

Introduction

A Major Flood Disaster

In June 2013, the dramatic images of a major disaster in the mountain state Uttarakhand, India, captured the attention of the national public and dominated the coverage of all regional and national news media. Several days of extremely heavy rain, culminating on June 16 and 17,¹ had turned the mountain zone into the venue of a mud and water battle. The rain-saturation of the soil resulted in countless landslides, while the overflowing rivers swept away people, houses and infrastructure. The widespread catastrophic situation caused by the onslaught of the water masses reached its apex with yet another major calamity in the high mountain zone of the Himalayas on the morning of June 17. Already one day before, the important pilgrimage site of Kedarnath at an altitude of 3580 m (Kala 2014:145) had been hit by a massive landslide and was partially destroyed. However, on June 17 the snowmelt and rain-fed Chorabari Lake above the little town, unable to contain the oncoming water, burst its moraine dam. Shortly after 6:15 a.m. on that date,² the lake emptied within 5 to 10 minutes (Dobhal et al. 2013:171) thus sending a violent surge down the valley. The flash flood swept away everything in its trail. People, pilgrims, shelters and various smaller places of worship and other infrastructures all vanished in the torrent. Yet and very symbolically, the site's sanctum sanctorum, protected by a large boulder, remained largely unscathed. Against the backdrop of these scenes of destruction, soon an emotionally charged discourse

1 Reports about the amount of rain are inconsistent, some sources say that the state received with 4340 mm only on June 17 an amount of rain that was 375 percent above the daily average of a monsoon rainfall (Kala 2014:145). The Geological Survey of India on the other hand is cited as saying "from 14 to 17 June 2013, Uttarakhand and adjoining areas experienced heavy rainfall, which was about 375 percent more than the benchmark rainfall during a normal monsoon" (Satendra et al. 2015:34). Parkash (2013:1) again quotes the IMD according to which parts of the state had received an excess rainfall of 400 percent between June 16 and 17. This probably also in comparison to the expectable normal amount of rain for the two days. He suspects that the huge quantities of water that filled or overfilled the rivers came not only from the rain but also from the meltwater of snow and glaciers, which was more intense than usual owing to the high temperatures in the preceding two months (Parkash 2013:1).

2 The time was set by scientists who were present at the site of the Chorabari Lake (Menon 2013). According to others (Dobhal et al. 2013:174) it happened at 6:45 am.

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unfolded. In public debates, politicians, journalists, religious authorities, intellectuals and environmentalists tried to fathom the “why” for this unprecedented flood catastrophe.

The extreme destructiveness of the overall disaster has been attributed to an existing heightened vulnerability of the region and in this context to multiple anthropogenic causes. One aspect of the state’s vulnerability can be traced to the sacred geography attributed to Uttarakhand, which makes it the focus of religious endeavours. Already in the textual traditions of Hinduism, the area is depicted as a sacred field of merit and referred to as *dev bhūmi*, the land of the gods—and is even advertised as such today. The general perception of holiness and beneficence attached to the visit of the area had established the region as a major draw for spiritual tourism.³ Given this framework, one of the main factors contributing to the high death toll was the timing of the catastrophe. The months of May and June are the high season of the pilgrimage to the holy places in Uttarakhand, the four *dhām* Badrinath, Kedarnath, Joshimath and Yamunotri. This meant that thousands of pilgrims as well as local and migrant workers were in the affected area. In turn, these circumstances coincided with the occurrence of a highly unusual meteorological phenomenon, as well as the premature arrival of the monsoon (A. Kumar 2015; S.P. Sati & Gahalaut 2013:196; Chevuturi & Dimri 2016).⁴ While the exact number of fatalities could never be established, its gravity made the disaster a matter of national concern and attention.

One outstanding attempt to explain the catastrophe, termed the “Himalayan Tsunami” by several of the media (cf. Satendra et al. 2015:4), was the story about a goddess that had been shifted from her temple just hours before the lake breach above Kedarnath. And in fact, the transfer of that deity had taken place at 6:30 p.m. on June 16 (Gusain 2013a/b), while the lake burst out at 6:15 a.m. the next morning, June 17. As it appeared, the local population, deeply rooted in its firm religious beliefs, was convinced that this all-encompassing disaster was a sign of divine retribution. Allegedly the Goddess in her wrath about the relocation had caused the lake breach with its fatal consequences at Kedarnath.

3 This is complemented by other forms of tourism; such as adventure tourism. Foundations for this spiritual mass tourism were already laid in the middle of the 18th century. By then the construction of the Upper Ganges Canal and the connection of Haridwar to the major railway network had been completed. As a consequence, Haridwar and also the higher elevations of the mountains had become more accessible and attractive as a place of pilgrimage for a wider range of people (Lochtefeld 2010).

4 Parkash (2013:1) attributes the “abnormally high amount of rain [. . .] to the fusion of westerlies with the monsoonal cloud system.” The Times of India, in turn, describes the area’s level of vulnerability in a simple equation: “Recipe for disaster in Uttarakhand: 1 crore population, 2.5 crore tourists” (Varma 2013).



Figure 1. The Statue of Dhārī Devī, on the Right a Copy (Source: TemplePurohit.com 2016, adapted).

The goddess in question goes by the name of Dhārī Devī. Her temple is located about 12 km from the next district town Srinagar (Uttarakhand). The site is very popular with the inhabitants of surrounding villages and Srinagar town, but also draws visitors from adjoining districts and many of the pilgrims on the way to the Badrinath Dhām make a stop-over to pay obeisance to the deity. A visit to the place is deemed most significant for newlywed couples and new-born children, but also for all matters requiring divine blessings. The festival of Navaratri in particular draws huge crowds to the temple twice a year. Goddess Dhārī is usually described as a representation of the Goddess Kālī and indeed the features carved into the black stone that form her face show rather ferocious expressions (Figure 1). However, the typical wild characteristics associated with this form of Śakti do not hold much weight in everyday practice. People tend to refer to her presumed maternal side and regard her as a wish-fulfilling deity. The temple is perceived as a *siddhapīṭh* “a place where one’s desires are fulfilled” (Lochtefeld 2010:119).⁵ Innumerable bells, donated by grateful believers and today hanging on

⁵ This feature of “wish granting” is supposed to be particularly pronounced among several “shivalik goddesses” (Lochtefeld 2010:119) (the Siwaliks are the outermost foothills of the

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the fence of the bridge to the new temple, bear witness to the wishes she is said to have granted (see e.g. G.A. Thapliyal 2012).⁶ Visitors are as well informed that the temple is one of the 108 *śaktipīṭhas*, the sacred places of the Goddess.⁷ Also these are said to have a wish-fulfilling capacity (see Lochtefeld 2010:119).

A closer look at the deity with her temple on River Alaknanda reveals that the Goddess Dhārī has an impressive prehistory, which is likewise tied to flood events (see Chapter 2.1). This is not too surprising, considering that her temple is located directly on the watercourse. Yet, to fully grasp how the temple of Dhārī Devī and her diverse and special relationship to the river and floods became such a central theme and part of the publicly unfolding post-disaster discourse, it is first necessary to shed light on the reason for her resettlement. What made the moving of the Goddess imperative was the construction of a hydroelectric power plant on the same river. The project in question is the 330 MW (megawatt) Srinagar Hydroelectric Power Project (HPP) situated about 12 km downstream from the temple (Figure 2).

The HPP had been planned at this location since the 1980s, with the first Detailed Project Reports (DPR) drafted as early as 1981 (Das & Jindal 2011:6). Its initial version received environmental clearance on May 3, 1985 (Lahiri 2011:226). During further preparatory stages, the original 200 MW project was upgraded to 330 MW, while the dam height was raised from 77 to 90 m from the deepest foundation level (Das & Jindal 2011:22). The process from conception to implementation became extremely protracted. The project was originally pursued by the Uttar Pradesh State Electricity Board (UPSEB). But due to lack of funding and arguably the World Bank's non-cooperation in providing financial support (CDM Executive Board 2011:3; Supreme Court of India 2013), the entire plan did not

southern Himalayas). The framing of a place of worship as wish-fulfilling or as a "field of merit" (Lochtefeld 2010:119) is also considered a kind of promotional tool to raise funds for a temple. An attributed fecundity of a place serves to convince potential donors that their offerings will be rewarded.

6 "लोगों का विश्वास है कि यहां मांगी गई मन्नत जरूर पूरी होती है। यहां घंटियां चढ़ाने की परंपरा है।" (Amar Ujālā 2012, July 8b). [People believe that the wishes put forward here will certainly be fulfilled. There is a tradition of offering bells here.]. In the last 15 years, about 75,000 bells are said to have been donated, although the figure seems somewhat questionable (G. A. Thapliyal 2012). People usually come to the temple twice, once to express their wish, and then again, when the wish has been fulfilled (Pandey personal communication 2014, Oct. 15 and 2005:16).

7 *Śaktipīṭha* or *śākta pīṭha* (Sircar 1973) designates the venerated places where the severed limbs of the Goddess Sati are believed to have fallen to earth (see e.g. Sircar 1973). Yet, with regard to the cultural sphere of the mountains, the classification of a temple as a *śaktipīṭha* should not be seen in a strict sense, e.g. as based on scriptural evidence (M. P. Pandey, personal communication, Jan. 13, 2017). It appears to be used as indicative of a power place (Lochtefeld 2010:119) and as a synonym for the location of a goddess or a goddess temple.



Figure 2. Position of Dhārī Devī Temple, Dam and the City of Srinagar on River Alaknanda (Source: Google Earth 2021, adapted).

progress for many years. Following a change in government policy towards the hydropower sector, or a liberalisation of the market aimed at increasing private sector involvement, the M/S Duncan North Hydroelectric Power Company took over the management of the project in 1994. Yet again, for a range of reasons, the venture did not move ahead, whereupon it was taken over by Tata Power Company Ltd. in October 2003. In 2004, the company was then renamed Alaknanda Hydro Power Company Limited (AHPCL), which in turn was incorporated by the GVK Group in November 2005 (CDM Executive Board 2011:3). For all these factors, the actual work on the ground did not start until 2007 (CDM Executive Board 2011:3).

That the temple was to be relocated because it fell within the submergence zone was known from the very outset. This is important to note, as the project became a controversial issue not long after the commencement of construction activities, and contention was primarily based on this plan to move the temple. A frequently used argument was that the temple fell within the inundation zone only because of the plant's extension from 200 to 330 MW (e.g. PTI 2013, May 16; Das & Jindal 2011). The Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) of 1985 (Section 4.2) had however already addressed this issue stating: "One old temple, a suspension bridge and a small reach of the road will be submerged. The temple would be raised and erected with a pleasing architecture" (Das & Jindal 2011:10) (see Figure 3). Despite intense resistance and the ensuing fierce debates concerning the option of relocating a goddess and several alternative ideas for models of a new

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Figure 3. One of the Models of the new Temple (Niebuhr, Oct. 2014).

temple, the original construction plan was eventually implemented. To this end, a completely new temple complex had been built on a platform standing on concrete pillars above its former location (see Figure 18). The old seat was then inundated when the statue of the deity was lifted onto its new base—in the event of the 2013 catastrophe. As the transfer took place in the midst of a disaster, it was done in a hurry and did not follow a usual ceremonial. The actual new temple had also not been completed at that time, which is why the Goddess began to be worshipped in a makeshift shed in a corner of the concrete platform. It was not until almost ten years later, on 28 January 2023, that she was finally moved to her new abode. Protracted conflicts with the implementing company can be named as one of the reasons for the lengthy postponement.