

Preface

This study aims to investigate the dynamics that unfold when the following factors come together: a sacralised river in the Himalayan region, a hydroelectric power plant under construction, a temple and its presiding deity that needs to be relocated, as well as a series of flood events. Which conclusions can be drawn about prevalent cultural issues, developments and entanglements that surround the local *pahārī* (mountain) society and its perception and way of coping with adversity and disaster when the above key components are incorporated into multi-layered discourses by actors with different backgrounds and agendas, from different groupings and segments of society?

Disasters, among them floods, are often regarded as turning points. This is especially valid for the temple of the Goddess Dhārī Devī on river Alaknanda in the state of Uttarakhand, India. The past and present of the Goddess are intrinsically tied to such hydrological events. Floods not only determined transmitted histories regarding the emergence of the Goddess at the ford on a tributary of the Ganges, but also frequently transformed and reaffirmed her identity and the connection to her worshippers. These dynamics came increasingly to the fore, when the implementation of a hydroelectric power project in the vicinity of her temple began to take shape in 2006 and necessitated the relocation of the temple of the Goddess Dhārī. Not only became conceptions about floods part of fierce debates and protests surrounding the development project, but additionally the construction process was decisively impacted by two consecutive flood events. In particular, the occurrence of a large scale flood event in the state in 2013, the “Himalayan Tsunami,” then concluded the deity’s final transformative step with the transfer of her statue to a new temple. Remarkably, in the wake of the massive deluge, a story of divine retribution began to make its way through the media and to nationwide audiences and such theologically rooted interpretations eventually elevated the Goddess Dhārī to a national symbol of the catastrophe.

While the 2013 flood disaster, the “Himalayan Tsunami,” serves as a starting point, this dissertation draws on other significant Himalayan floods dating back to 1885, 1924 and 2012 as further pivots. By employing an actor-network theory approach, the investigation traces the development and transformation of a local goddess from a deity with an animistic and tantric background into a constituent of a technically engineered riverscape. The narratives and discourses related to the Goddess and the accompanying flood events are examined in particular with

Preface

regard to hydro-social relations. This soon links this analysis to hegemonic discourses and leads into the realm of political ecology. Issues related to political ecology are intrinsic to dam projects. They came to the fore here notably with certain flood-related practices of the project executing entities. Power relations, however, even at a much earlier stage decisively shaped the perception of the place of worship and its hydrological entanglements. At the same time, they exposed continuing conflicts between the two distinguished social layers of the village society. Consequently, the discourse that accompanied the environmental struggle over the planned resettlement was characterised by strongly diverging and equally contested flood memories. This was exacerbated by the fact that representations about the Goddess, which used to be predominantly local in nature, gradually changed their scope and merged into conceptions propagated by a transnationally engaged political-ideological spectrum.

This research project, based primarily on the qualitative assessment of textual sources, has a strong interdisciplinary orientation. While it encompasses the social science fields of religious studies, environmental history and disaster research, it goes hand in hand with elements of political ecology and a critical analysis of the role of the media, in addition to embracing the disciplines of sociology and anthropology. Whereas the project set out with the intention to provide substantial contributions to these domains, the focus of this dissertation, however, is on identifying features of a Himalayan disaster culture as it oscillates between local and transnational dynamics. The thesis thereby seeks to provide valuable insights for an understanding of and further research on the socio-cultural angle of catastrophes.