotee, a fiery independent warrior who is not associated with any god, a local guardian or protector, or an unconventional, passionate lover. In almost all manifestations, however, she is seen as the wielder of special powers and as [a] benevolent bestower of grace to her devotees” (254). It is because of the numerous powers and qualities associated with the Goddess, or the Great Goddess, that the Ganga can be represented in the iconic form of a woman sitting upon an auspicious crocodile (her “vehicle”) while also being revered and worshipped in her riverine state. The image of the anthropomorphized Ganga helps devotees remember the Goddess’ *shakti* whereas the river reminds people of the Ganga’s role in nature (*prakriti*).<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> *Prakriti* has several other meanings. Pintchman notes that it also translates to “environment”. And it can denote a fundamental form, pattern, and standard; the primary substance of the material world; and “a personified will of the Supreme” (1994, 3).

This is not to say that *shakti* and *prakriti* are distinct. These concepts are both integral to the understanding of the Goddesses' powers and they are deeply intertwined. Drawing from the work of Susan S. Wadley, who examines the comingling of *shakti* and *prakriti*, Pintchman explains that in the Hindu tradition, "The female is first of all *sakti* (energy/power), the energizing principle of the universe. The female is also *prakriti* (Nature)—the undifferentiated Matter of the universe" (3). And, as Wadley (1977) points out, the association of these principles with the feminine is socially reflected in the expectations established for the behavior of women (115). I will explain the significance of this shortly in reference to the use of devotional song. But, in anticipation of that, it is important to further situate the popularity of goddess worship in "Hindu traditions" and give an account of the expansion of devotional practices.

Interestingly, the rise of Goddess worship occurred with the convergence of non-Brahmanical sects (in which devotion to the feminine divine was prominent) and Brahmanical traditions. In fact, many of the Goddesses associated with Hinduism were not originally Vedic-Brahmanical. The principles that they are now predominantly associated with, nonetheless, are taken from the Vedas and the orthodox Brahmanical philosophical systems. For this reason, Pintchman declares: "...although the impulse to elevate female divinities to supreme status probably originates primarily from non-orthodox, autochthonous religious systems, as other scholars have argued, the mechanisms by which the feminine principle is elevated in orthodox literature are borrowed from the orthodox tradition itself" (ibid.: 17). This is important, she explains, because it allowed Brahmanical orthodoxy to maintain authority while adapting itself to

suit the changing religious orientation of the population at large in the classical, medieval, and modern periods that followed the Vedic era.

And what were those changing orientations? As noted above, there were long-term practices of devotion to the feminine divine throughout the Indus Valley Civilization that predate the rise of the Brahmanical system. In the archaeological remains of the Indus valley and North India, for instance, one finds a distinctive set of female terracotta figurines that number in the thousands. We do not definitively know the functions they served but they were undoubtedly important to the people that kept them (Hawdley and Wulff 1996). In addition to their ubiquity, there is evidence that they influenced later genres as the styles of modeling these figurines display are found in subsequent periods. Female sculptures from the Mauryan period (fourth to second centuries B.C.E.), for instance, look similar to their Indus prototypes. This shows the influences that the “Aryan civilization” (the drivers of the Brahmanical system) negotiated. While it is true that the Aryans became dominant in North India from 1000 B.C.E. onward, the material evidence shows they adopted facets of the preceding cultures. The scholarship suggests, some argue, that the development of Hindu practices in South Asia entailed a reemergence of the feminine: “As the Sanskrit textual tradition developed up through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries C.E., the place of the Goddess in it became ever more firmly established” (Hawley & Wulff 1996: 1-2).

The transforming notions and practices of Goddess worship appear to have also been influenced by economic concerns. Tracing the emergence of pilgrimage centers, Arya (2004) contends that the practice of pilgrimage to *tirtha* (holy places) in India began to expand from roughly 300 to 1200 C.E. The popularity of pilgrimage was likely related

to economic depression. The third to fifth centuries C.E. were marked by the decay of towns, the decline of commerce, and migration. From that period onwards, particularly during the sixth to the thirteenth century C.E., the practice of pilgrimage increased. Arya credits a growing gift economy and the rise of the Bhakti (devotional) tradition as possible reasons for the increase of the temple and the pilgrimage movements. In her estimation, “This new development symbolizes the changing relations of gift exchange system[s] between the priestly class and its clients. Moreover, poorer sections of the people who could not earlier participate in the costly *yajna* (worship involving offerings and sacrifice) found in the practice of pilgrimage an easier mode of salvation” (ibid.: 5).

Arya further describes the influences, motivations, and modalities of such action:

The temple movement was [therefore] inspired in a large measure by the emerging Bhakti tradition. The Bhakti movement first surfaced in the southern region among the Vaisnava Alvars and Saiva Nayanara of Tamil Nadu. The Bhakti saints preached the service to god which could be rendered in any form [and] entitled every person high or low to salvation. Drawing water for the bath of the deity, making swings for his pleasure, dancing and playing musical instruments in his honor, plucking flowers, washing clothes and utensils, cleaning the premises of the temples, supplying various items of luxury for the deity were all parts of the ritual service which different sections of the society could undertake according to their social standing. This drew people from far and near to the temple site and thereby promoted the pilgrimage value of the concerned centre (ibid.: 7).

Arya’s description explains the rise in popularity of the Bhakti movement. As others point out, there were and are gendered dimensions to such devotional movements and practices of pilgrimage. A telling footnote by Bina Agarwal (2007) gives historical support for the role of women in bhakti traditions. She writes that the Bhakti movement was open to all sexes and castes. This non-discriminatory practice was in contrast to the recitation of the *Rig Veda* (a collection of sacred Sanskrit hymns which constitutes the

roots of Brahmanical Hinduism) that was inaccessible to women and untouchable castes. Such people were forbidden to recite the hymns because it was believed that they would defile the magical power of the words. Bhakti was popular with women because it sought to establish a direct relationship between God and the individual without the mediation of the Brahmin priests. The movement also gave rise to numerous devotional songs and poems in a variety of vernacular languages. Bhakti now coexists with the more ritualistic and rigid Brahmanic[al] traditions and it is marked by a high percentage of female involvement (ibid.: 353).

In history, therefore, we see the mediation of circulating discourses and practices. For not only were ideas about and practices of Goddess worship adopted by what became a dominant social and religious authority (the set of Brahmanical practices with their Aryan roots, Vedic texts, Sanskrit language, and ideas of caste, etc.), they were negotiated within a framework that molded and modified their significance. Put in other words, the practices and concepts about the Goddess that we now think of in relation to Hindu deities like Durga, Saraswati, Laxmi, and Ganga are a blend of principles that were mediated by historical power struggles. The ebb and flow of practices even shows the pliable nature of what we call “Hinduism.”<sup>78</sup> And, as scholars such as Wadley (1977), Hawley & Wulff (1996), and Agarwal (2007) remind us, there are gendered dimensions to Goddess worship and devotion.

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<sup>78</sup> Supporting this assertion, Agarwal (2007) argues that the non-fundamental strains of Hinduism are pluralistic, fluid, and containing several coexisting discourses (322).

### **Devotional Song: A Gendered Genre of Discourse**

Why are songs a popular speech medium for women in the Garhwal region of the Himalayas? I have already pointed to some of the answers. The rise of worship to the Goddess was fostered in part by Bhakti, a practice that was and is accessible to women. I have also shown in earlier parts of this dissertation that song is a particularly popular form of expression for Garhwali women—especially ones that are uneducated or semi-literate. Such women frequently use songs in their repertoires of daily work, worship, and even protest. For this reason, scholars such as Capila (2002), approach rural Garhwali women’s songs (which she calls “folksongs”) as a “source material” that reflects various socio-cultural images of women, including their daily practice and livelihood struggles.

In the terms used by Holland and Lave (2001), songs are part of important “cultural forms of communication” in the Himalayas that help to build dialogues about the self (7). Examples of “cultural forms” of dialogue include the Tij Festival songs that Holland et al. (1998) explore in the Nepali context. Holland draws from a Bakhtinian-influenced sociohistoric perspective to show how Tij songs are cultural forms that women use to position themselves in relation to the harsh, often oppressive realities of daily life. These songs help construct spaces in which women can voice discontent. They also enable possibilities for imagining alternate visions of social and political life that includes the improved treatment of women (ibid.: 253-254).

In the context of the dam oppositions in the Garhwal Himalayas, I suggest that women use devotional songs to evoke and remind others of the figured worlds in which the Ganga is featured as an entity of paramount importance. The performance of these songs has an intent that is distinct from the Tij festivals in Nepal in which women share

melodies that critique social conditions and imagine alternative worlds. However, the performance of devotional song does open spaces within which women can voice dissent. The songs and their performance do have transformative effects, especially in the realm of intimate subjectivities and identity making. This is the focus of the latter part of this chapter.

In stressing women's use of devotional song in the Garhwal Himalayas, I do not wish to indicate that it is a verbal genre that is always gendered. Devotional song is an especially popular cultural form because it fits well within the history of a nation and geographical region with strong oral storytelling traditions.

The most famed of the sacred texts associated with Hinduism were transmitted orally long before they were written down many hundreds of years after their creation. Arya (2004), for instance, states that the above-mentioned *Rig Veda* was recited for over 3,000 years before it was preserved in Sanskrit text. And, as the work of Sax (2002) details, there are numerous past and contemporary oral performances in Garhwal that bridge well known mythologies with regionally adapted variations. These include the *pandav lila*, a performance genre that draws from the Mahabharata. Sax explores the significance of this expressive tradition in his 2002 book. In speaking of performance generally and the practices of the Garhwal region in particular, he argues: "public ritual performances are an especially powerful means for creating (and sometimes undermining) selves, relationships, and communities, precisely because they inscribe cultural concepts on the whole person, the body as well as the mind, and they do so by requiring of their participants a public, embodied assent to those concepts" (12). In his opinion, these performances are important for reinforcing a sense of community. This

concur with Blackburn and Flueckiger (1989) who claim that performance traditions in India often draw upon “local ideologies” to help “shape a community’s self-identity” (11). These are arguments with which Durkheim (1995) could have agreed. He proposed that collective rituals serve to create and foster solidarity among groups of various kinds. Thinking of religious rituals, for instance, Durkheim once wrote: “...religion is first and foremost a system of ideas by means of which individuals imagine the society of which they are members and the obscure yet intimate relations they have with it. Such is its paramount role” (227).

The difference between the expressive cultures that Sax, Blackburn, and Flueckiger draw on and the ones I elaborate in this chapter, however, is that the songs of devotion to the Ganga draw from minor stories featured only in select Hindu epics. The songs are not well known nationally and they are mostly sung by women. Women compose many of the songs in the Garhwali language but they sometimes perform them in Hindi. These regional melodies are quite significant to their singers and they use them at specific moments and with targeted aims.

The second way that my approach to the performance of devotional song differs from others is that I do not argue that these melodies, when used in movement processes, are designed to call upon a real or imagined “community” in the sense provided by Sax (2002) or even Anderson (1983). I aim to show, rather, how the songs help to remind people of the Ganga’s importance by evoking the figured worlds that recollect the river’s history and worth. The historical-cosmological positioning of the river, in turn, helps people to “author” themselves in relation to the river’s sacred flow. I now turn to an example that helps me illustrate these points.

### **Devotional Songs in Activist Space: Exploring Performance**

On July 11, 2009, a rally was held in Uttarkashi, Uttarakhand to protest the ongoing work at upstream dam construction sites. The participants in these protests believed that the construction activities were in violation of a government suspension of the projects. The rally was well attended—numbering around 200 to 250 people—and most of the audience members were women from Uttarkashi and the villages that surround the district capital.

Due to the nature of my “multi-scale” ethnographic research, I was not present for the rally; in an unfortunate overlapping of events, I was in New Delhi doing research on organizational networks and policy. The multiple scales and places in which I conducted research gave me valuable perspective on the different views of dam building along the Ganga and in the Himalayas more generally. As I detail elsewhere (Drew In Press c.), there were also drawbacks to spending time out of the mountains. The rally on July 11, 2009 was one of the moments when I wished the commute up to the mountains was not a day-and-a-half journey. Fortunately, the rally was documented with video taken by members of an ashram outside of Uttarkashi. I was familiar with many of the rally participants and I was later able to interview them about their experiences.

From the newspaper articles, interviews, and videos, I pieced together the rally’s sequence of events. Members of Ganga Ahvaan worked for several days before the protest to garner the support and participation of villagers from surrounding areas. As some of the activists from Delhi who came up for the event later told me, the village women outnumbered the men in volunteering to attend. Commuting by bus and local

transportation, these villagers arrived in Uttarkashi in the late morning. Several activists from New Delhi, Haridwar, and Rishikesh met them there.

The rally involved three main tactics. One of these was a boisterous march through the streets of Uttarkashi in which the procession members yelled slogans against the dam building company. This was a common tactic of every rally I observed during my fieldwork. Even the pro-dam rally, which I detailed in the opening of Chapter 4, featured two different processions through the streets of the district capital. Such rallies were geared to influence public perception and show support for a cause by virtue of decibels generated and the number of people in attendance.

The second tactic that the rally entailed was a roadblock (*chakka jam*). This involved assembling at the most narrow point of the road that passes through Uttarkashi in order to obstruct traffic. When the rally participants reached this spot, they sat down in the middle of the road. Numbering over a hundred people, they were able to cover a sizeable area and render the path impassable for vehicles. From the video taken by Ganga Ahvann members, this was also a key moment for yelling slogans and to feature large signs that declared their position on dam building. The chants demanded that the hydroelectric projects be closed and called for the demise of the dam construction companies. As in other rallies, they asked that the Ganga flow free by saying, “Let the Ganga be uninterrupted, let the Ganga be pure!”<sup>79</sup> They also reprimanded the actions of state and central governments. A large banner declared: “Rivers are common property, they don’t belong to the government! Don’t obstruct them, let them flow!”<sup>80</sup> To the side

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<sup>79</sup> *Ganga ko nirmal rehne do, Ganga ko behne do!*

<sup>80</sup> *Nadiya sarkar ki nahi, manav samaj ki sampatti hai! Pravah ki bandhe nahi, behne do!*

of the main banner, a picket sign read: “Save the environment! Save our culture! Stop the dams!”<sup>81</sup> A popular chant, one that I frequently heard the Ganga Ahvaan members employ, positioned the struggle against dams as a fight for the welfare of the nation. “Save Ganga!” they yelled. “Save India!” came the answer. This was followed by an inversion of the statement: “Save India! Save Ganga!”<sup>82</sup>

The roadblock was short-lived, lasting less than a half-hour. Ganga Ahvaan members told me that Uttarkashi officials demanded they desist lest they be arrested. When I asked bystanders about the roadblock, several mentioned that it was an unfair strategy. Even those who were sympathetic to the dam opposition commented to me that it was wrong to hold up traffic in a region in which mobility is already extremely difficult. Since transportation is so challenging on the winding mountain roads, some felt that the traffic block served to anger people and was therefore counterproductive.

The third tactic, and the one that I want to highlight, was a public meeting in front of a regional government building called the Collectorate. Rally participants congregated on a field adjacent to the government facilities and staged a series of speeches from that location. Several men spoke into a microphone that was attached to a mobile loudspeaker system. A prominent Ganga Ahvaan activist from Delhi, Himant, also invited several of the women to speak. One of these was a village leader by the name of Sarojini. In the video taken by Ganga Ahvaan, Sarojini accepted the request to talk in front of the large crowd that gathered. Instead of speaking, however, she launched into a call-and-answer song. The women in the audience, most of who were seated on the ground, sang along

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<sup>81</sup> *Paryavaran bachao, sanskriti bachao, bandhe band karo!*

<sup>82</sup> *Ganga bachao! Desh bacho! Desh bachao! Ganga bachao!*

with Sarojini. The song was different from the one that Sita and Nirmala shared at the climate change meeting. But, similar to their song, it gave the genealogy of the Ganga's descent into the earth, the role that king Bhagirath played in its inception, and it commented on the sacred geography of the Himalayas through which the river flows. There were two main refrains to this song. The first was, "My Gangaji" (*meri gangaji*). And the second was, "(My) Lovely Gangaji" (*pyari gangaji*). This song was presented in lieu of an oration. It bears noting, however, that another woman—Rukmini—did make a short speech. When she recalled the experience to me later, she declared it to be the first time she had ever spoken in front of a large crowd. She was scared at first, she said, but she thought of Gangaji and the words came easily.<sup>83</sup>

Coincidentally, I later met Sarojini (the song leader from the rally) when I went to the ashram affiliated with Ganga Ahvaan to view the video and inquire about the rally. Although she was not part of the ashram and didn't frequently visit there, I came on a date when the Ganga Ahvaan organizers were meeting with key village leaders to give them an update on the government decisions and the legal battles that were likely to ensue. In a pause between meetings, I spoke with Sarojini. She recalled the event and her participation in the rally.

I first asked Sarojini why she chose to sing instead of giving a speech. "Many people spoke before I did," she answered, "and they said everything that was in my heart. What else could I say?" This was a common response I received when asking women why they chose to pass up speaking opportunities or why they elected to sing instead of speak. My informants often said that they refrained from repeating what others had said if

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<sup>83</sup> Interview with Rukmini in Senj, Uttarakhand on December 7, 2011.

they had nothing new to contribute. Some directly commented on their intellectual insecurities as illiterate women. One woman even told me that her thinking was “fat” (or thick and cumbersome) and that she preferred not to demonstrate that publicly to anyone.

When I asked Sarojini why she chose the particular song that she sang, she brushed the question aside by saying, “There are so many songs about Gangaji...” I was unsure of how to get a more precise explanation. So I reminded her of other possible songs that she could have sung. Although I did not sing it entirely (for the benefit of her ears), I shared the first few lines of a song I’d learned from Rukmini when I first met her in 2007:

Ganga is the purest stream; there is no other stream like hers, (3x)  
She is the essence of life; there is no other essence, (2x)  
Ganga is the purest stream; there is no other stream like hers, (2x)  
Love God, there is no other love, (2x)  
Ganga is the purest stream; there is no other stream like hers, (2x)  
Universal love is the essence; nothing else will suffice, (2x)  
Ganga is the purest stream; there is no other stream like hers, (2x)  
Sing, “Glory to Ganga!”<sup>84</sup>

Sarojini nodded to acknowledge this tune and laughed at my modest rendition. We sing such songs in the villages, she told me. This implied that the song I shared was not appropriate for the rally. I tried to get Sarojini to elaborate but to no avail.

Switching topics, I asked her why so many women were in attendance at the rally. “It was an emergency,” she said. “The Ganga is disappearing... They are taking Ganga

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<sup>84</sup> *Ganga nirmal dhar aur koi dhar nahi, (3x)*  
*Ye jeevan ki saar aur koi saar nahi, (2x)*  
*Ganga nirmal dhar aur koi dhar nahi, (2x)*  
*Kar lo prabhu si pyaar aur koi pyaar nahi, (2x)*  
*Ganga nirmal dhar aur koi dhar nahi, (2x)*  
*Prem jagat ki saar aur koi saar nahi, (2x)*  
*Ganga nirmal dhar aur koi dhar nahi (2x)*

inside the tunnels.” This is worrisome, she reminded me, because people will lose land due to the dam construction and their livelihoods could be threatened. And, she added, access to the Ganga is important for the observance of Hindu rituals. “We need Ganga for everything... “We are connected to her our whole lives.” It was impossible, in her view, to think of being without her.<sup>85</sup> I share these latter comments despite the similarities with already described utterances in order to clarify Sarojini’s perception of the issues and the threats. I also believe the focus on human relationships with the river is important to highlight once more. It is the relational aspect of connection to the Ganga that pervades these subjectivities, an issue that I turn to next.

### **Narratives, Performances, and Spaces of Authoring**

There are two main reasons, I argue, that women in activist spaces often employ particular songs about the Ganga. The first reason, alluded to earlier, is that these songs help to narrate the river’s story. The narration generates meaning about the Ganga, establishes the importance of living alongside it and receiving its blessing, and evokes the figured worlds that position the river as a Hindu Goddess. The songs even help devotees call forth the invisible presence of the Goddess Ganga. This fosters affect and makes people feel that they have her support. The second reason is that the use of the established cultural forms of expression allows women to participate in the river’s defense despite perceived disadvantages such as a lack of education. Their participation via the cultural form of devotional song also helps women to author their own importance and reflect on their agency. This informs subjective domains and notions of identity.

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<sup>85</sup> Interview with Sarojini Devi on August 19, 2009 in Senj, Uttarakhand. Her latter comments in Hindi were: *pure jindagi mein... laga hua (ham) gangaji ke prati.*

On the first point, as alluded to above, the songs that narrate the genealogy of the Ganga are the most likely to be recited by women in activist spaces. The melodies shared by Sita and Nirmala as well as Sarojini were of this type. It is also telling that, when asked, Sarojini notes that there are “many songs about the Ganga.” When I shared one of them with her—a tune that urges people to love the Ganga and God—she acknowledged it without suggesting that it would have been interchangeable with the one that she shared. If I am interpreting her silence correctly, the question becomes: why not?

Why are the songs that narrate the Ganga’s birth and the role that King Bhagirath played so useful in efforts to defend the river? To begin, we can look at the functions that narratives serve. Narratives help to establish a particular perspective, viewpoint, or understanding of events past and present. Since narration is set in conversation with the real or imagined phenomena, narratives are a social process and a “performance in action” (Cortazzi 2001: 384). The act of narration, therefore, is an interactive process that jointly constructs and interprets experience with others. Because of this, narrative analysis enables us to examine participant roles in constructing accounts and in negotiating perspectives and meanings (*ibid.*).

The focus on meaning making through narratives is extremely significant. The songs that share the Ganga’s genealogy are powerful because they remind people of the reasons that the river and its Goddess came down to earth—the primary one being human salvation. This helps to offset the objectification and commodification of the river’s flow that some believe the project proponents are guilty of. In situations where the Ganga is treated solely as a good to be manipulated for energy generation and material gain, the genealogical songs evoke a figured world in which the Ganga is a unique river with a

particular history that cannot be overlooked.

Consider, for instance, a moment when Rukmini critiqued the dams. When denouncing their value and positioning them as undesirable, she used the story of the Ganga's inception at the bequest of King Bhagirath:

“...we shouldn't build dams because then they will block Ganga. When they build the dam, Ganga will go inside the tunnels and this whole valley will become desolate (*sunsaan*). We have a deep relationship with Gangaji from our birth that lasts until our death. King Bhagirath did so much penance (*tapasya*) to bring Ganga to earth. But he did not say that it should be taken inside tunnels. In fact, he said that it will keep flowing for ages and ages and it will give salvation (*udhar*) to each and everyone.”<sup>86</sup>

Here, once again, we see the emphasis that people make on the sacrifice that Bhagirath underwent to secure the Ganga's flow for the benefit of humanity. It is for this reason that its genealogy was restated time and again in conversations, interviews, and in song. Reflecting on the river's history, Rukmini also expressed her fear that future generations will not know the value of the Ganga if it one day stops flowing in the riverbed. “When Ganga will be stopped [and redirected into the tunnels], then our children and their children will not think [be able to imagine] that once there was a huge Ganga flowing like an ocean.” Rukmini's worries that it would one day become “like a myth” that the Ganga once flowed through the Himalayas was related to her fear that future generations would not know or recognize the Ganga's significance. She elaborated on the implications of this later by saying: “When (the) Ganga is no more... we won't have any identity (*pehchaan*).”

The use of the word identity, or *pehchaan*, is significant. The word can be employed as a noun, as in the case above, as well as a verb that indicates the act of

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<sup>86</sup> Interview with Rukmini in Senj, Uttarakhand on August 8, 2007.

recognizing something or someone. In the sense that Rukmini used it, *pehchaan* is meant to indicate a hallmark or a main characteristic with which something or someone is associated. Her subsequent statements exemplified this use of the word. “This is the identity of these mountains,” she said. “It [our identity] is Mother Ganga.”

As she and others informed me, there is even a name for residents of the mountains who live along the Ganga; they are called *gangaputri* (Children of the Ganga). This label indicates proximity to, and connection with, the river. It is a source of pride. Rukmini reinforced these feelings when she said that the men of the region earn respect while working in the plains when they say they come from Himalayan villages nestled along the river’s banks. And, in a final employment of *pehchaan*, Rukmini transferred this regional pride onto all the (Hindu) residents of India: “The culture of India is Ganga itself,” she said, “We are residents of that country in which the Ganga flows.” This comment used the river to fashion a pan-Indian identity, albeit one that was Hindu-centric.

Because of all the subjectivities that the Ganga’s genealogy and geography generates, the songs that employ the story of King Bhagirath are affectively influential than other tunes that merely praise the river. They also help people to argue for their own importance vis-à-vis the flow of the Ganga. Rukmini gives support for this when she talks about the pride that *gangaputri* (those that reside along the Ganga and are recognized as her “children”) feel for their proximity to the river. In so doing, the songs also enable a process of identity meditation. This latter point merits explanation.

Identities, as Holland et al. argue (1998), are the “imaginings of self in worlds of action” (5). They are, in other words, social products that are lived in and through

activity. In positioning identities as a process developed in social practice, they argue, "...we are always engaged in forming identities, in producing objectifications of self-understandings that may guide subsequent behavior." This stance emphasizes that identities are improvised "in the flow of activity within specific social situations," from the cultural resources and artifacts at hand. "Thus," they explain, "persons and, to a lesser extent, groups are caught in the tensions between past histories that have settled in them and the present discourses and images that attract them or somehow impinge upon them. In this continuous self-fashioning, identities are hard-won standpoints that, however dependent upon social support and however vulnerable to change, make at least a modicum of self-direction possible" (4).

The emphasis on history in identity formation is crucial. Numerous past forces and processes have influenced the social-cultural worlds that we are born into. As individuals of larger "communities" (kinship networks, religious affiliations, nation-states, etc.), we draw from existing norms and cultural forms to negotiate our own senses of self and as we navigate contentious practice. This approach to identity integrates the social and the historical influences that help people weave together their self-conceptions (Price 2009: 232). Similar to the *bricoleur* [who Levi Strauss (1966) presented as a builder that constructs from the resources at hand], Holland and Lave (2001) explain that the self-centered 'I' builds, and so is built, opportunistically with preexisting materials. They write: "In authoring local conflicts, in applying words to the contentious others who address it, the 'I' draws upon the languages, dialects, genres, and words of others to which she has been exposed" (10-11). These theoretical insights build on Bourdieu's concept of habitus, or historically influenced dispositions, as well as the dialogism

offered by Bakhtin that stresses the sociality (and fluidity) of the intimate self. “Just as local struggles are dialogic,” write Holland and Lave, “the self process is (also) dialogic” (ibid.: 13).

The following sections employ these theoretical framings on identity to make sense of women’s experiences in movement processes and the implications of their activism for subjectivity. This includes commentary on the performance of devotional song. By way of illustration, I give truncated versions of the life histories provided by Sita and Nirmala. Their stories illuminate some of the ways that women in movements to defend the Ganga negotiate enduring struggles, contentious practice, and fluid subjectivities.

### **Songs and Affect: Sita’s Story**

Of all the women I came to know during my fieldwork in the Himalayas, Sita was the activist that I was able to spend the most time with. There were many reasons for this. Sita was a prominent participant in Ganga Ahvaan and the Clean the Ganga Movement. She also spoke fluently in Hindi even though Garhwali was her mother tongue. This meant that we were able to communicate with relative ease (although it did take time for my ears to adjust to her Garhwali accent and for her to get accustomed to mine).

Sita, like some of the other women I became friends with, was quick to adopt me as an honorary family member. She insisted that I refer to her as my aunt (*mausi*) and she was adamant that I visit her home as frequently as possible. Fortunately, the two-bedroom apartment that she shared with her family was centrally located in Uttarkashi city and she was often easy to find. Unlike some of the other women, Sita seemed to

understand that I had many tasks and obligations to attend to during my time in the mountains. This made visits comfortable because I never had to fear that a visit to her home would extend into a series of obligatory meals with the family and potentially even an overnight stay.<sup>87</sup> Although she always asked me to share meals (and I did on a few occasions) and she invited me to spend the night numerous times, she usually only asked twice and would let me go with a smile and a soft reprimand for not staying longer. With Sita, I could come and go as I pleased without the guilt I felt with others.

I recorded Sita's life history over the course of numerous visits. Each time I sat with her in her home, I came to know different aspects of her life. These details were as revealing as the ones that I documented in my semi-structured interviews with her. I learned, for instance, that Sita was from a rural area on the "other side" of the mountains. Her village was near to the valley through which the Yamuna River flows. Sita was not formally educated as a child and she was married between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. Her husband was a district officer—an educated man with a government salary and a pension—who married her while he was on assignment in an area near her village. They moved to Uttarkashi shortly after their union. Sita, well into her fifties during the period of my research, had seen the district capital grow over the decades.

Sita was a very religious woman. She went to the temples (*mandir*) for daily prayer and was part of a group of women who gathered every Friday to sing devotional songs (*bhajan*) at the Ganga Mandir above Manikarnika ghat. Sita also attended many

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<sup>87</sup> It is common, and sometimes even expected, that relatives spend the night when they visit. Since some of the people I frequently interacted with came to think of me as a daughter or a niece, they often invited me to solidify my status as an honorary relative with an overnight stay. I was also a source of novelty and entertainment because I was an unmarried and Hindi-speaking woman from America.

performances of *katha*, or the recitation of Hindu stories told over days and weeks, that take place in Uttarkashi throughout the year. These practices, combined with her regular interaction and worship with the Ganga, nurtured her faith.

Sita was also very devoted to the regional *devis* and *devta* (gods). As I came to know abruptly one afternoon, she was even a medium for a particular village devta. When I first saw her channeling this deity (or perhaps it was the deity channeling her), she was seated cross-legged on one of the cots in the back room of her apartment on an auspicious day in the Hindu calendar, Shivratri. A couple was seated on the cot in front of her in the dimly lit room. Sita was staring into grains of uncooked rice in the open palm of her left hand. She spoke angrily while looking into these grains. She accented words of disdain by occasionally throwing a few kernels of rice at the couple and the man in particular. The man nodded humbly at her forceful reprimands, many of which chastised him for drinking alcohol and demanded that he stop doing so. When the deity was done with the counsel, Sita blessed them by applying colored pastes and dry rice to their foreheads. I was blessed, too, before being escorted out of the room so that Sita could recover from the tiring experience and return to her body.

I later found out that the *devta* started coming to Sita when she was pregnant with her third child. He came without warning, she told me, and has been appearing occasionally for over two decades. This *devta* could be helpful in times of need such as when Sita was fearful or full of self-doubt. Sita recalled that in January of 2009, she and a number of other people from Uttarkashi were called to attend a “Save Ganga” meeting in Jodhpur, a city in the desert state of Rajasthan in the Indian plains. She and many of the other Garhwali women feared the journey. They had never traveled so far from their

homes. On the bumpy bus ride down the mountains, Sita prayed to the *devta* and asked him to keep them safe. He appeared soon after the prayer ended; her hands suddenly shot straight up in the air and he offered a loud blessing. A voice that did not resemble her own spoke through her body, declaring: “Everything will be alright!” Feeling assured that the journey would be successful, Sita’s mind was at ease for the rest of the trip. And when they arrived at the King’s palace where the meeting took place in Jodhpur, Sita recalled that she was asked to speak before any of the other women. She beamed at this recollection while pointing out that a different woman from their group, a multi-term village leader, was usually chosen to talk first. Of her performance, Sita said proudly, “I spoke very well. I said many good things. The King liked it so much that he later called me back up on stage.” She was honored to receive such high praise. But she didn’t know what else to say. So, she remembered, she shared a song that illustrated how in past eras “people were good” and treated the Ganga and each other with respect. Her parting words were a denouncement of moral degeneracy and a call for righteous action.

As I mentioned in chapter 6, Sita did not received a lot of formal education as a child and she struggled with the written word. She, like other women in the movements, often felt that she doesn’t have much to say. Her words were limited and they paled in comparison to her emotion for the Ganga and her belief that it should not be tampered with. And yet, despite this, Sita has accomplished quite a bit. Sitting in her living room, one can see numerous pictures of her hanging on the walls in which she is speaking at the podiums of various meetings or receiving a ribbon in recognition of her work. One of Sita’s speeches is even published in a book entitled, “Save Ganga, Save Himalaya.” The translation in English takes up a single-spaced page. It was a source of great pride for her

even though she can't read the words. When I asked Sita to reflect on her achievements, she recalled that she used to be shy. But, at the urging of her husband who insisted she express her opinions, she slowly began to speak out despite being an "illiterate village woman."

Even though Sita learned to be comfortable speaking in front of a crowd, she still preferred to perform devotional song. This is evidenced in the opening ethnographic description to this chapter. The songs, as I've argued, employ an accepted form of expression for women. They also help Sita and others remind people of the Ganga's paramount importance in words that she believed are more nuanced than a speech.

For Sita, an important reason for sharing the songs was affective. "When we are singing *kirtan*," she said, "it feels like Gangaji is there with us." The songs, in other words, summoned the feeling that devotees get when being near the river or looking upon an iconic image of her anthropomorphized form. And how does it feel to be with Ganga? "It feels good," Sita asserted, "Very good. She takes away our pain (*kast*)."

**Figure 7. 2 Women Singing Devotional Song in Uttarkashi**



These comments show how emotions associated with that Ganga influence assessments of its worth. And since the devotional songs help to recall people's emotions, they are part of the meaning making practices that people enact to defend the river and its Goddess. This is important to note, as Milton (2002) explains, because "...The process of valuing things in the world is inseparable from the emotions and feelings they induce in us; without these emotions and feelings there would be no value" (100).

Sita's story and her involvement in movement processes, I believe, illustrate her identity transformation. Through her participation in movement events, she refashioned herself, going from an "illiterate village woman" to someone whose ideas were worthy of print and whose words could earn the praise of Kings. Her transformation builds upon past histories and her negotiation of the challenges and opportunities of everyday life. Sita's use of the devotional song in activist spaces also shows how she was involved in adapting and modifying existing cultural forms to fit the needs of the present moments of contention. Her experiences, in other words, demonstrate the relationship between her involvement in processes of intimate self-making and her participation in local contentious practice. This frame draws from what Holland and Lave (2001) have termed, "history in person." The history in person perspectives lends an appreciation for the ongoing and unfinished character of both the enduring struggles that people like Sita navigate and the fluidity of their self-definitions. Although Nirmala's story is different from Sita's, it is particularly poignant of the struggles and contentions that some women overcome in the processes of movement involvement.

### **Songs and Contentious Practice: Nirmala's Story**

I began recording Nirmala's life history during a lull in one of the movement activities in Uttarkashi. One day in early June of 2009, a group of us gathered near a bridge on the Ganga to undertake a river cleaning campaign. The event followed the aforementioned meeting with the District Magistrate (DM) of Uttarkashi. Since the river cleaning was scheduled in the middle of the day and it followed on the heels of the earlier event, only a few people showed up. Nirmala, who wasn't at the meeting with the DM, was one of two other women in attendance. I had time to chat with her before the river cleaning program in what became a two-part recording of her life story.

I started by asking Nirmala what her family thought of her involvement in the various movements. It was a question that was on my mind because the river cleaning campaign took place at a time when most of the other women I knew were at home cooking the afternoon meal and taking care of their children. Speaking of her family, Nirmala said, "They think I'm crazy." And their friends, she added, reinforce this perception: "The neighbors say to my husband, 'She's gone mad. She doesn't cook for you, she goes to the market alone—what does she do in the market?—and she doesn't even look after her children properly.'" Sometimes, she admitted, her nearly grown son even complains. "But I tell him, 'You aren't so small, anymore... If you are home alone, you can cook for yourself.'"<sup>88</sup>

These comments were somewhat startling to me because the first time I had gone to Nirmala's house—back in the beginning of 2009—I'd been with six people from

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<sup>88</sup> I was surprised by implication that perhaps Nirmala didn't cook regularly for her family. But when I asked, I discovered that she usually cooked large quantities before the meetings. She just wasn't always home to serve the food.

Uttarkashi who were active in the river cleaning and dam opposition movements. We'd come from campaigning in nearby villages where we were trying to recruit people into the dam opposition by going house to house. We were exhausted by the time we arrived to Nirmala's midafternoon. Seeing this, her husband let us sit in the entry room of their ground floor apartment (which doubled as the bedroom) to talk. In a reversal of roles, the husband went to the kitchen and came out with sweet milk tea for everyone, which he served off a tray. When I recalled this to Nirmala, she laughed. Ravi, who had also been with us at that time, overheard our conversation. He added: "Sister, he didn't just serve us—he made the tea himself!" This evoked laughter from the five or six other people sitting with us under the tree. The humor stressed what an anomalous act we had witnessed at Nirmala's house.

But, as Nirmala went on to share, it hadn't always been that way. She used to have a lot of difficulty at home. Her husband was once a hard to manage drinker. When I asked what had changed, she recalled an event when his drinking had gotten out of hand. He treated her like a servant and she got fed up. The next morning, while he was still drunk and asleep, she gathered her child and left the house with the intention of moving back to her village. The bus was late, however, and before it could arrive her husband woke and realized she was gone. He found her waiting for the bus on the side of Uttarkashi's main road with their son and convinced her to come home. That was the beginning of the changes. Shortly thereafter, Nirmala began to focus more on the activities outside of the home that interested her such as the events of the Clean the Ganga Movement.

Later, in my last days of research in the end of 2009, I recalled these things with Nirmala and her husband in a visit to their home. He laughed at the memories. “She says you think she’s crazy,” I asked. “Is that true?” His grin widened as he affirmed that yes, she is definitely is. But he said it fondly. When she spread out the photos and newspaper clippings of her activism, he rifled through them along with me and smiled at the images. He even offered to helpfully fill in the details of some of the events covered in the news because, as Nirmala reminded us, she couldn’t read the Hindi text.

The photos and newspaper clippings were extensive. They covered the entire area of the double bed upon which we sat cross-legged. To this pile, I added the photos I’d taken of Nirmala at movement events over the previous months. She beamed at these new images, claiming that I was one of the few people that actually followed through with the simple request to distribute photos. Having these memories, she stressed, was meaningful for uneducated women such as herself. Unlike the print articles, she could hold up the photos and recite to others their significance.

When it was appropriate to broach the subject, I asked her to share her motivations in the movements that defend the Ganga’s flow. Nirmala explained:

Gangaji is the treasure of our previous births. We have faith in Ganga. Ganga is our mother. She is world famous. She helps us overcome all adversity. We hold our heads high when we hear Ganga’s name. Because of her, we can go anywhere and we are successful. Whatever we have is because of the grace of our Ganga. We are not so well educated; whatever we are is due to the support of Ganga.

Nirmala’s comments bring up several points. First, she underscored the inheritance that the Ganga embodies. This inheritance she attributes to the good deeds of the past, done literally by ancestors or ostensibly in former lives (following the theory of reincarnation). For Nirmala, the person with the main credit for the Ganga’s flow is King

Bhagirath. As she said right after the above quoted text, “Bhagirath did so much [work] to modify nature... we cannot do so much... but we do what we can for Ganga.” Honoring this ancestor’s efforts and the blessings of the river’s flow was vitally important for Nirmala. The second point that she brought up is the Ganga’s fame. “She is world famous,” she said. The notoriety that the Ganga achieved was significant for her. It instills so much pride, in fact, that people hold their heads high when they hear Ganga’s name. Since the Ganga is endowed with so many powers, Nirmala attributes the river and its Goddess to the success that she and others experience in life. The Ganga’s grace does this even for “illiterate” people, a category that she identifies with. And, as Nirmala went on to reason, “Since Ganga is helping us at each step then we should also be ready to save her.” This argument stressed the need for reciprocity. These factors, she argued, demanded action:

We have to raise our voices for Ganga, that she should flow in her original form. Whatever her path is, let her flow in that way without obstruction. If we put the Ganga in a tunnel than her form will be totally different; no one will be able to say that Gangaji flows here.”

For Nirmala, losing the Ganga was the biggest fear. And, casting blame, she criticized the “scientists” (*vigyanic log*) that were responsible for threatening to remove the Ganga’s flow from the riverbed. They should also know, she chastised, that the rains no longer fall in the mountains the way they used to. Pollution is increasing in the region, affecting everything from the quality of water to the health of the glaciers. We feel like crying, she explained, when we see Mother Ganga is such a state. After a pause, Nirmala shared a poem she’d composed:

As long as Ganga exists, as long as there is life in the Glacier,  
Till then the glory of Ganga reigns;  
When the glaciers melt,  
Where will one find Ganga's banks?  
Without Ganga the bodies will rot,  
Leaving reign to dogs and foxes.<sup>89</sup>

Nirmala recited these lines from memory. When she was done, she shared that she had many such things to say about the Ganga. She had also composed numerous original songs that sing the Ganga's glories. But, she mused, with whom shall I share them? Shaking her head, she commented that nobody seems to care. Even those with faith in the Ganga are not coming forward to defend it. And others believe they might get employment because of the dam construction. The government, she lamented, is the worst offender because they did not pay attention to the faith and devotion of the public.<sup>90</sup> They were ready to let the Ganga "disappear".

Nirmala's final criticism was for the engineers who design and implement dam projects. If they are so advanced, she argued, "Why don't they apply their development to something else... have they only got the Ganga left for their development?" No, she countered, they should work on some other and more useful projects to "show that they are [real] scientists." Diminishing their contributions, she reminded me that Bhagirath was not literate. But he brought the Ganga down to earth. Nirmala's father was also

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<sup>89</sup> The deceased are often placed in the flow of the Ganga. People believe that the Goddess will transport their spirits to heaven. Due to low water levels, however, a number of foxes and leopards had been seen consuming human body parts that were meant to be taken away by the river's flow. This was shocking to many in Uttarkashi and it reinforced their fears for the decline of the Ganga's waters.

<sup>90</sup> In a related comment, Nirmala stated that: "The Central Government and others are ready to drink Ganga's blood. They are not paying any attention to our feelings. They have hurt everyone's sentiments."

illiterate but he once found a water source in her village. It provides nourishment to this day. Such acts, she believed, signified true development.

Despite the challenges that she and others confronted to raise awareness about the Ganga's fragile state, she vowed that they would "keep shouting" even though "nobody listens to our voice." If their efforts were unsuccessful, she assured me that the Ganga would save herself should the dam builders and officials one day succeed in redirecting the river's flow. In such a scenario, the Ganga "would definitely show her furious side" by bringing landslides and earthquakes as the Goddess has done in the past.

Nirmala's story demonstrates the challenges that she has overcome and the struggles that she continues to face. Her comments especially show how she has navigated what was once a difficult domestic situation and transformed her household relationships. She has done this through a process of slowly standing up for the convictions that she holds most dear. Paramount among these is her belief that the Ganga's flow should be clean and without obstruction. Nirmala also reflectively cited the ways that the Ganga has supported her and others to overcome hardships in life as well as contentious daily practice. To show her gratitude and love, she engaged herself in movement processes and also in the composition of poems and songs. These compositions praised the Ganga and reminded others of what was at stake if the Ganga's flow is disrupted.

## Conclusion

This chapter has discussed devotional song as a cultural form with sociohistorical origins that is a popular medium of expression for women in the Garhwal Himalayas. Devotional song was a key communication resource that women with low levels of formal education and literacy used in movement events to oppose dam building on the upper Ganga. This chapter has described when and how such women employ these songs. I have argued that the devotional songs evoke the figured worlds that position the Ganga as an entity of paramount importance whose flow is the product of an ancestor's penance and a treasure to defend for current and future generations. By sharing the genealogy of the Ganga's birth and descent into earth, the songs help to remind the singers and the audience why and how the Ganga matters. My analysis of the use of these devotional songs has also explored their significance in the identity transformation that some women underwent as they engaged in activism.

To illustrate the above points, this chapter has shared two women's journeys while highlighting their use of devotional songs in movement processes. The space provided by devotional song is an affective one. Such spaces of devotion call forth the Goddess Ganga and makes people feel that she is with them and that they have her support. The songs also allow women to recognize themselves as ardent devotees and to speak on the Goddess' behalf. Their involvement in these practices has fostered the transformation of their identities and self-conceptions.

As Holland et al. explain, identities enable "possibilities for mediating agency" and they are "important bases from which people create new activities, new worlds, and new ways of being" (1998:4-5). The life histories provided by Sita and Nirmala

demonstrate the relationship between identity struggles and agency. Both women identified as illiterate women with village upbringings who were once too timid to speak in public. Compelled by their devotion to the Ganga and their fears for the changes taking place along the river, they slowly began speaking out in its defense. Their movement involvement has fostered personal and subjective transformations.

Sita's participation in efforts to defend the Ganga were a source of pride and accomplishment. Nirmala's movement involvement has enabled her to navigate contentious practices at home and to redefine her roles as a mother and a wife. In their own ways, both women have been able to challenge and upset historical structures of privilege, a central area of inquiry for social practice theory. This does not mean, however, that all the women that participated in the movements experienced subjective transformations through their involvement. Other women mentioned that they felt disillusioned by the degree to which their efforts were overlooked or underappreciated. This indicates the ongoing structural challenges that many women continue to navigate.

The next chapter is thematically distinct from the ones that precede it. I address the broader ecological changes, such as warming temperatures and glacial melt, which are impacting the Ganga's flow. Some fear that the long-term effects of climatic change will result in the river's disappearance even if the dams are never constructed. Others, however, draw from Hindu scriptures and cosmologies to contend that the river, and especially the Goddess Ganga, will not leave the earth anytime soon. The different discourses draw from past histories and contemporary challenges to make sense of the changes taking place along the river. They demonstrate the meanings that people are producing about ecological transformations and the ways that new struggles are emerging

over the river's use in the context of "climate change". Although the gender subfocus is minimized in the next chapter, the environmental shifts will likely impact women's daily practices and the hardships that they may experience in the Garhwal Himalayas.

## **Chapter 8. A ‘Disappearing’ River? Conflicting Views and Discourses**

The chapters preceding this one have sequentially moved deeper into the conflict over the management of the Bhagirathi Ganga. This has involved the examination of debates over the value of dams and development; the meaning making practices in which people engage when viewing the Ganga from the vantage of different figured worlds and imagining the impact of its manipulation or loss; the particularities of protest along the river’s upper stretch; and the ways that women speak about and contest development practice in the Himalayas by drawing upon accepted cultural forms of expression such as devotional song. I also examined the particularities of concern and the intimate dimensions of emotion and identity vis-à-vis the Ganga.

I now widen the lens to look at emerging “threats” to the river such as climate change and upstream glacial melt. Some scientists and environmentalists believe that these phenomena could potentially impact the Ganga’s long-term condition. In Uttarkashi, however, some river devotees challenge the extent to which environmental stressors are harming the Ganga. Others integrate the environmental concerns with regional ideas about the Goddess’ agency and the effect that human actions have on the Ganga. I also show how people draw from Hindu religious scriptures to interpret ecological change and to cosmologically situate the river’s potential loss. The various

ways that people perceive the transformations taking place inform their responses and their participation in new struggles over the Ganga in the context of climatic change.

Although these debates may seem distinct from the ones about development and its impacts, there is considerable overlap. In looking at ecological change, I address concerns for the future of a vital body of water in the Himalayas along with the cultural and religious practices that the Ganga supports. My treatment of these issues also highlights the ways that people struggle over and make meaning about the transformations along the river's Himalayan stretch. This chapter continues to frame these meaning making processes within an approach that engages the multiple dialogues in circulation and conflict and which pertain to the river's current and future state. It does while including the "scientific" discourses about glacial melt that have generated substantial controversy. By interlacing the climate science and the regional interpretations of change, this chapter examines the extent to which people perceive that the Ganga—as a physical body of water, a cultural resource, and a Goddess—is endangered. I emphasize the varied epistemologies and ontologies that influence perceptions of environmental shifts.

I focus on the circulation of discourses about the river's condition and potential 'disappearance' in four arenas. First I address the influence of national and international climate science and the controversial predictions of glacial retreat. These discussions greatly influenced my thinking and my fears for the future of Himalayan ecologies before I arrived in Uttarkashi. The second is the space in which devotion to the Ganga is enacted along its upper reaches. I share perspectives about the Ganga's resilience that I encountered when speaking to river devotees at Manikarnika ghat in Uttarkashi. This was

an important location where I learned that some people do not perceive that the Ganga is endangered. The third arena is the programming of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and social movements. It was due to the events sponsored by such groups and networks that some of my consultants came to know about, and become concerned for, climate change. The final arena is the circulation of discourses about the Ganga's impermanence that are informed by Hindu texts and cosmologies. My exploration of these arenas demonstrates the production of meanings about ecological transformations and the extent to which people's understandings of such changes are evolving. My discussion also demonstrates how people mediate, and make sense of, circulating discourses about change, some of which are growing in frequency relative to others.

Towards the end of the chapter, I address a debate on the role that religion can play in the promotion of sustainable ecologies. This is sometimes indicated by the phrase "religion and ecology". My ethnographic work indicates that even though religion has been a source of inspiration for some of the actors I have featured earlier in this dissertation, it does not always promote concern for and care of the environment. In some instances, as I show, Hindu religious interpretations of ecological change can even promote complacency and provide validations for the development status quo instead of fostering proactive efforts to preserve natural resources.

My discussion of evaluations and interpretations of ecological change in the Himalayas is relevant to a growing body of literature on the anthropology of climate change. Such scholarship recognizes the inextricable linkages between humans and the

environment that ecological anthropology (Rappaport 1968; Steward 1955)<sup>91</sup> historical ecology (Crumley 1994; Bale 1988)<sup>92</sup>, and even political ecology (Robbins 2004; Biersack et al. 2006) have highlighted. This scholarship, similar to the anthropology of the environment, also attends to the meanings that people ascribe to themselves, the environment, and the relationships that connect them (Alley 2001; Crumley et al. 2001; Martinez-Allier 2002; Tsing 2001, 2005; West 2006).

Within the anthropology of climate change, the work of Crate (2008) and Crate et al. (2009) indicates that climate change could threaten cultural systems, including patterns of existing in and perceiving the world. Increasingly, they argue, culturally diverse and enriching human-environment relations are being challenged by global ecological change. These relations “lose place” because climatic shifts entail the relocation of human, animal, and plant populations as they adjust to change. They write: “Such relocations, both actual and projected, entail a loss of intimate human-environment relationships that not only ground and substantiate indigenous worldviews, but also work to maintain and steward local landscapes. In some cases, migrations and ecological change will also result in the loss of mythological symbols, meteorological orientation, and even the very totem and mainstay plants and animals that ground a culture” (Crate and Nuttall 2009:12).

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<sup>91</sup> Theoretical labeling is often problematic. Although the authors noted are sometimes associated with cultural ecology, I link them with “ecological anthropology” following Moran’s 2006 presentation of these scholars (31).

<sup>92</sup> Historical ecologists emphasize the importance of applying a long-term lens to our analysis of the human-environment interconnections that shaped, and continue to shape, the earth’s landscapes and biospheres. Such scholars have sought to remind us, among other things, that humans have been interacting and intervening in ecosystems processes for not just centuries but millennia.

There are criticisms to this perspective. The invited responses to Crate's 2008 piece in *Cultural Anthropology* reveal the hesitation that some scholars have with forewarning the demise of entire cultural systems because of shifting ecological contexts. Scholars such as Schlee point to evidence of human resilience and adaptability to suggest that cultural change is a part of human experience and that we cannot expect cultures to remain static (2008: 589). Crate's response to these arguments is to assert that the truism of cultural fluidity and adaptation is not an excuse to sit by and watch with idle attention the sweeping ecological transformations that are impacting people's livelihoods and the cosmological groundings that give meaning to life (2008: 590-593).

I take inspiration from Crate's call to examine the ways that climatic shifts and ecological transformation could impact cultural practices and livelihoods. This was an area of inquiry that I was very interested in before I began fieldwork. I also heed some of Schlee's cautionary remarks because many people in the Garhwal Himalayas pointed to the resilience of their cultural and religious practices regardless of whether or not the Ganga should be lost due to the deterioration of its upstream glacial source. My consultants in Uttarkashi sometimes even took a middle ground. Before I describe the commentaries of my consultants in the Himalayas, I begin with the international debate and controversy over climate change and glacial melt.

### **A Region and a River in Peril? Context and Controversy**

International concern for climate change and its associated phenomena grew substantially in the years before I began fieldwork. Of the many potentially deleterious impacts that could result from warming temperatures alone, the issue of glacial retreat

was a topic of significant discussion in much of the media and scientific literature. Newspaper articles and academic journals gave several estimates for glacial melt globally and reminded readers of the vast hydraulic changes that the ice loss could entail in places such as the Himalayas. When I read such articles, I noticed that the commentary influenced my emotion and cognition; I was fearful for the ecological shifts that awaited Himalayan residents and those living downstream. Because of this, I was filled with a deep concern for a looming climate catastrophe before I began full-time research.

During the period of my fieldwork, however, a significant shadow of doubt was cast over some of the predictions for glacial retreat in the Himalayas. My questioning of the estimates for ice loss at the Gangotri-Gaumukh glacier began when I learned of the paucity of long-term data for that particular glacial range. It increased when the predicted date for the ‘disappearance’ of Himalayan glaciers became a subject of international controversy in 2009.

Whereas the records for the glacial movements in areas like North America, Europe, and the Arctic are extensive, the data on glaciers in the Himalayas extends back only a few decades. In South Asian countries like India, for instance, much of the early research relied on limited field investigations and aerial photography. Among the few glaciers studied, the Gangotri-Gaumukh glacier is one of the best documented. This ice mass feeds into the upper stretch of the Ganga in the Indian State of Uttarakhand. It is located near India’s northwestern border with Tibet/China. Dobhal (2009) cites a 1937 sketch of the Gangotri-Gaumukh glacier by Auden as the first effort to establish reference points for its fluctuations (72). He notes subsequent studies and claims that the regular monitoring of the glacier’s snout only began in 1971 when the Geological Survey of

India undertook the task. Later, in the 1990s, satellite imagery and remote sensing were introduced. The data shows that the Gangotri-Gaumukh glacier retreated 1.25 miles from 1780 to 2001 (Naithani et al. 2001: 94). The pace of recession quickened after 1971. In the 25 years before 2009, the glacier retreated more than a half a mile (NASA 2009).

Unfortunately, the data has been inadequate for the entire glacial range of which the Gangotri-Gaumukh glacier is a part. Scant funding and the difficulty of accessing glaciers higher than 2,500 feet have been a part of the problem. The dearth of information has made the movement of Himalayan glaciers in places like India a subject of speculation. For this reason, postulations regarding the quantity of ice loss in the Himalayas often involved a limited selection of glaciers, including the Gangotri-Gaumukh glacier, rather than the region's ice masses as a whole.<sup>93</sup>

Based on data from a relatively small selection of glacial bodies, Indian glaciologists such as V.K. Raina (2009) and R.K. Ganjoo (2009) dismissed the concern for Himalayan glaciers. After showing photographs of a few glacial snouts (terminus points) and their movements over the last fifty years, for instance, the latter scientist claimed at a climate change conference in New Delhi in November of 2009 that “there is no need to worry” about Himalayan glacial melt.

At the other end of the spectrum were those that predicted the near disappearance of the Himalayan glaciers. This perspective was at one point fueled by the 2007 report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that cited the year 2035 as a likely timeframe for the Himalayan glaciers to vanish. That date was widely quoted in environmental circles from 2007 up until the middle of 2009. People worried about the

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<sup>93</sup> “Glaciers Take the Heat” by Smriti Mallapaty. Available at HIMAL Magazine, [http://www.himalmag.com/Glaciers-take-the-heat\\_nw3573.html](http://www.himalmag.com/Glaciers-take-the-heat_nw3573.html), accessed July 11, 2010.

entire collapse of Himalayan hydraulic systems and the ecosystems that they feed. Many reports painted a picture of impending doom.

One such report was a documentary produced by PBS/Now entitled “On Thin Ice.”<sup>94</sup> The filmmakers traveled up to the Gangotri-Gaumukh glacier to document its condition. They also took a small sampling of views on what its retreat could potentially mean for people living in the Himalayas as well as the downstream inhabitants of the Indian plains. Some of the narratives that they employed are important to note. The beginning sequences of “On Thin Ice” present us with images and adjectives for the Gangotri-Gaumukh glacier. The narrator tells us that it is “endangered” and that its potential loss represents an “environmental calamity in the making.” The glacier’s retreat foretells, we are told, an “unimaginable future for the world as we know it.” This, the filmmakers assert, is based on what “scientists” say. The main scientists they cite are the ones that helped write the 2007 report compiled by the IPCC.

The 2035 date in which the Himalayan glaciers were speculated to disappear was a subject of intense controversy before and during the period in which reports like “On Thin Ice” were produced. Indian glaciologists, as noted, were some of the most adamant in their efforts to refute the prediction. Initially, the IPCC defended the date. They pointed to the exhaustive peer-reviewed work of the thousands of scientists that their 2007 publication drew from. After review, however, they later conceded that the 2035 date was dubious. As it turned out, that number was likely taken from a 2005 publication of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) that came out of Kathmandu, Nepal. The estimate for glacial retreat was based on the comments of one scientist and not a peer reviewed

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<sup>94</sup> <http://video.pbs.org/video/1146684618/>, accessed January 15, 2011.

publication. In late 2009, IPCC officials revoked the 2035 date as potentially erroneous. But, they cautioned, the Himalayan glaciers are still threatened by ecological shifts and warming temperatures. They called for an escalation of data collection and cautioned against complacency given the potentially high stakes (UNEP 2009).

What the mistake underscores is the fact that our scientific knowledge can be imprecise. It also calls for caution. Although the glaciers of the Himalayas may very well be “endangered,” we must treat apocalyptic narratives with hesitation. A report in 2010 by Immerzeel et al. for instance, shows that the retreat of glaciers that feed into the Ganga may not cause the massive water and food shortages that some fear. Their study indicates that the contribution of snow and glacial water to the Ganges is only 10%. This, they argue, is due to limited upstream precipitation, the relatively smaller size of the glaciers in that system, and the recharge contribution of monsoon-dominated downstream climates (2010: 1383). The Brahmaputra and Indus Rivers, by contrast, depend on glacial melt to a much greater extent. The populations living near to those rivers could be significantly impacted by the loss of upstream Himalayan ice mass. Given the geographic variation of glacial melt rates and the divergent ways that river systems will be affected, they conclude that while Asia’s “water towers” are threatened by climate change, the effects of climate change on water availability and food security in Asia will differ. And, they add, these changes cannot be generalized. This concurs with an earlier study by Rees and Collins in 2006 that also pointed to geographic variability and disparate rates of glacial melt in a variety of Himalayan glacial regions.

What I seek to point out in highlighting the IPCC’s 2007 error and the above report is the degree to which our knowledge of glacial melt is changing along with

predictions of downstream impacts. This may temper the presentation given by the PBS/Now special that the recession of the iconic Gangotri-Gaumukh range will lead to “water wars”. These gloom and doom projections succeed in getting one’s attention. But do they tell the whole story? Based on the above evidence, I argue that they do not.

Narratives of impending ecological collapse, moreover, are only one of multiple discourses in circulation. In the Himalayas, there are numerous other interpretations of ecological change and its significance. The perspectives indicate varied connections to dynamic bodies of water and ice. These entities are infused with multiple meanings, many of which are religious. In the discussion that follows, I highlight the regional interpretations of ecological change and glacial melt that residents of the Garhwal Himalayas provided to me along the upper stretch of the Ganga.

### **Assessing Knowledge of Ecological Change at Manikarnika Ghat, Uttarkashi**

Soon after I arrived in Uttarkashi District for full time research in the summer of 2008, I came to know that the estimates for glacial retreat and the scientific discourses on climate change were not yet topics about which many people *regularly* conversed or expressed knowledge. I was especially surprised when I questioned people in Uttarkashi city. Although I anticipated that rural residents would know less about the “science” of climate change, I expected that Uttarkashi residents would have more access to print and video media in which the issues were being discussed. This was not always the case. My conversations with people on Manikarnika ghat were particularly indicative that not everyone was aware of climate change or that, at the very least, they didn’t perceive it in the same way that I was trained to think of it.

Manikarnika Ghat, as I've mentioned in this dissertation, is one of the most important places to worship the Ganga in Uttarkashi. The ghat, or steps leading to the Ganga, is located at a point where the river cuts through the middle of the city. It is a main site for people to gather on auspicious days in the Hindu calendar, pray to the Goddess Ganga, and cleanse themselves in the holy waters. The majority of the people that can be found at Manikarnika ghat on any given holy day are most often women.

I started visiting Manikarnika ghat regularly in the summer of 2008 and I continued to go there throughout the period of my fieldwork. It was while sitting on the steps leading to the river that I was able to observe in detail the practices of reverence and devotion to the Ganga. Whereas the men came empty handed, the women often arrived with woven baskets covered by a colorful knit doily. If the day was sunny, the women—and particularly the women from the villages—would drape this doily over their heads to shield themselves from sun's rays. They would next place the palms of their hands together in a gesture of greeting and reverence and perhaps offer a murmured prayer. Then they would take out a bronze pot from the basket, which they dipped into the waters of the Ganga. Devotees held this water up to the Sun and its God, Surya, before pouring it back into the river's flow. They would repeat this roughly three times and most often they would spin in a clockwise direction while they let the water descend back into the flow of the Ganga that rushed around their feet. After this ritual, women would proceed to offer the other items in their baskets to the river Goddess. They would take a pinch of turmeric and other spices and throw them in the Ganga along with a bit of the vermilion dye that married women place on their heads called a *sindoor*. Devotees would also sprinkle dry rice and other foodstuffs into the waters.

**Figure 8. 1 Devotion to the Ganga at Manikarnika Ghat**



When I asked one woman why she offered the Ganga these items, she replied to me in an amused but sharp tone: “Why do you eat?” I was stumped by this question and could only smile in response. The woman, satisfied that her rhetorical question had achieved its aim, grinned back at me and said: “That is why Ganga eats, too.” For her, the Goddess was as much a living being as I or anyone else. And we shared the same needs for nourishment. As she was saying this, however, another woman standing next to her emptied the contents of a plastic bag into the Ganga and, having made her offerings, she let the plastic drop into the waters, too. This was a common act of pollution amidst devotion that I observed at every point along the Ganga from the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal. When I asked such people why they put waste in the river, they often said that there was nowhere else to deposit the plastic and they reasoned that it didn’t harm the Goddess Ganga. This illustrates some of the contradictions about the river’s treatment that others, such as Alley (2002), have pointed out.

In addition to observing practices of worship and pollution, Manikarnika ghat was a place where I was able to witness several acts of Goddess possession. These moments

of rapture were often very brief and I only saw women experience them. The women who I observed experiencing possession included rural women visiting the city for the day and the seemingly middle-class women who lived in Uttarkashi. There was no telling who would be possessed at any given moment. Women would just approach the waters, perform their ritual practices, and then immerse themselves.<sup>95</sup> When the Goddess came to them while they were bathing, they would suddenly scream and begin to shake uncontrollably. If the flow was particularly swift, nearby devotees would grab the possessed woman to keep her from falling deeper into the rushing waters as she writhed and flailed. Lasting between fifteen and sixty seconds, these moments of possession would desist as quickly as they had begun. Sometimes, women standing near to someone who they believed to have experienced an authentic possession<sup>96</sup> would touch her feet, shoulders, or head in a gesture that symbolically transferred the power (*shakti*) of the Goddess onto them. On a particularly auspicious day that celebrates the Ganga's "birthday" (Ganga Dashahara), the commemoration of her descent into earth from the heavens, I counted seven instances of Goddess possession in a half-hour period alone.

Initially, I was confused when I witnessed these moments of possession. I thought that perhaps it was the Goddess Ganga that was entering the bodies of the women when they worshipped her riverine form and bathed in her waters. When I asked some of the

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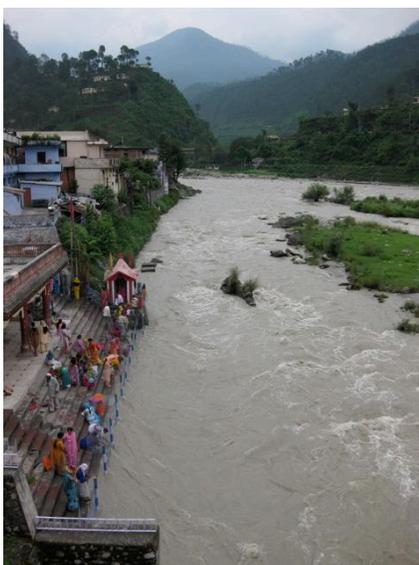
<sup>95</sup> If it the Ganga's flow was high and swift, devotees had to hold onto a chain link fence while they immersed themselves in the river to keep from being swept away.

<sup>96</sup> Some of my consultants told me that they were able to discern who had experienced a "real" possession and who had only pretended to experience one. As to why one would fake an encounter with the Goddess, one of my informants said that the act was meant to gain attention and increase a woman's esteem among her peers because the Goddess had selected her as a medium. This explanation was akin to saying that Goddess possession can help increase a person's symbolic capital in the sense explained by Bourdieu (1977).

women who had been possessed, they clarified that it was not the Ganga that had visited them. They weren't always sure who had come into their bodies but they most often explained that it was the family Goddess (*ghar ki devi*) that they worshiped at home and who looked after them. The reasons for why their family Goddess would come to them while they bathed in the Ganga was not always clear to the women I asked. One woman, however, did have an answer. She explained: "The Goddess who watches over our home gets happy when we are near Ganga and she comes to worship her through us."

Along with being a central location for worship of the Ganga in Uttarkashi, Manikarnika ghat was one of the locations with a high variability of flow. In the summertime, when rain was plentiful and the rate of upstream glacial melt was high, the river would be swollen. In the fall and spring, the water would be nearly absent from the ghat. Devotees would either have to bathe in a small trickle that flowed past the steps of Manikarnika ghat or they would have to cross a dry embankment. The variability in the seasonal flows is pictured in Figure 8.2.

**Figure 8. 2 Seasonal Flow Variability at Manikarnika Ghat, Uttarkashi**



Manikarnika Ghat, June 2009



Manikarnika Ghat, December 2009

It was because of the high variations in the river's flow past Manikarnika ghat that I chose it as a location to ask people about their perceptions of change in the region. This was at times a difficult task because most often devotees came to the ghat for worship of the Goddess Ganga and to Shiva (the main male god with which she is associated) and I had to interrupt them either before or after their rituals to ask them about the ecological transformations that they had observed. Fortunately, most of the people I approached were so taken by the presence of a White foreigner (*gori*) speaking in Hindi that they were happy to talk with me even if I was asking about sensitive topics such as the Ganga's longevity and potential decline. After I had satisfied their queries about where I was from, what I was doing in Uttarkashi, and if I liked the region, I was able to pose the questions that were on my mind.

In speaking with roughly thirty women on Manikarnika over a series of ten visits to the ghat, I came to realize that very few of them were concerned about the changes they had seen to the Ganga's flow. When I asked, for instance, about the low flows at Manikarnika ghat in the fall and winter, I was most often told that this was due to the upstream Maneri dam. This was presented as an observation and it didn't necessarily equate to a denouncement of that particular project. When I asked about the Ganga's future condition, however, the women that did know about the contested dams upstream<sup>97</sup> asserted that these projects would also impact the Ganga by taking evermore water into the mountains. This perception was not entirely correct as the run-of-the-river dams were designed to take water out of the river, run them through tunnels, and then release the water back into the riverbed. Since Uttarkashi was downstream of these dams, the

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<sup>97</sup> Several of the people I spoke with at Manikarnika ghat were unaware of the projects that were under construction upstream of Uttarkashi during the period of my fieldwork.

available water would have remained the same because it would have already been returned to the riverbed at the powerhouse located just above Manikarnika ghat.

Regardless of whether or not people were worried about the impact of the dams, not one of my consultants on Manikarnika ghat expressed a fear that the Ganga would one day cease to flow. When I pointed to the scant levels of water in the Ganga at periods of low flow, people would tell me stories about the river's movements and capricious nature. Before, they said, the Ganga always used to flow near the ghat no matter how little water there was. In the last few decades, the river shifted sides and now flows most of the year on the far side of the riverbed that is opposite to the ghat. Recalling this, some consultants also shared with me that the river had once even flowed on the opposite side of the city. The river, according to my consultants, switched sides suddenly in the middle of the 1800s because the Goddess Ganga got mad at the human misconduct in Uttarkashi and changed course to punish the evildoers whose homes were inundated.

The general lack of concern for the Ganga's condition did not mean that the women I spoke with on Manikarnika ghat hadn't noticed and weren't worried about ecological shifts. Many people commented on the growing water shortages and the rising temperatures. They noted that these phenomena inhibited the timely maturation of crops and endangered the agricultural cycle. Water scarcity—in terms of the water that was available via groundwater and springs—was a topic that many elaborated upon by sharing examples of water stress from villages near and far.

My conversations with people on Manikarnika ghat, therefore, indicated that although people had observed environmental change, they often perceived that those transformations would not lead to a significant decline of water in the Ganga. This meant

that many people viewed the Ganga as an exceptional entity that was independent of the variations in the water cycle that occurred around it. Because of this perception, these river devotees did not perceive that the Ganga was ‘disappearing’.

To further explore this apparent lack of concern for the Ganga’s longevity, I tried to pose hypothetical questions about the river’s loss. I asked people on Manikarnika ghat, for instance, “Could you ever imagine a time when the Ganga would stop flowing?” Numerous people replied to this question with a gasp and a strong “No.” One older woman answered this question with furrowed brows before responding. “The Ganga will never disappear,” she told me firmly. When I pressed her to consider the ecological changes rapidly taking place in the region, the woman looked thoughtfully down the steps to the thin stream of water running below. “On the day when Ganga is no more,” she conceded, “it will be the end of the world.” The difficulty imagining life without the river demonstrates the monumental value that people placed on its existence.

One of the reasons why I had such a difficult time getting people to talk about the Ganga’s potential loss on Manikarnika ghat perhaps has to do with the particular significance of that location. In the Skand Puran, for instance, Lord Shiva speaks to his devotees and tells them that he can be found residing in Uttarkashi during the worst stages of Kali yug and that they should worship the Ganga there at Manikarnika ghat to attain salvation.<sup>98</sup> According to Shiva, “Those who take a bath in Manikarnika and offer water to their ancestors, their ancestors stay satisfied for millions of years. Those who

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<sup>98</sup> In the Skand Puran, Lord Shiva is quoted as saying: “This Kashi [Uttarkashi] is the ultimate place for salvation (*moksha*). Even without knowing much, salvation is possible here. People get salvation even by dying in this place. Therefore, on the face of this earth, there is no place that is more sacred than this. This is the significance of my Kashi... In Kali yug, this Kashi will be known as Uttarkashi” (1994).

worship their fathers with proper rituals [at Manikarnika], they bring salvation to hundreds of previous generations of their ancestors... Somehow or the other, one should try to offer [Ganga] water here” (1994). Such scriptures likely influence ideas about Uttarkashi’s importance while providing reassurance that the Ganga’s flow through the city at Manikarnika ghat will continue to provide grace in times of sin and decay.

Although some of the illiterate and semi-literate women I talked to would not have been able to read these scriptures themselves, they were apt to hear the Hindu priests and storytellers refer to these texts. The deference that women showed to such authorities—who were almost always male—was reinforced in some of my conversations with women on Manikarnika ghat. On one occasion, for instance, I spoke with a river devotee about environmental change in the region and she noted that it no longer snowed in Uttarkashi in the winter. When I asked why not, she let out an exasperated sigh and said, “What do I know? Go ask the priest.”

In my initial visits to Manikarnika ghat in 2008, I would sometimes ask people what they knew about climate change. Many of the people I spoke with were unfamiliar with this term. At first, I thought it was my American English that confused them. So I tried to pronounce “climate” as “klimat” with the hard K and T that is common with speakers of English whose mother tongue is Hindi. Most were still confused by this term. In my third attempt, I would use the Hindi translation that I’d heard in environmental circles: *jalvayu parivartan*. This term was similarly unfamiliar.

On one occasion, I met three young college girls performing worship (*puja*) at Manikarnika ghat. They stood out from the crowd of women because they wore jeans and tight sweaters as opposed to the *salwar kameez* or the *sari* that the women around them

wore. As we spoke, I learned that they were students at the government postgraduate college in Uttarkashi. I anticipated that these girls, literate women in their early twenties, would know about climate change. They did not. I'd caught their interest, however, and they asked me to explain what the term meant. When I gave my rendition of its associated phenomena, they shrugged their shoulders and thanked me for the information.

In addition to occasionally sharing definitions of climate change, I sometimes cited estimates of glacial retreat in my early conversations with people on Manikarnika ghat. These included the IPCC's prediction that the Himalayan glaciers would "disappear" in 2035. Looking back, I cringe at the bravado with which I presented these spurious numbers to devout Hindu devotees of the river's Goddess. That I dared to do so demonstrated my deep entrenchment in dominant "scientific" discourses. It also demonstrated the valuations that I had in the beginning of my fieldwork for "knowable" natural entities such as glaciers. By knowable I mean to say that I felt I could speak to change in ice formations with certainty. When I said that the glaciers were retreating, I cognitively processed this statement as true and I envisioned an irreversible change in a progression of decline. Later, as I reflected on how I had shared my understandings of climatic change and glacial retreat, I realized that I had also become an actor involved in the circulation of climate change discourses.

The urgency with which I thought about glacial retreat was contrasted by some of the responses I received. When I stated the estimates for retreat given by scientists, for instance, the information was sometimes met with nonplussed expressions and perhaps even a shrug. Numerous people even refuted the estimates outright. One consultant, a fortuneteller who channeled one of the regional *devis* or Goddesses, proclaimed that the

glacier didn't have to go back, that it could also surge. If people behaved better and adhered to higher standards of moral conduct, she reasoned, the glaciers would gladly return. The confidence that accompanied such utterances was confounding, alluring, and somehow comforting.

Over time, I stopped using the term climate change when asking about people's perceptions of ecological transformations in the region. Similar to what Marino (2009) found in her study with Alaskan natives, I realized that it was easier to access people's observations of landscape alterations and climatic shifts when I refrained from associating these phenomena with climate change. Instead, I asked people if the weather was changing. This was language that people in the area readily responded to. I learned that the same people who did not respond to the words climate change were often eager to comment on the changes in the average temperature and precipitation when I asked about the weather (*mausam*).<sup>99</sup>

When I inquired about the state of the upstream glaciers, some people mentioned that they themselves had seen changes from its previous form while on pilgrimage to Gaumukh or that they had heard the ice mass was undergoing a transformation from friends and other pilgrims. From these sources of information, they knew that Gangotri-Gaumukh no longer looked like the mouth of a cow as per the namesake for the glacier's snout, "Gaumukh". People commented to me that the cave that once resembled the open

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<sup>99</sup> If I asked in Hindi, "Is the weather changing?" (*Kya mausam badal raha hai?*), they would most often reply in the affirmative and say, "Yes, the weather is changing" (*Han, mausam badal raha hai*). This was followed by various observations. These included a paucity of winter snows, erratic rainfall (including rainfall in the wrong seasons), warming temperatures, and crop failures.

jaws of a cow (and from which water flowed) was gradually losing shape as the ice melted and large sheets broke apart.

**Figure 8.3 Glacial Melt at Gaumukh (Snout of Gangotri-Gaumukh)**



Gaumukh in October of 2004



Gaumukh in October of 2009

There were several reasons cited for the changing ice formations at Gaumukh. Some respondents pointed out that pollution has grown in the world and that this pollution is a cause of the changes to the regional ecology. Conceptualizations of pollution, however, were not limited to plastics, carbon emissions, and the brown clouds that cover many of the world's cities. It also included corrupt human nature or "internal pollution". This moral degeneracy was linked with the inevitable increase in sin (*paap*) that accompanies Kali Yug, the last of four cycles of time in Hindu cosmologies.<sup>100</sup>

A few consultants at Manikarnika ghat pointed to litter and sewage along the river to argue that people are "no longer good" and have lost respect for the holy Ganga.

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<sup>100</sup> The four *yug* mark periods of time and a progression from righteousness to degeneracy. The first, Satya yug, is a period of pure goodness. It is therefore considered the "golden age." Treta yug is characterized by a 25% increase in sin. In the next period, Dvapara yug, the world is 50% bad and 50% good. In Kali yug, an age of moral corruption and turmoil, the balance of goodness in the world is only 25%. Each of these yugs have internal phases lasting thousands of years. When Kali yug ends, the cycle begins again with Satya yug.

Numerous river devotees reasoned that the Ganga was upset at such sinful behavior and that the changing ice formations at Gaumukh were signs of her displeasure. These statements challenged some of my own socio-cultural trappings even though I was familiar with ethnographic descriptions, such as Cruikshank's (2005) presentation of Alaska natives' relationships with glaciers, which portrayed similar perspectives on non-human agency. As I show next, the fusion of environmental discourses with commentary about the Goddess Ganga's agency was something that was especially prominent among people exposed to the work of NGOs and social movements.

### **NGOs, Social Movements, and the Circulation of Climate Change Discourses**

In and around Uttarkashi, a number of non-governmental organizations worked to educate people about climate change and its associated phenomena. Several of these organizations were based in Uttarkashi. These regional NGOs had offices and ongoing projects in surrounding villages. Other organizations had home offices in large urban centers like New Delhi. The national NGOs coordinated events in the Garhwal Himalayas that varied from one-time environmental awareness raising campaigns to environmental programs that lasted months and years. It was because of the programming of regional and national NGOs that I discovered that I was more likely to hear someone in a village outside of Uttarkashi talk about climate change phenomena than my Manikarnika ghat consultants. One reason for this is that, when first entering a village, I usually spoke with a village head or the leader of one of the women's committees (*mahila mangaldal*) that are common to the area. These people, who held esteemed positions in their villages, were most likely to have been involved in NGO programming

and they were often sensitized to some of the environmental concerns that their NGO interlocutors shared with them.

The educational efforts of regional and national organizations also overlapped with localized observations of change. In one village along the Ganga five miles upstream of Uttarkashi that I visited six times over a year and a half, I documented commentary from people who itemized the rise in average temperatures, the concerning lack of snow in the winter, the loss of groundwater supplies, and also the increasingly frequent failure of crops. The head of the women's committee in that particular village told me that the changes in the weather were forcing women to extend their already long working hours. In the rice cultivation season in the spring-summer of 2009, for instance, women had to plant rice three separate times before the crop finally took. This tripled their labor for the season. When the rice matured, it produced only half of the anticipated amount. The women's committee members in that village, Nagpuri, informed me that the rice crop yielded more fodder for the cattle than food that could nourish their families.

Prior to 2009, I did not hear people in Nagpuri use the words "climate change" with the exception of the women's committee members who had been sensitized to the term through the programming of a prominent NGO in the region. In the middle of that year, however, I became privy to the circulation of discourses about climate change in Nagpuri. A friend and former colleague asked me to introduce him to some of my village contacts for a survey on climate change awareness that his organization was conducting in the Garhwal Himalayas. I agree and went with one of his staff members to Nagpuri. In the course of conducting the survey, the NGO worker spent time introducing people to the term climate change and educating them about its associated phenomena.

In addition to the work of several NGOs, some of the movements organized to defend the Ganga from hydroelectric development were also engaged in efforts to increase awareness about potential climate change impacts in the mountains. As I mentioned earlier, for instance, some of the members of Ganga Ahvaan were highly educated urbanites from New Delhi that would come up to the mountains for dam opposition meetings and rallies. At these events, they would speak of climate change to the people gathered. Such programs, along with other events like the climate change meeting sponsored by Dr. Vandana Shiva's organization that I described in the introduction to chapter 7, helped to sensitize the participants in the dam opposition to climate science discourses.

Although they were influential, the discourses on climate change did not displace the ideas that many mountain activists held about the Ganga's agency. Instead, many people in the movements merged the climate discourses with their own ontologies of the Ganga. Nirmala's poem, also featured in chapter 7, is an example of this merging. Her composition, which she shared with me after attending Dr. Shiva's climate change meeting, shows how the environmental figurings impacted her thinking because in it she lamented the potential loss of the Gangotri-Gaumukh glacier. The discourse about glacial retreat, however, did not dampen her belief in the power and agency of the Goddess Ganga. Rather, Nirmala was able to blend environmental-scientific and religious figured worlds. This synthesis allowed her to call for the river's conservation and protection while also cautioning that, "Ganga will definitely show her furious side" if people do not act in her interest.

There were numerous other indications that people incorporated the climate science with their own understandings of the Goddess' agency and her ability to respond to human behavior. Once introduced to the discourses on glacial retreat, for instance, some activists from Uttarkashi campaigned for the glacier's conservation. Their concern for the glacier, however, was influenced by the estimates of retreat as well as their perceptions of the degree to which localized activities harm the Ganga's glacial source.

One activist adamantly demanded that tourism up to the glacial snout at Gaumukh be completely stopped. She argued that as more people go up to the glacier for adventure or to beg for their own salvation, evermore cars and bodies travel near to and pollute the fragile ice. Although a cap was already in place that restricted the per day number of visitors to 150, this particular activist undertook a one-woman campaign to stop all movement past the temple at Gangotri, some fifteen miles below the glacier. She argued that visitors litter the trails and pollute the area. The woman even asserted that some of the foreign tourists and for-profit pilgrims (who are paid to bring holy water from the glacier to urban residents) harm the integrity of the ice mass by bringing up "impure" foodstuffs such as meat and alcohol. She and others imagined that these goods reduced the holy atmosphere around the glacier, angered the Goddess Ganga, and caused her to recede out of displeasure with human conduct. In an account given by a religious ascetic who used to live in Gangotri, the Goddess once became so infuriated by meat consumption at Gaumukh that she broke off a large chunk of the glacier. This incident, purportedly from the late 1990s, created a surge of water that enveloped and killed the meat-consuming people picnicking nearby. Although the story is anecdotal, it attests to

some of the ideas that people have about the Goddess' ability to respond to human behavior.

In addition to the role that humans play in creating physical and ritual pollution near Gaumukh, some people told me that the heat from human bodies that approach the glacier causes the ice to deteriorate and melt. In one interview, a semi-literate village woman shared this hypothesis to explain why the glacier was changing (she didn't say "retreat"). When I looked confused at this answer the woman helpfully sat arm-to-arm next to me on the bench where we were sitting. Grinning through beads of sweat in the intense Indian summer, she asked if I didn't feel a bit warmer with another body next to mine. (I did.) And, since I got warmer with another body sitting close to me, she reasoned that the glacier/Goddess must get hot from receiving all the pilgrims that go up to Gaumukh. Although I documented people employing this logic at environmental rallies and climate change awareness-raising events, the educated classes disregarded this assertion. They had learned from the media that warming temperatures and glacial retreat were *America's fault* and not that of a few thousand devotees yearning to see the river's sacred source.

The idea that localized activities hurt the glacier persisted nonetheless. In conversations with mountain activists, I heard many complain that the dust, dirt, and sand from the road and dam construction were causing particulate matter to rise into the air and settle higher up in the mountains. These brown, grey, and black particles were damaging the glacier, I was told, and thus the development projects should be stopped. In early 2009, a UNDP officer in New Delhi mused that he had heard similar complaints in other parts of the Himalayas where dams are proliferating. To him, the concern had merit.

After all, white ice reflects the sun's heat but sullied ice loses its ability to deflect ultraviolet rays. Despite this, he cautioned that the argument faltered when one considered scale because a few dam projects couldn't possibly impact the glaciers as a whole. As 2009 and 2010 progressed, however, more talk emerged about the negative impact that brown smog-filled clouds and black soot can have on glacial integrity. Although many countries produce such pollution, the intensity of airborne particulate matter is especially high in populated Asian countries like India and China that use less refined versions of coal, petroleum, and kerosene as compared to Europeans or North Americans. This indicates that localized activities and regional pollution patterns could possibly combine with the larger-scale phenomena to contribute to a loss of overall glacial integrity.

### **Hindu Interpretations of Change: The Influence of Texts and Cosmologies**

As I've indicated, the number of discourses circulating in Uttarkashi about "climate change" (or *jalvayu parivartan*) increased by the summer of 2009. Besides the village leaders and social movement participants that I have noted were sensitized to the climate discourses through environmental programming, I found that Uttarkashi's well-educated residents were also talking amongst themselves about climate change. These were often the business owners, teachers, and middle class families with access to cable television. They read the newspapers and watched coverage of environmental issues on various national and international channels.

When I spoke with such people, I asked them to clarify what climate change entailed. These consultants associated the term with a global rise in temperature and a

lack of snowfall in the Himalayan winters. They were also aware of the global inequities associated with climate change phenomena. Media coverage of the climate summit at Copenhagen in 2009 was particularly influential. It educated people about the tensions between the “developed” countries emitting the bulk of the world’s carbon emissions and the “developing” countries who defended their rights to economic growth even if it meant increasing emission levels.

Even as these educated people spoke of climate change, their interpretations often stopped short when they were asked about the Ganga’s future. Yes, some contended, the Gangotri-Gaumukh glacier is receding due to global warming and the continuity of the Ganga’s flow is in jeopardy. Often in the same stroke, however, respondents would refute the idea that the river—and especially the Goddess—could completely disappear from the earth. Only in limited cases would these consultants equate climate change and glacial melt with the river’s total loss. The few people who did imagine that the river could one day disappear showed great remorse at the thought.

An interview with a schoolteacher in Uttarkashi demonstrates the sadness that some expressed when they thought of the Ganga’s decline. The interviewee, Maya, was one of the people I intentionally spoke with because she was not involved in efforts to address the river’s environmental condition or to oppose dams. In addition to knowing what motivated some people to act in defense of the Ganga, I also sought to understand why some people refrained from joining efforts to address the river’s condition.

Maya was a schoolteacher in her fifties who had lived in Uttarkashi for over thirty years. She noted that the Ganga used to flow through the city at a much higher volume and that the water was cleaner a few decades back. Now, by contrast, upstream

projects have hindered the river's natural course and the quantity of water is less than before. The result, Maya said, is that the river can no longer handle the waste (*gandagi*) and excrement that people dump in its waters and the Ganga has become dirty (*ganda*). When I asked her if she had observed any other changes, Maya replied: "The peace that one used to feel by going to (visit) Ganga, now that (feeling) has decreased. Her power has decreased. The vibrations that one used to feel [near the Ganga], that has also decreased."

Despite the observations of change, Maya has never taken part in any of the movements to clean the river, oppose hydroelectric development, or promote environmental awareness. Why not? To explain, she first pointed to her busy schedule as a mother, a wife, and a schoolteacher. When pressed, however, she expressed her concern that the movements were just playing a "political game" and that movement actors were only interested in promoting their own "name and fame". These were hesitations that many people shared in the Himalayas as well as urban centers such as New Delhi. The final reason, however, was cosmological. Maya drew from Hindu framings to say that the Goddess Ganga could never completely leave the earth because she simultaneously flows on three levels: in the heavens, in the riverbed, and beneath the surface of the earth. The subterranean zone is known in Hindi as *patal*. Maya cited the Saraswati River as an example of a river that has disappeared from the surface of the earth but that continues to flow underground. As Maya and others reminded me, Hindus still worship the Saraswati even though the river dried up many centuries ago. For Maya, this meant that the Ganga would continue to bless humans from *patal* as long as they pray to the Goddess and keep her in their hearts.

Maya spoke of *patal* philosophically. But her remorse at the thought of losing the Ganga was evident. I asked her what it would feel like if one day the Ganga no longer flowed through Uttarkashi. “It would feel very bad,” she said. “The entire world will have difficulty surviving without Gangaji. She is the giver of life (*jeevan dahini*).” After further contemplation, Maya later commented that it would perhaps be better if the human race died out before being forced to see the Ganga disappear. “It is better if we go before Gangaji goes,” she said. “She has been flowing for so long... So my idea is that we should leave the earth first.”<sup>101</sup>

The idea that the Ganga will continue to live in the heavens and beneath the ground (*patal*) regardless of what happens to the river’s flow is evidence, some suggest, that the Ganga will always remain an important entity in Hindu practice. As one Swami said, “Gangaji won’t lose her holiness. That is in the mind.” But, he cautioned, she will lose her greatness as a river if she disappears. Although this was a small consolation to some, such as Maya, it did not soothe everyone’s fears. Others, such Meeta from Jodhpur (the aforementioned water quality expert and Ganga Ahvaan activist), encouraged people to undertake every measure possible to support the river’s longevity. When speaking to me, she employed an idiom that urged everyone to “make an effort like King Bhagirath” so that the river could be saved.<sup>102</sup> “If we brought Gangaji to earth,” she reasoned, “then humans can save her.” Since Meeta considered that humans created the problems that endangered the river, she argued that people have a responsibility to correct the situation.

In their efforts to encourage people to take action in the Ganga’s defense, people

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> The idiom in Hindi is: *bhagirath (ka) prayas karna*.

such as Meeta from Ganga Ahvaan and the participants of the Clean the Ganga Movement in Uttarkashi were exceptional. Most people I met in Uttarkashi were reluctant to involve themselves in environmental campaigns. This was especially true of the religious leaders, such as the Hindu swamis and saints, which live in the holy city.

I was especially confused by the apparent lack of concern for the Ganga that I encountered when I spoke with many Hindu religious figures in Uttarkashi. But, over time, I realized that they were influenced by Hindu texts that predict the *eventual* disappearance of the Ganga. When I spoke with the learned priests (*pandits*), they would often draw from the vedas and the puranas to explain the river's impermanence. Such informants quoted passages to me from literature composed millennia ago to confirm that the Ganga's destiny is to one day leave the earth and return to the heavens. One Hindu swami recited a line (*shlok*) from the Srimad Bhahavadtum that predicted that of India's most famous rivers—the Saraswati, the Yamuna, and the Ganga—only the Yamuna is destined to remain on the earth.

Many such respondents clarified, however, that the Ganga is only predicted to disappear in the third or the fourth stage of Kali Yug, a period of moral and ecological degeneracy. These informants would emphasize that we are only in the first phase of Kali Yug. For river devotees, this is good news for it means that the Ganga will remain on the earth for hundreds of years more as we cycle through stages of time that will be increasingly difficult. This information, on the other hand, should be of little comfort to those that believe the world is currently in a bad state. It means that, as per predictions by the ancients, the arguably sordid condition of our societies and ecologies are destined to get much worse.

For some of the Hindu religious leaders that I spoke with, the assurance that the Ganga will continue to flow for many more years supports the argument in favor of the river's manipulation via dams, road construction, and other development projects despite the signs of growing rates of ecological change. One particular swami shared this perspective on this with me during an interview. To begin, he cited the efforts that he and others exerted decades earlier to stop projects on the Bhagirathi Ganga at places like Maneri and Tehri. The opposition movements were unsuccessful. The Swami also tried to stop tourist activities in the town of Gangotri on the basis that it should be preserved as a sacred location. Now, years removed from these campaigns, he believed that development projects should be allowed along with other activities that could potentially transform the Ganga. His first argument to substantiate this (back in 2007 before the dams were canceled) is that "no one" can fight successfully against the government. If the government has a project in mind, he cautioned, it is very difficult to persuade them otherwise. Secondly, he argued that in a country of high economic growth and potential, "a little sacrifice" should be made by river devotees to support the nation's progress. And, thirdly, he countered that since the development projects have come up, and despite changes in the river due to erratic precipitation patterns and glacial retreat, people still interact with the Ganga as they did before. Their faith is intact, he reasoned, and they continue to worship the river despite the imposition caused by some of the existing projects. "So in what way (has) it affected culture?" he asked rhetorically before adding his own response: "Very little."

## **Religion and Ecology: Some Limits**

In this chapter, I have described the circulation of discourses about ecological change in the Garhwal Himalayas and in Uttarkashi in particular. I've highlighted the different arenas in which people come to know that the Ganga is (or is not) endangered and the ways that people mediate climate change discourses with their own ontological understandings of the Ganga and the agency of its associated Goddess. I have also shown how Hindu religious interpretations are sometimes employed to validate a lack of proactive efforts to protect the river. My discussion of these issues indicates that religious reverence for natural entities does not necessarily promote ecologically sound behaviors. This point pushes back on aspects of the literature on religion and ecology.

Some scholars, for instance, believe that reverence for the natural world is a salve that can help promote sustainable ecologies. Sponsel (2001) argues that enactments of reverence for the non-human and divine could foster more environmental stewardship. He writes: "Religions are alternative ways of representing nature; affording it spiritual, moral, and cultural meanings and values; and defining the place of humans in nature, including how they should and shouldn't act toward nonhuman beings and other natural phenomena" (Sponsel 2001: 185). His presentation of "spiritual ecology" is optimistic regarding the role that religion could play in reorienting our perspectives of, and interactions with, the environment. He argues that secular approaches fail because they are anthropocentric but that spiritual ecology provides hope because it is ecocentric.

Shiva's work (1988, 2005), asserts that religious practices such as those promoted in "Hinduism" can help in the quest for sustainability by reminding us to think about our intrinsic physical and spiritual interconnectivity with nature. In her view, reverence for

nature is a counterweight to the conceptual separation between humans, nature, and the divine that post-enlightenment modernity and Cartesian thinking has helped to create and which has fueled humankind's extensive practices of resource extraction and destruction. Many others echo this assertion while providing caveats and disclaimers.<sup>103</sup>

The scholarship that addresses the relationship between religion and ecology, of which I have shared only a few examples, importantly highlights the dangers of dualistic thinking that separates humans from their embedded ecologies and fuels unsustainable practices. Although religious traditions can help to remind people of their interconnection with nature (Gosling 2001; Kumar 2002), my discussion of ecological change on the Ganga shows that there are also counter forces within religious systems such as Hinduism that are used to validate behaviors that are not in the interest of environmental integrity. I therefore side with those who question the inherent compatibility between contemporary Hindu practices and ecological sustainability.

Nagarajan (1998), for instance, asserts that it is problematic to think that ritual care for a place, object, or natural entity directly leads to “ecological behavior” and conservation. Critiquing the work of Vandana Shiva (mentioned above), she argues that reverence for nature might be a part of some Indian sociocultural systems but it does not necessarily lead to environmental protection:

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<sup>103</sup> Gosling (2001) similarly foresees ways in which religious concepts and framings could be applied to environmental conservation and rejuvenation in places like India. He cautions, however, against the uncritical employment of views that “the Hindu tradition” unreservedly endorses ecological harmony. He points, for instance, to passages in the Mahabharata (composed between 800 BCE and 400 CE) that describe the razing of the Khandava forests by Krishna and Arjuna. This, he believes, is an example of times when the destruction—or anthropogenic control—of nature has historically been framed in a positive light within texts that are associated with Hinduism (ibid. 2001: 12).

...although non-Western religions may have a reverence towards landscapes and therefore may contain innumerable embedded ecologies, these beliefs do not necessarily lead to ecological practices that resemble conservationism in the sense that the West has come to know it. While it is true, to a certain extent, that the infusion of the natural world with notions of sacrality does affect the behavior of people towards the natural world, I have misgivings about the implications that Indian culture, because of its notions of sacredness, has intrinsic checks and balances to restrain the rapaciousness of human greed (ibid.: 284).

Even if, once upon a time, practices of reverence for natural entities did support the rejuvenation of ecological systems, Nagaranjan reasons that the density of human habitats, along with patterns of mass production and consumption in open-market capitalist systems, has greatly reduced the ability of such practices to support ecosystemic equilibrium. She points out, moreover, that the sacred qualities that people associate with natural entities can paradoxically prevent people from seeing the need to protect them because of the entities' purportedly supernatural and self-regenerating powers.

Alley (2000) concurs with this caution, drawing from her ethnographic fieldwork on pollution along the Ganga in Varanasi, India in the 1990s to assert that people failed to see the river as a finite resource whose contours were shaped by a larger ecosystem (377). This limited the drive to protect the Ganga, especially when much of the ritual enacted along its waters was intended to help devotees seek spiritual purification or personal redemption from the divine. This means that "religious rituals cannot be confused with civic ethics" (ibid.) and we cannot assume that reverence for nature will inspire its protection in isolation of other concerns and influences.

My research concurs with the observations of Nagaranjan (1998) and Alley (2000). As this chapter indicated, religious reverence for the Ganga does not alone inspire large numbers of people to involve themselves in efforts to contest destructive

development practices or to engage in proactive measures such as environmental conservation. Even though I have highlighted several people and movements that did actively address the river's management in earlier chapters, these were exceptional cases given that millions of India's inhabitants are Hindus that ritually worship the Ganga at some point in their lives.

Since religious Hindu framings alone are unlikely to motivate environmental stewardship, the increase in environmental education is heartening. This education is important given the high stakes and the deleterious effects that a decline of long-term water supplies in the Himalayas could entail. Imprecise though our climate science may be, it is still important to act upon the precautionary principle and provide resources that can help people respond to the possible ecological shifts ahead.

### **Closing Thoughts**

This chapter has looked at circulating discourses about ecological change and glacial melt. In it, I have emphasized the regional interpretations, meaning making practices, and responses to these issues in the Himalayas. I examined four different arenas in which people, including myself, come to know and produce meanings about environmental transformations. I highlighted the circulations of scientific discourse, the faith in the Ganga's perpetuity that people on Manikarnika ghat express despite observations of ecological change elsewhere, the environmental education promoted by NGOs and social movements that sensitizes people to climate change, and the influence that Hindu cosmologies have on minimizing some concerns for the Ganga.

With the exception of my consultants on Manikarnika ghat, residents living along the Ganga in Uttarkashi sometimes acknowledged that glaciers such as Gangotri-Gaumukh may be melting because of our global carbon emissions and environmental hubris. If and when they did, they added a number of qualifications. The first was that the Goddess Ganga is also an actor with the ability to respond on her own to ecological stressors and the human misconduct that they represent. They also pointed to regional practices of pollution and development to add that the environmental mess we see is a signifier of our moral corruption. We have lost respect for our world and the Gods that inhabit it, they argued, and they have become angry with us. To correct this, some of my consultants offered a suggestion that exceeded the call to merely cut back on carbon emissions: if we overcome our moral shortcomings, they argued, the glaciers may one day surge again. At the same time, however, the comments of some educated consultants and religious figures indicated how Hindu texts and cosmologies can support complacency, inaction, or the developmental status quo because they asserted that the Ganga's destiny (regardless of human activity) is to one day disappear. These points reveal conflicting ways of thinking about ecological change. They also demonstrate how distinct imaginings influence disagreements over the management of the sacred Ganga in the context of climatic change.

The varied positions on the longevity of the Ganga indicate the different ways that people learn about and express concern for the river, its embedded ecosystem, and the Goddess. In so doing, they illustrate the multiple and evolving epistemologies and ontologies that influence perceptions about ecological transformations. These perceptions inform behavior and the struggles over resources that people are enacting.

## **Chapter 9. Concluding Remarks and Observations**

This dissertation has taken a dialogic approach to examining contested practices on the upper stretch of the Ganga in the Indian Himalayas. In it, I have employed social practice theory to highlight the influence of past histories, enduring struggles, and situated practices on people's relationships with the Ganga and their ideas about how its waters should be managed. Each chapter has shown a particular aspect of disagreement and debate as different discourses circulate among diverse actors operating in multiple figured worlds. My treatment of these issues has highlighted the ways that people imagine development projects and ecological transformations to impact the Goddess Ganga. It has also demonstrated how the efforts made by Himalayan residents to address the river's management has led to the emergence of new actor subjectivities. I have given particular attention to the involvement of women in movements to oppose hydroelectric development and the subsequent transformation of some women's self-definitions and identities. I have additionally shown how women's movement participation draws from existing cultural forms and accepted repertoires of resistance that build upon regional struggles and movement legacies.

The introduction opened the dissertation with an ethnographic description and a short overview of the analytical frames I employ. Chapter 2 continued to give context for contested practices along the upper stretch of the Ganga such as development and the construction of hydroelectric projects. That chapter also touched upon my early research

engagements and the theoretical approaches that were influential to my thinking about the issues. The chapters that followed drew different perspectives and actors into the discussion while focusing on the multiple dimensions of conflict as they played out in the Garhwal Himalayas and the district of Uttarkashi in particular. After addressing the past and present debates on development in chapter 3, chapter 4 explored the figured worlds that influence people's ideas about the Ganga's significance in the Himalayas and how it should be managed. Chapter 5 examined the ways that regional actors come in and out of Uttarkashi District and the impact that their discourses and actions have on regional resource management decisions. Chapter 6 continued to draw from social practice theory and the dialogic approach to show the particularities of concern for the river and its Goddess in the district capital of Uttarkashi. It also employed feminist political ecology to highlight the significance of daily practice and historical struggles in the region (such as the Chipko and Uttarakhand State movements) on women's participation in efforts to defend the river. Chapter 7 examined the specific mediums through which women claim the Ganga's importance while simultaneously engaging in practices of self-authoring that transform their subjectivities as river devotees and women activists living in the Himalayas. This illustrated how women overcome challenges, including low levels of formal education, by drawing from accepted cultural forms such as devotional song to address an issue that is meaningful to them. Chapter 8 stepped back from the contention about dams and development to examine the emerging concerns for the impacts that climate change and upstream glacial melt could have on the Ganga's longevity. It highlighted the circulation of polyvalent discourses while focusing on the multiple

epistemologies and ontologies that inform the discussions about the river's use in the context of potentially unprecedented ecological shifts.

In the process of focusing on the above topics, this dissertation has examined the production and negotiation of multiple meaning making practices that influence actor subjectivities. The meanings have significance beyond the Ganga. Different ideas about development and ecological change were also produced and debated. The circulation of meanings and their contestations, moreover, have had perceptible influences on policy. The Indian Government was forced to revise and ultimately cancel three contested projects on the upper stretch of the Ganga because of particular concerns about the dams' projected effects on the ecology of the river as well as interpretations of how it would impact the practices of reverence for the river's Goddess.

### **Enduring Struggles and An Enduring Goddess**

Although the dams along the Bhagirathi Ganga may be canceled, I do not want to suggest that the government decision signaled an end to the conflict over the use and management of the river or the struggle over development in the region. These fights continue. When I returned to Uttarkashi District in the summer of 2010, for instance, counter movements were protesting the cancelation of the dams and urging the central government to reopen the projects. Their main concern, as was the case during my fieldwork, was with securing jobs and employment for the residents of the region. During my return visit, I was handed an appeal composed by the "youth" of the mountains. It summarized the issues and requested that people not forget their plight.

The appeal began by making general observations that speak to the different

discourses in circulation. From a religious point of view, they noted, dams should not be constructed on the Ganga. From an environmental point of view, no dam should be built on any river. And from the point of view that prioritizes the nation's development, dams should be constructed everywhere possible. The result, they argued, is that there was enough momentum to build the dams and then enough indignation to have them stopped when they were nearly completed. Now the hillsides are ravaged, land has been lost, and long tunnels have been drilled through the mountains resulting in the depletion of groundwater supplies. We neither have development, they asserted, nor the "environment" we enjoyed before. The youth lamented: "We are hanging in between." In light of the situation, they urged prominent actors like Dr. G.D. Agarwal to come back up to the mountains and rectify the situation by going on more fasts-unto-death until the government resumes the dam building. If he didn't help them, they reasoned, that would call into question his concern for the welfare of mountain residents.

The youth were not alone in their criticisms. My Fulbright-affiliated academic advisor in Uttarkashi, Dr. Harshwanti Bisht, similarly argued that Himalayan development and environmental policies must first and foremost benefit mountain residents. As she repeatedly stated in our conversations: "We need a development model that thinks about the people of the mountains. Until we have policies that improve their lives, there can be no true development." For Dr. Bisht, this argument is not a *carte blanche* that validates the destruction of Himalayan ecologies or of the sacred Ganga. In an ideal world, the maintenance of mountain ecologies and cultural-religious practices could coincide with policies that prioritize regional development. What her comments respond to, however, is a reaction—which she perceives as a kneejerk impulse—to

protect mountain environments without considering equity or the survival of the people that live there.

Ultimately, what such critics push back against is the “museumization” of the Himalayas. According to Rangan (2000), the impulse to preserve the Himalayas as a museum for urban and wealthy elites is long standing. She points to the national and international reaction to the Chipko movement in the 1970s, and the forest protection policies that resulted from the efforts to prevent commercial deforestation, as an example of the drive to create enclosures in the mountains without considering regional demands for development and ideas about sustainability. Instead of helping mountain residents, Rangan argues, environmentalists and policy makers, “privileged a fetishized notion of the Himalayas as a globalized ‘eco-cultural’ commodity; in essence, the region as an objectified sample of pristine nature, an ecological museum to be maintained for the pleasures of contemplation and mystic exploration by well-fed elites” (183). The problem with this kind of treatment of Himalayan issues, Rangan argues, is that it is ignorant of the ways that development continues to hold enormous significance for most households and localities in the Garhwal Himalayas. The mountain residents want development, she asserts, because like the rest of us, they wish to enhance their material conditions and sustain the lived dimensions of their social life” (ibid.: 185-186).

I have mixed reactions to the above critiques. On the one hand, I recognize that even though the people I consulted with do want development, or *vikas*, many of them emphasized that it should not come at the cost of losing access to a meaningful entity like the Ganga. For some of the activists, moreover, the cancelation of the dams was no less than a miracle; it was the culmination of their heartfelt prayers to the Goddess. On the

other hand, I look to the new “eco-zone” on the upper stretch of the Ganga with hesitation. Do such policies reenact the enclosures and exclusions of the post-Chipko era? Will the memory of the oppositions to dam building on the Bhagirathi Ganga one day be as distasteful as Chipko has become for some mountain residents? And what about livelihoods? Will the new policies foster the long-term resilience of humans and ecologies in the region? Or will they stop at banning dams along the first 80-miles of the Ganga?

These are important questions. They address the difficulty of enacting “sustainability”, a term that is liberally used but is not often qualified. Iyer (2003) provides one guidepost to help us understand the concept along the Ganga. He writes that sustainability, defined as the long-term maintenance of an ecological balance and thus the survival of the planet and with it humanity, must also include the cultural and religious practices that people enact and find meaningful. This approach to sustainability would, however, require a revision of our interactions with the “natural” world. Iyer cautions: “...If we approach this [notion of sustainability] in a positive spirit of fostering a harmonious relationship with nature rather than merely limiting the harm that we do; if we think of rivers as sacred sources; if we think of them not as separate entities but as integral parts of larger ecological systems; then our ‘planning’ and our ideas of ‘development’ will have to undergo a complete transformation” (298). Sustainability, in these terms, must integrate the wellbeing of humans, ecologies, and the non-human entities with which they are connected. This is an argument that I have also made elsewhere (Drew 2010, In Press a & b).

As a Hindu swami in Uttarkashi frequently reminded me in our numerous conversations, such integrated or holistic measures must “start at the grassroots.” If our efforts to promote development or sustainability are not linked to the everyday lives and struggles of the masses, he argued, then the results will be superficial and short lived. If, moreover, we truly wish to facilitate a “grassroots development” then it will be crucial to allow people to demarcate for themselves the things that matter to them and which they wish to promote or protect. In the case of the Garhwal Himalayas—the land of gods and goddesses (*dev bhoomi*)—this would entail working within the multiple ontologies that people express as well as their desires for development. Based on the commentary of some of my consultants, regionally appropriate means of development could involve leaving the main stretch of the Bhagirathi Ganga unobstructed (to allow the Goddess’ freeflow) while building small dams on the river’s tributaries.

An approach to sustainability that incorporates the defense of multiple ways of knowing and being could entail an open-ended politics that leaves room for diverse ontologies, what Blaser (2009) has called “political ontology”. Although I did not specifically label it political ontology, the figured worlds in dialogue that I illustrated throughout the dissertation (and in chapters 4 and 5 in particular) attest to the everyday cultural politics that are enacted over different ways of perceiving, learning about, and existing in the world. I have shown how these dialogues and debates influenced ideas about how humans should treat “nature” and non-human actors such as the Ganga. I have additionally pointed out, however, that some Hindu predictions for the Ganga’s eventual disappearance combined with the promise that the river and its Goddess will continue to flow underground in *patal* can reduce the urgency that some people might otherwise feel

for conserving the river. This counterforce was and will continue to be an important part of the ontological struggles in which people promote and contest different visions for the Ganga's management.

Whatever happens to the upper stretch of the Ganga, there are indications that people will continue to enact the practices of devotion to the river and its Goddess that they find meaningful. As numerous consultants pointed out during my fieldwork, and as interviewees such as Maya mentioned in chapter 8, in a worse case scenario the fate of the Ganga could be similar to that of the Goddess Saraswati. People still worship Saraswati despite the disappearance of the river she was once associated with. In the contemporary moment, moreover, we see that devotion to the Ganga is transmutable and not limited to a specific water source. Interviewees in chapter 5 pointed out that other rivers in India are honored as the holy Ganga even though they are normally called by other names (such as the Kaveri).

There are signs that people are already beginning to generate new cultural forms and practices in relation to the Ganga. During the period in which I wrote this dissertation, articles appeared in the American press which explored emerging practices in Queens, New York: Hindus are worshipping the adjacent Jamaica Bay as an embodiment of the Ganga. Devotees approach the bay on holy days; offer candles, flowers, and incense to the water; and send prayers to the Goddess Ganga.<sup>104</sup> These actions indicate that, whatever happens to the river in India, people will adapt cultural forms and practices while generating new ones to fit their needs and circumstance. These

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<sup>104</sup> "Hindus Find a Ganges in Queens, to Park Rangers' Dismay." New York Times, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/22/nyregion/hindus-find-a-ganges-in-queens-to-park-rangers-dismay.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/22/nyregion/hindus-find-a-ganges-in-queens-to-park-rangers-dismay.html?_r=1), accessed May 25, 2011.

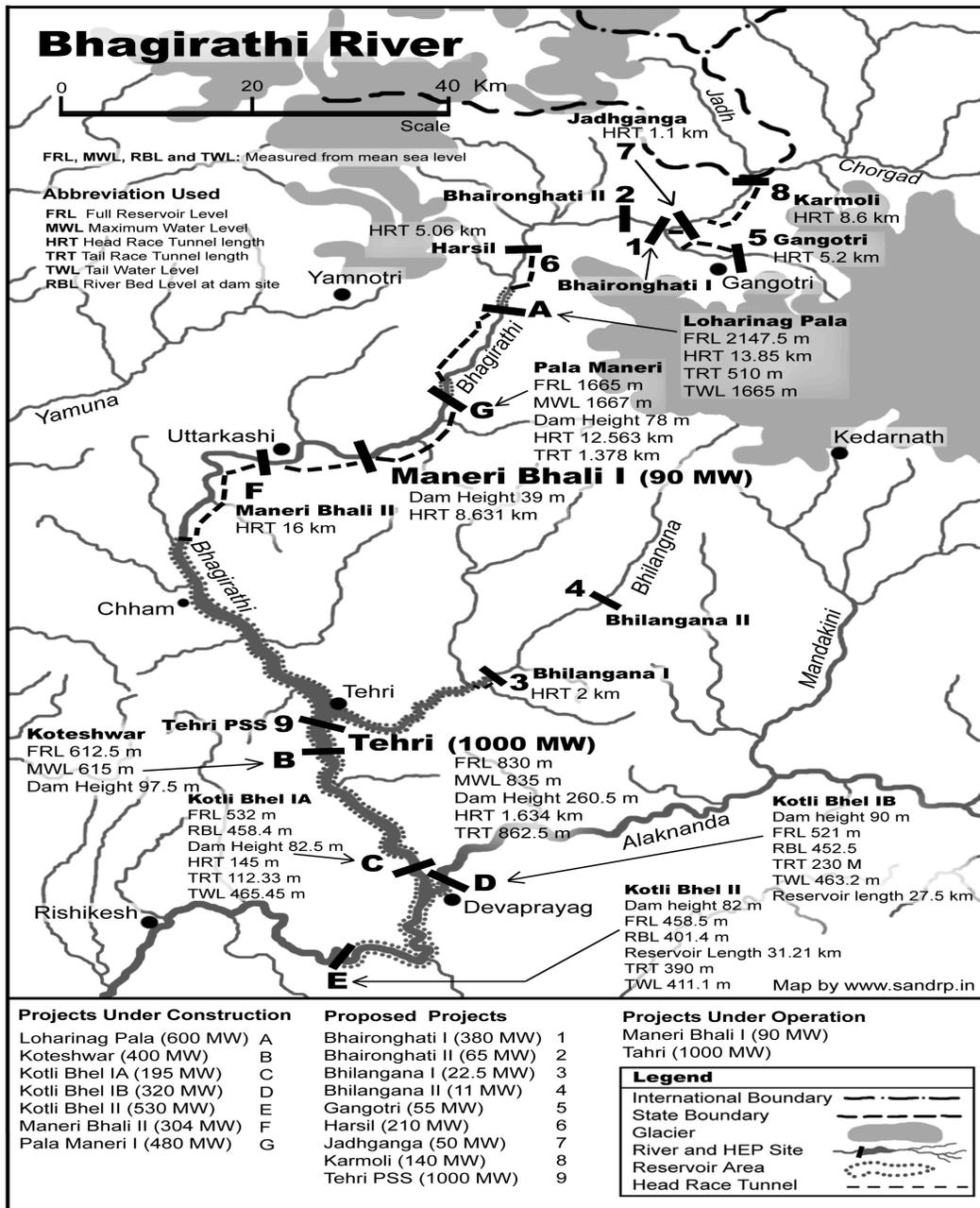
emergent and adaptive processes also demonstrate how people continue to enact figured worlds in which devotion to the Ganga is paramount.

Emergent forms of devotion to the Ganga at Jamaica Bay likely enable participants, caught in the tensions and cultural mediations of the Indian diaspora, to maintain a degree of continuity in their self-definitions and identifications as “good Hindus” and river devotees. This once more indicates how identities may orient people to express and act upon the things that they care about—such as the Ganga—while helping them to create new activities, new worlds, and new ways of being (Holland et al. 1998: 5). Emergent practices of devotion to the Ganga at places like Jamaica Bay, New York also demonstrate that river devotees are involved in the production of new meanings about the Ganga that contest the notion that it is bounded by a particular body of water. The meaning making practices entail new constitutions of place, the nexus points of social and non-human relations in which people engage with and experience a particular location in connection with their everyday lives (Escobar 2008; Massey 1994). Even though we have seen extensive struggles over the river’s management in the Garhwal Himalayas in this dissertation, there are signs that ontologies and figured worlds about the Ganga could shift and be modified to suit the needs of the varied places where people live and within which they produce meaningful cultural or figured worlds.

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Having examined varied discourses on development along the Ganga and the meanings that people are producing about the transformation of Himalayan ecologies, we can ask once more: *Is the Ganga disappearing?* The answer depends on how one perceives the river and its significance. If it is just a river, a body of water, then there are ominous signs that the Ganga could one day cease to flow continuously. If, however, one thinks of it as a “river of belief” (*vishwas nadi*), then the answer is more conclusive: As long as faith in the Ganga remains, so too will the Goddess and the spiritual salvation that she provides. The ways that people interpret the Ganga’s condition, in the meantime, will influence interactions with it as well as disagreements about its treatment. Although the question of the river’s longevity is still open-ended, we can say with some certainty that conflicts will continue to manifest over the use of its waters.

## Appendix A: Map of Hydroelectric Projects on the Bhagirathi Ganga



105

<sup>105</sup> Map reproduced with permission from Himanshu Takkur of the South Asian Network on Dams, Rivers, and People. Full text of “The Disappearing Ganga: Is there any Hope for this Holy River?” is available at [www.sandrp.in](http://www.sandrp.in), accessed on August 1, 2009.

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