

# 1 An Outline of the diverse Aspects of the Study

## 1.1 *Daivy Āpadā*—Reflections on Disaster

A society and its individuals affected by a disaster pursue a variety of strategies as they try to cope with this disruptive experience. The destabilising nature of the extreme event causes people to seek ways to make sense of the traumatic episode and they attach various types of meaning to it. A catastrophe is also pictured as a void or an explanatory crisis, which can be revoked by the creation of meaning (Döring 2003). In an area steeped in religious significance, such as the Himalayan region and especially the state of Uttarakhand, one might suspect that floods and other disasters are largely analysed within a religious frame of reference. This could already be indicated by the frequent designation of the 2013 flood disaster as *daivy āpadā* (natural, or divine disaster), as well as its occurrence in a sacralised environment. When a study led by S. Kumar et al. (2015) in the high mountain zone of Ladakh asked for suggestions to reduce disaster risk, 28 percent of respondents “believed that disaster events are acts of god and nothing major can be done to prevent it and so people should perform rituals to god avoid disaster events [*sic*], [. . .]” (S. Kumar et al. 2015:189) (Figure 4). Halperin (2012) likewise provides examples of how disasters in the form of weather occurrences in the mountain district of Kullu in Himachal Pradesh are widely tackled with religious practices or within a faith-based frame of reference. Yet there are numerous influences that contribute to a so shaped dealing with a catastrophe, and this dissertation will show that the issue is significantly more complex.

Floods and other disasters are an inherent feature of the Himalayan region.<sup>8</sup> The Himalayas are the youngest mountain range on earth, and the very fact that they are

8 “A report by United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR), reveals, that, seven of the top ten natural disasters in 2008, occurred in the countries of the HKH regions such as Afghanistan, China, India, Myanmar, Bangladesh, China, India and Pakistan. Further, these countries also accounted for 99% of the total deaths from disasters worldwide” (UNISDR 2008, as cited in Nibanupudi & Khadka 2015:234). “Further, from 1999 to 2008, floods affected close to one billion people in Asia, whereas the corresponding figures were about four million in Europe, 28 million in the Americas and 22 million in Africa” (Nibanupudi & Khadka 2015:234).

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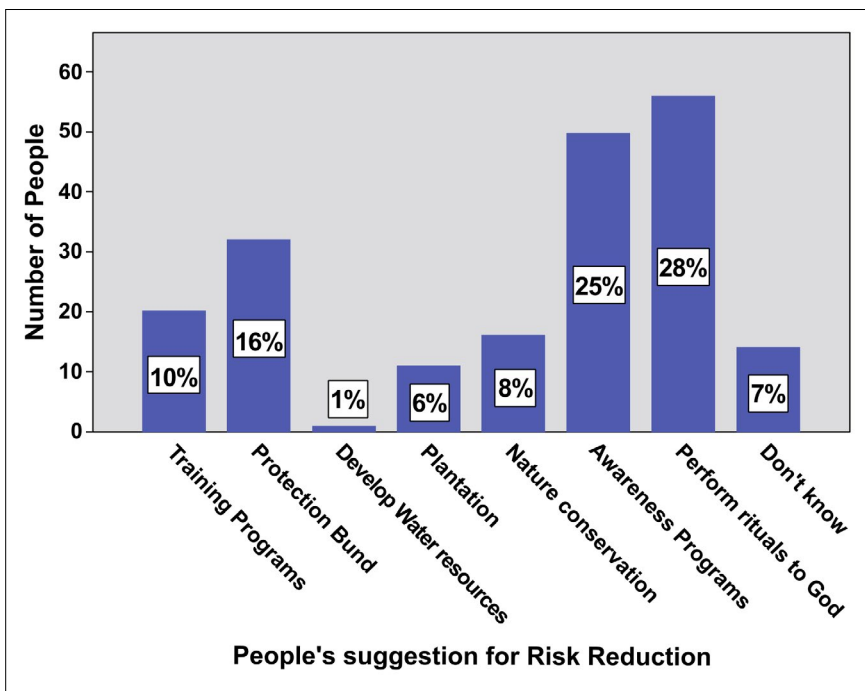


Figure 4. Table by S. Kumar et al. (2015:189)

still in a process of constant growth and expansion is in itself a formula for disaster.<sup>9</sup> Floods and other extreme events are also deeply carved into the social fabric and the cultural script of mountain societies. A heightened vulnerability makes the socio-cultural study of catastrophes in the Himalayan region at the same time a vital field of research. Science investigates disasters from many angles. While discourses from the geosciences discuss these phenomena prominently under premises of exploration and with regard to prediction enhancement, studies with a social science orientation focus on vulnerability assessments and questions of damage control and resilience. Disasters are generally seen as entailing transformation processes. Modern disaster studies illuminate these transformations from a number of angles, for example by examining adaptive behaviour with regard to mitigating measures after the disaster experience (Paton & Buergelt 2019). Others focus on how disasters can be utilised to achieve a higher degree of sustainability (Brundiers 2016), or they deal with the transformation of living environments from a gender viewpoint (Horton 2012). The transformative angle assumes special importance

9 This characteristic is, however, typical of the mountainous zones of the earth anyway.

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from the historical disaster perspective (e.g. Schaudig 2019, V. Singh 2014, 2018). Particularly water-related catastrophes tend to be charged with mythological motifs that illustrate a transformation process. In the social science domain, disasters can thus be investigated not only to prevent future risks (Dix & Röhrs 2007), but also to understand the characteristics and dynamics of a society (Bhagarva 2007), both a contemporary and a historical one. As Hoffmann & Oliver-Smith put it:

Disaster exposes the way in which people construct or ‘frame’ their peril (including the denial of it), the way they perceive their environment and their subsistence, and the ways they invent explanation, constitute their morality, and project their continuity and promise into the future. (Hoffmann & Oliver-Smith 2002:6)<sup>10</sup>

Major disasters have also contributed to scientific progress by catalysing various scientific discoveries (T. Roy 2012).<sup>11</sup> Academics promote the significance of culture in disaster assessments as a pressing issue (Bankoff et al. 2015:2), as well as urging the incorporation of cultural values into novel approaches with regard to disaster management (Medury 2001:157). Due to such views, cultural aspects and local knowledge are meanwhile recognised by the humanities disciplines as an important object of disaster research (Krüger et al. 2015; Crabtree 2015; Oliver-Smith 2015; Dhameja 2001). But this recognition does not necessarily extend to cases of a purely religiously founded conception of disaster (Schipper 2010). Even the social science branch of disaster research still treats the metaphysical view of a catastrophe with negligence. This is the case despite the fact that at least 6 billion people worldwide belong to various religious groupings and navigate the world with a corresponding orientation (Voss 2010). Voss therefore argues that the widely applied vulnerability approach must be expanded to include a religious perspective. The vulnerability of a society is closely related on the one hand to religiously informed perceptions of the human environment and on the other hand to the assessment of one’s own capacity for agency in relation to higher powers (Voss 2010:36f). Religious conceptions of an event are considered a coping strategy (Voss 2008:53) and are supposed to offer support, strength and solidarity

10 Another definition from one of the authors states, “they reveal the operation of physical, biological, and social systems and their interaction among populations, groups, institutions and practices, and their concomitant [*sic*] sociocultural constructions” (Oliver-Smith 1999:21). T. Roy similarly characterises the aim of historical disaster research in the following way: “disaster history is a story of the construction of useful knowledge about the interaction between human society and the natural environment” (T. Roy 2012:11).

11 Referring to cataclysms as a “cognitive challenge” (T. Roy 2012:22), T. Roy continues to elaborate on this statement, citing various examples from colonial India, where disasters helped to build up a geophysical understanding of the environment.

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building among communities (Schipper 2010). The widespread academic ignorance of such important influencing factors (McGeehan & Baker 2017) derives in part from the fact that the religious explanation of disasters is usually considered long overcome. Allegedly, only in past times were cataclysms generally thought to be the result of divine intervention.<sup>12</sup>

In the eighteenth century, earthquakes and storms were seen as god's punishment for sins committed by whole communities; they called for atonement. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, earthquakes and storms became acts of nature; they called for quake-resistant building of river embankments rather than more frequent prayers. From the late twentieth century the discourse shifted again. Disasters are now, at least partly, the results of human action upon nature. (T. Roy 2012:11)

This breakdown of temporal phases, however, represents a very reductionist understanding of developments, for it is not only historical disaster research that provides ample evidence of religious perceptions and ways of dealing with catastrophic events (see e.g. Groh 2003; Schenk 2007; Dix & Röhrs 2007). An academic disregard for faith-based conceptions in many contemporary communities, on the other hand, is a shortcoming most likely related to the "secular bias of Western thought" (Reale 2010). Even if not integrated into an openly religious framework, associated belief systems may take on indirect implications in the post-disaster phase. Grandjean et al. (2008:199) describe a phenomenon designated as "appraisal bias." They argue that even if certain belief systems in a society are regarded as overcome, there is still a tendency to frame events on the basis of such cultural heritage residues and with the help of corresponding traditional and deeply rooted thinking patterns. This mechanism is even considered valid in the "enlightened" European context. Today's global environmental challenges might moreover serve to re-establish or revive these "ancient" explanatory models:

The fact that natural disasters regularly recur in a world now faced with the unpredictability of climatic change is likely to keep ancient myths alive and even create new versions of them in a never-ending cycle as man struggles to survive in a world not of his own making. (Grandjean et al. 2008:201)

12 The conventional interpretation of a catastrophe based on faith included the idea of divine intervention after the violation of some moral codes (Schipper 2010).

It is thus contended that different forms of belief decisively determine the perception of risks and the willingness to adopt preventive behaviour. Critically, however, and viewed from a disaster management perspective, religion can foster both proactive behaviour and fatalistic passivity (Voss 2010). As Schipper explains: “principles of certain faiths may be conflicting with a risk averse approach needed to reduce the impacts of natural hazards on humans” (Schipper 2010:381; also McGeehan 2012). Whereas South and Southeast Asian religions such as Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism have been found to be particularly prone to fatalistic attitudes towards disasters (Chester et al. 2012).

When addressing the belief-based reading of a catastrophe, it is important to note that the interpretation of a disaster is also a deeply political process (Bhattacharjee 2015).

[. . .] disasters are not only socially and physically disruptive; they are also political events. Thus, disaster analysis must involve the analysis of political power relations among those affected as well as among the various agencies and institutions that stand in relation to the event and the victims (Button 2002:146).

This needs particular attention when it comes to India, where the religious and political spheres are closely intertwined (Alley 2000). Presumably more than the historical version of the retributory theory, today this interpretation bears clear political markings (see Bhattacharjee 2015). Even more so, as Grandjean et al. (2008:200) point out that such a disaster reading seems to be especially appealing to religious fundamentalists. Part of the political aspect also forms the discussion on authority and disaster. The elite is often held accountable for a catastrophe, which is why such events were and are understood as a challenge for rulers and the legitimation of their rule (Groh et al. 2003:26). Catastrophes can be powerful drivers of social upheaval (see e.g. Mulvany 2011, Oliver-Smith 1999)—and with regard to our focus area, they are recognised as the trigger for the formation of social movements. The flash flood in the Alaknanda River during the 1970 monsoon is regarded as one such catalytic event,<sup>13</sup> which ultimately found expression in the emergence of the Chipko movement.<sup>14</sup> The struggle for statehood, which was finally granted in 2000,

13 This flash flood was caused by another dam break at Lake Gohna, a lake that had been created and already breached about 80 years earlier, in 1894 (for more on this issue see Chapter 2).

14 Dramatic landslides caused by the flood were perceived as resulting from predatory practices of government nominated contractors that had ruthlessly decimated the tree population across the region (Bahuguna 1997a; A. Kumar 2015). First demonstrations that sparked off in 1973, came with the demand for the purchase of food at subsidised rates to

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is also seen by several scholars as a long-term effect of the earlier Alaknanda floods and the subsequent activism revolving around Chipko.<sup>15</sup> M. Sharma (2009:36) even traces down the origins of the opposition to dams to the flood of 1970.<sup>16</sup>

Whereas disaster research in general is a relatively young discipline,<sup>17</sup> most historical and modern disaster studies on India are even more recent.<sup>18</sup> This seems particularly disproportionate because the subcontinent is so overly susceptible to disasters. And as T. Roy notes, “although natural calamities have been an ingrained part of Indian history, historians have paid little attention to the effects of disasters upon societies” (T. Roy 2012:7). The higher incidence of disasters in India and in the Hindu Kush Himalayan (HKH) region by global standards (Nibanupudi & Khadka 2015)<sup>19</sup> is discussed as one of the factors contributing to distinct elements of the subcontinent’s culture (T. Roy 2012).<sup>20</sup> Yet it is only in newer studies that cultural components complete the broader picture of cataclysms and their interconnectedness with the civilization of the subcontinent (e.g. V. Singh 2014, 2018). Consistent with the overall trend, most of the research related to disasters in the Indian and particularly the Indian-Himalayan context is conducted by the geo-physical sciences (Voss 2010)<sup>21</sup> and same mechanisms apply to studies explicitly concentrating on flood events in the area (e.g. Rasmussen & Houze 2012). The magnitude of the Uttarakhand disaster in 2013 generated an extensive academic

ease the plight of the population hit by the catastrophe (Bahuguna 1997a). A seething discontent then further led to the birth of the Chipko, the tree-hugger movement.

15 As A. Kumar (2015:290) remarks, “[. . .] the demand for creation of Uttarakhand state, [. . .], was a logical culmination of the ecological consciousness associated with the *pahari* ethos articulated in the Chipko Movement and other social-ecological protests in the region.”

16 “The unusually heavy monsoons of 1970, devastating floods in Alaknanda valley, other upcoming big projects in the region, and a brewing discontent against their perceived impact also became anchoring points for the dam opposition” (Sharma 2009:36).

17 Hoffmann & Oliver-Smith (1999) pinpoint the beginning of modern disaster research, which is endowed with an additional socio-cultural dimension, around 1980.

18 As Shukla et al. (2018) note, for example, on vulnerability studies of agricultural communities in the Indian Himalayas, all the articles they reviewed were released after 2007.

19 As data collected by the Asian Disaster Reduction Center indicated, the death risk from disasters in South Asia is twice as high as in the rest of the world (T. Roy 2012:6).

20 Whereby the greater absence of catastrophes in the European world has also contributed to its divergent cultural characteristics (see T. Roy 2012:16f).

21 Here are some counter-examples of studies with a socio-cultural focus: Ishikawa et al. (2013) explore the implications of floods for psychiatric disorders in Ladakh; Shukla et al. (2016, 2018; also Rajesh et al. 2014) examine the extent of vulnerability of agricultural communities in Uttarakhand. Some authors acknowledge the importance of local knowledge (S. Kumar et al. 2015; Jigyasu 2002), for dealing with disasters in the area. Likewise, the gendered aspect of disaster perception and experience in the Himalayan region is considered a vital research object (Nibanupudi & Khadka 2015).

body of literature that explores the causes of the event as well as possibilities for future risk mitigation (Rautela 2013; Nibanupudi et al. 2015, S.P. Sati & Gahalaut 2013). Also here, the majority of investigations adopt a natural science perspective by exploring geographical or meteorological settings (P. Kumar et al. 2015, Allen et al. 2016; Chevuturi & Dimri 2016).<sup>22</sup> However, most scholars take into account the specific status of the state as a pilgrimage- and tourist destination. Quite a few identify this distinctiveness of the locale as the main trigger for the severity of the disaster, or the increased vulnerability of the area (particularly Ziegler et al. 2014). Several academics therefore urge for a revised version of development for the hill state Uttarakhand (e.g. Sagar 2016; A. Kumar 2013). Chopra (2014) draws lines to historical developments, up to land use practices of the British colonial power, which abetted the particular setting and contributed to the intensified impacts of the disaster. Considering specific forms of vulnerability of the local population, Rautela (2015), Arlikatti et al. (2018) and Maikhuri et al. (2017) deal with coping strategies and the subject of local knowledge for the purpose of disaster risk reduction. Occasionally a study engages with the culturally tinged perception of floods and rainfall events while also dealing with local flood narratives (Sagar 2016). Kala (2014), with an emphasis on risk/vulnerability reduction even briefly mentions the Dhārī Devī case. Finally, Giri and Vats (2018), also in terms of improving disaster management, looked into the media discourse that unfolded after the floods in Uttarakhand.

### 1.1.1 Scope of the Study

The preceding elucidations have highlighted that to date limited attention has been paid to the understanding of flood disasters in the Western Himalayan region from a cultural and religious perspective. Compared to flood events unfolding in other global contexts, disasters and their perception in this territory undoubtedly have their very own form of expression.<sup>23</sup> Yet another key component making the setting of the case study exceptional is the emergence of the hydroelectric power plant. The issue of dams and their contested social and environmental impacts, as well as the mechanisms of the conflicts they trigger, have been widely studied. A limited section of the literature on dams also deals with their role in the context of catastrophes. Nevertheless, the questions explored usually—as even after the

22 Anthropogenic climate change is a widely discussed topic (Cho et al. 2016, Agnihotri et al. 2017) and the role of dams in exacerbating or mitigating floods is also addressed (S.P. Sati & Gahalaut 2013; Chopra 2015).

23 See Döring's (2003:299) suggestion: “[. . .] disasters occur in unique socio-historical contexts that determine the patterns of interpretation.”

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flood of 2013 in Uttarakhand—are with the focus on how dams promote or aggravate disasters in their surroundings,<sup>24</sup> or to what extent the construction of a dam is an socio-environmental disaster in itself (Sulaiman 2007). Another strand with the view to hazard risks is the one dealing with past or potential dam failures leading to disaster and again their cultural implications (Sandesara & Wooten 2011; Huber et al. 2017; Canestrini 2003; Oliveira Andrade 2020). A second approach with regard to dam breaches looks at such structures in disaster-prone areas, as high mountain zones, and at the nature of the threat they are exposed to, especially from earthquakes (Valdiya 1992). However, the examination of the presented triangle, the interrelationship of a living place of worship with a dam and then the role of floods, and additionally as a background setting the implications of a nationwide recognised religiously meaningful space, seems to constitute a rather unique combination. Only the study of Gergan (2017) can be regarded as an example that comes close in this respect. Her paper considers the relationship between dam projects, earthquakes and their connection to deities. Yet the cultural environment and population structure in that examined part of the Himalayas differ considerably from the region of interest here, Garhwal, especially in terms of its significance for pan-Indian religious motives. The author furthermore does not engage with water-based disasters and water in particular carries with it a whole set of unparalleled meanings (see Chapter 1.2.2), which extend their influence to the interpretation of catastrophes and the appraisal of a hydropower project.

This investigation is thus intended to be part of the discussion on how religious conceptions, in exchange with a modern, technologically engineered environment, influence ideas about catastrophes in a South-Asian context. As a further aspect and following authors such as Hoffmann & Oliver-Smith (2002), Bhagarva (2007) or T. Roy (2012), the study will examine what a specific attribution of meaning to a disaster reveals about the current state of the socio-cultural fabric of a society and about different segments of society. With the diverse interplay of factors involved, the project moves across multiple research fields and academic disciplines. This is already rooted in the fact that the existing and resulting knowledge about water-based cataclysms was largely informed by the imprints of a developmental project. The presence of a dam under construction as a key component is being linked to the respective branches of research addressing such undertakings. These include questions regarding environmental justice and political ecology. However, the primary reason why the scientific field of disaster research was chosen as a starting point for the topic and as a further goal for the production of knowledge was, that everything began with a disaster. Most of the attention that was drawn to the temple and its presiding Goddess, including the author's, was by the catastrophe

24 V.P. Sati (2015), S.P. Sati & Gahalaut (2013), Chopra (2015). See also Thomalla et al. (2018) who deal more generally with disaster risk related to developmental projects.



in 2013. Eventually, it turned out that behind a single flood event stood a whole series of other significant deluges that had shaped not only the interpretation of the 2013 disaster, but also the discourse preceding it. Floods had been an integral part of the deity's genesis and played a crucial role in the trajectory of the temple, both in the past as well as today. Finally and decisively, floods were linked to the process of dam construction in its neighbourhood. All this meant that with the onset of the research project, the agency of water, the river and its most energetic expressions in the form of floods had stepped into a pivotal position. Water-based factors appeared to have exerted a major impact on the earlier and later sequence of events—that is the story of the temple and its associated rural society, the implementation of a developmental project, as well as the ideas about floods of a great part of the public. With an analytical access like the one presented, this work aims to provide valuable results and a foundation for other scholars on disasters as well as for further academic reflections on vulnerability, hazard control and resilience. The thesis may also add some novel angles to the literature on dam projects by revealing new features of contemporary dynamics, either confirming or complementing currents that have been identified earlier.

In this way, drawing on various flood events, the study traces the transformations of a goddess and her extended and increasingly technically modified environment. The main focus thereby lies on water as the linking element and on its capacity to bring about comprehensive changes in both the physical and socio-cultural spheres. The question of how other agentive forces, such as imaginaries about sacrality as well as the role of the ubiquitous media shaped perceptions of floods and narratives about the watercourse and about a river goddess is explored simultaneously. Since floods appeared to be related to the deity's origin, it was equally important to shed light on preceding floods. Here the objective was to create a social history of the engagement with water in the form of a river and its deluges. An underlying idea was to see how such memorised relationships and imprinted events exert their influence on contemporary readings of catastrophe. While the study looks at the different factors that shape these perceptions within a mountain society and beyond, the investigation moves across different scales. It begins with the view from the local micro level and proceeds towards a national perspective on the river, on the River Goddess and the floods. In this process, the perspective continuously changes back and forth from the micro to the macro level, with both being constantly intertwined. To summarise—in order to gain an understanding of the here existent flood imaginations, five sets of key questions will be addressed and are supposed to be answered in the course of this examination:

1. Where do the floods act as agents of change in shaping the identity of the Goddess? Or, what was the trajectory of the deity's image as it was formed by the river and its floods?

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2. To which extent and where did floods and other elements of the river inform the discourse on the local level with regard to the upcoming dam project? Where did—partly historically based—imagination about the Goddess, the watercourse and its flood events unite and divide the local society? Eventually, how did these flood narratives obtained from the local level in turn show up in institutional assessments trying to evaluate the relation between temple and hydropower project?
3. How did understandings about the riverine landscape, its water and floods, structure the argumentation of actors involved in the issue of the temple of a more overarching ideological and cross-national spectre?
4. What role did floods play in the construction process of the hydropower project, how were they instrumentalised on both the material and discursive levels to advance the realisation of the project?
5. How did the case of Dhārī Devī shape the flood perceptions following the disaster of 2013 as based on the different inspected levels and elements? And in this context, how did the media, another key player in the coping with a catastrophe, inform knowledge about the flood?

### 1.1.2 Structure

After the presentation of the research object and the associated research questions, this section now turns to the structure. The ensuing Chapter 1.2 addresses the theoretical framework of the study. It introduces the actor-network theory and argues why it is a suitable approach for the topic under examination. Subchapters 1.2.1 to 1.2.3 explain how other important aspects of this thesis, considerations of political ecology, questions of water and the presence of divine actors, can in turn be combined with this theory. Chapter 1.3 outlines the practical steps taken during the research and then applies the actor-network theory in practice by identifying the key actors that form the network of relationships in this case study.

Each of the now following chapters explores the emergent discourses connecting the Goddess Dhārī to the river, its floods and its surrounding river-carved cultural landscape, thereby disclosing the transformations that the deity undergoes along with the meanings ascribed to her. As the study follows the floods, the transformations of a temple and the conflicts accompanying the changes in the cultural landscape, different key issues come to the fore. This required mapping each chapter to the dominant theoretical underpinnings and integrating the respective theoretical frameworks. Chapter 2 onwards looks at the historical angle to further the understanding of the complexity of the Goddess's relationship to her place, and both of their connections to floods. This part will begin in Chapter 2.1 by presenting the narrative-based versions of the first appearance of the Goddess and it

will demonstrate the extent to which historical flood events were woven into these stories. Whereas this section is still untouched by the upcoming dam project in the neighbourhood of the temple, the political nature of the stories already becomes visible here. This insight entailed a detailed analysis of how the different village groups conceive of their goddess. It equally necessitated a thorough overview of the fabric of the village society. That in turn required a critical examination of the caste structures found in this part of the Himalayas in Chapter 2.2 and in particular the situation of the lowest castes, the Dalits. The identification of such underlying themes proved important both to gain a general impression of the social dynamics impacting local narratives; but also to subsequently decipher the social forces that exerted a direct influence on the discussion about the “movability” or “immovability” of the Goddess. As a matter of fact, the issue of caste and a past marked by caste conflicts reaches deep into the discourse on the then upcoming redevelopment of the place. Clear evidence of this is a document issued by the temple *pūjārīs*, which is discussed in Chapter 2.3. While this leaflet had assumed high significance in terms of the implementation of the HPP, it equally draws an extreme picture of the socio-economic positions at the village level. In order to provide a deeper understanding of the notions of the cultural space of the mountains and the corresponding argumentation in the discussion, Chapter 2.3.1 will first expound the dimensions of mobility in relation to mountain deities. The different perspectives on the Goddess and the manifestations of the river are then illustrated from Chapter 2.3.2 to 2.3.6 by means of central historical developments and key moments.

From Chapter 2.4 onwards, the perspective shifts to a new level as the discourse draws wider circles. The theme of a disputed past and the meaning of the Goddess, the floods and other landscape elements reaches the regional public as ideas about the deity find expression in newspaper reports (Chapter 2.4.1). A brief digression at the beginning of that chapter addresses the special status of the *Amar Ujālā* newspaper in Uttarakhand. The handed-down narratives enter decision-making processes while being absorbed by a new category of actors—official state organs and expert panels, as well as judges representing the legislature (Chapter 2.4.1 & 2.4.2). This part also examines the status of oral narratives or a village history based on them and converted into written form before a judicial institution. In Chapter 3, the narratives about the Goddess and the river undergo a further shift to an even broader level. It will be demonstrated here how the issue of the temple was gradually incorporated into the symbolism and politics of a range of actors associated with the Hindu right, and into their vision of the riverine landscapes of Garhwal. The first part of it introduces a particular phenomenon found in this area, namely the existence of two broadly parallel, interwoven and sometimes conflicting (sacred) spaces.

The first major recent flood event in the region in 2012 was accompanied by an alleged manipulation of water flows. Corresponding Chapter 4 covers a

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contextualisation into the broader dynamics that determine developmental projects. This touches upon issues of political ecology and the intrinsic factor of violence, which is often obscured in their implementation process. The extent to which planetary constellations can exert agency on the accomplishment of a hydroelectric project will become clear in the first subsection of Chapter 5 (5.1.1). A newly formed opposition to the moving of the statue instrumentalised, at least in part, the cosmic conditions prevailing at the time. Questions of movement and stasis came to the fore once again. While the slower movement of the planets and their adverse constellations conveyed a sense of stagnation, constructed memories of the previous flood served to build an urgency for “movement” (Chapter 5.1.2). Aspects of agency then completely change in the second part of the chapter (5.2) with the 2013 floods, the “Himalayan Tsunami.” Apart from assigning limitless power to the Goddess, this mega-disaster unleashes another “flood” at the media level. With regard to its particular dynamic, Chapter 5.2.1 sheds light on the general modes of action that determine media coverage and the special mechanisms that come into play in the event of a disaster. The players participating in the media discourse, their interests and the political backgrounds that fed into the narrative of “divine intervention” are analysed in detail in Chapters 5.2.2 to 5.2.8. Chapter 6 offers a conclusion for this extensive trajectory of the Goddess Dhārī and her place within the intermittent occurrence of flood events.

### 1.2 Theoretical Framework

Alongside the examination of the overarching subject of flood disasters, the main target of the investigation of the Dhārī Devī Temple is to unearth its manifold relations and networks of interaction. The study moreover seeks to identify the attributions of meaning that accompany its various transformative phases. There is the Goddess’s connection to a developmental project, both of their interactions with floods and the implications of these entanglements for the affected sections of society and likewise the cultural conceptions going along with it. Ascriptions of meaning emerged from groups, institutions and individuals either witnessing or partaking in the events, which unfolded during the period of investigation. These interpretations were related to the environment, first of all to the river and to questions concerning the multifaceted knowledge about water. The given complexity required an approach, which offered a theoretically and methodologically holistic access. In search of such a system, the actor-network theory seemed compelling because it constitutes a comprehensive concept, especially designed and applicable for fast-changing and fluctuating situations and for novel research questions in which human beings and technology are entangled (Baumgartner

2016). The following brief introduction to actor-network theory intends to map its analytical gains for this research project and highlights its particular benefits for engaging with the non-human and metaphysical agents that assumed importance in its course.

The rise of the actor-network theory (ANT) marked a revolutionary shift with regard to the understanding of social systems and the creation of meaning. The theory was originally conceived for the setting of a modern environment, where people were confronted with new technologies. This ambience demanded novel explanatory approaches in order to define the relationship between humans and technology (Belliger & Krieger 2006). Scholars such as Bruno Latour, Michel Callon and John Law pioneered in developing new perspectives on those interrelations. Latour's (1993) critique of modernity looks at the backdrop setting of social theory prior to the emergence of these novel conceptions. Modernity came to be understood as a distinct constellation of nature, society, man and the divine. Characteristic was the radical separation of these areas (Belliger & Krieger 2006:20). In this context, the de-socialisation of the sciences, the de-mystification of nature and the subjectification of society are closely interrelated. They form a structure made up of justification and legitimation instances which determine the "constitution of modernity" (Latour 1998, as cited in Belliger & Krieger 2006:20). The division of the world into a mechanistic nature, a society consisting of freely acting subjects and a distant, indifferent God thus radically separated man and his destiny from material nature. Science and technology seemed to be positioned outside society and independent of the influences of culture (Belliger & Krieger 2006:20). This is how the autonomous subject of modern epistemology was born. And it occurred in tandem with the modern construction of an objective science and the juxtaposition of nature and society. An epistemological and ontological dualism of subject and object had become the hallmark of modernity. There remained either subjects or objects, but nothing could be both at the same time (Belliger & Krieger 2006:22). Latour (1993) and others challenged prevailing concepts by declaring that there is not nature on the one side and society on the other, but instead interaction. Society, hitherto seen as based on relatively stable explanatory schemes, then turned into a dynamic process, also referred to as "ongoing achievement," or "society in the making" (Callon 2001:62). The realisation that man and technology are inextricably coupled, turned the ANT into a key theory, as it placed its focus on the coalescence and coexistence of the two (Belliger & Krieger 2006). The initial concentration on the human and technological sphere was later expanded and adapted to other research disciplines. Eventually the theory disseminated into the social and human sciences. Various empirical studies carried out under the ANT upset the traditional separation of domains such as the "social" and the "technical" (Belliger & Krieger 2006), but also other areas previously interpreted as autonomous, for example society and nature (Nimmo 2011). The theory's most outstanding feature,

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however, remains its particular emphasis on the agentic role of non-human components. Latour's central idea of the "collective" of human and non-human actors, describes networks of artefacts—material things, human beings, signs, norms, organisations, texts and many other elements—that have been integrated into action programmes, thus making them hybrid actors (Latour 2000, as cited in Belliger & Krieger 2006:15). As research under this heading gained momentum and dealt with dispersed forms of agency, the anthropocentric view of human-environment relations declined in importance (Strang 2014). Analyses of flow processes between technical and other non-human and human actors in a cluster are no longer even considered a novelty. The theory has become deeply anchored in the current scientific landscape and furthermore reveals the transformed self-understanding and conceptualisations of science, society and technology (Belliger & Krieger 2006:17).

The question of how to position ANT between a theory and a methodology is still unresolved. Latour (1996) himself had already asked whether conceptions that fall under this rubric would not rather constitute a method. If so, it would be a fairly free methodological system, or rather a *modus operandi*. Callon characterised the theory as "an attempt to provide analytical tools for explaining the very process by which society is constantly reconfigured" (2001:62), while it can also be viewed as a "useful set of theoretical resources" (Nimmo 2011:112). Among such ambiguities, several authors point to the problem of implementing ANT in research practice. Instead of concrete methodological directions (Nimmo 2011) there are often only vague suggestions for practical application, and so the concept tends to leave the researcher in limbo. Based on the realisation that society is not an accomplished product or system, but is in a constant dynamic process, the general proposal is to monitor these dynamics. Expressed objective is to trace the fluid processes of assembling, the formation of social networks (Baumgartner 2016). The researcher is asked to participate in this movement and the creation of relations, interconnections and linkages and the unfolding dynamics. But the advice is not to capture or freeze developments with a premature explanation (Baumgartner 2016). Since the social aspect is placed at the end of the explanatory chain, processes must be followed and even encouraged to evolve. The method is therefore descriptive, and while the researcher oversees the heterogeneous human and non-human actors as they create networks, he should be attentive to controversies and to processes of mutual translation and cooperation (Mareis 2014). To this end, approaches like participatory observation, document analysis and interviews are employed (Dankert 2011). Historiography and ethnography are also methods of choice for the ANT (Nimmo 2011:112). However, ANT is adaptable to numerous other research methods, usually depending on the focus of the study. This could be an analysis of the characteristics of the actors as they are present in an assemblage or the characteristics that define the network itself (Davey & Adamopoulos 2016).

The weak points for research with ANT arise again from its complexity. Collecting the data is time-consuming and leads to an accumulation of large amounts of material that requires a thorough separation between useful and useless. An extensive body of information, though, makes it difficult to draw transparent conclusions, and the results obtained are not statistical data and cannot be generalised or compared (Dankert 2011). It is nevertheless the method of choice for areas that are still poorly researched and in need of exploration. ANT is equally well suited for complex research questions for which traditional methods and theories do not offer conclusive solutions (Dankert 2011). One of the theory's assets is that it sensitises the researcher to multiple realities that may have been overlooked in other approaches (Nimmo 2011). Therefore, "ANT provides a corrective to the usual social scientific focus upon human beings and the 'social' domain of human 'subjects,' by directing attention to the significance of nonhumans in social life" (Nimmo 2011:109).

### 1.2.1 A Political Ecology Approach

Like actor network theory, political ecology formed part of the paradigm shift in the social sciences in the 1980s. A new consensus emerged that environmental problems and conflicts are part of the political and economic background in which they materialise (Nüsser 2003). This was a new perspective, distinct from earlier apolitical approaches. Political ecology came to be known as an epistemological field that aims to enhance understanding of the relation between society and nature while seeking to provide insights into issues surrounding environment and development (Epure 2015). Bryant (1998:89) defined political ecology as the study of "[. . .] political dynamics surrounding material and discursive struggles over the environment" in developing countries.<sup>25</sup> One focus of the domain are power relations. Power here "[. . .] is reflected in the ability of one actor to control the environment of another. Control may be 'inscribed' in the environment through land, air or water alterations [. . .]" (Bryant 1998:86). Particular attention is paid to inequalities in what Bryant (1998) called a "politicized environment." This goes hand in hand with the recognition that this environment is "constituted through struggles over material practices and struggles over meaning" (Bryant 1998:84). Political ecology shows many similarities with the ANT and the influence that ANT has had on conceptions of political ecology is well recognised (Robbins 2012). Just as the study of actor networks, political ecology takes into account network structures, albeit with a clear focus on the political context. Interdisciplinary approaches

<sup>25</sup> This classification would now also apply to countries that fall into the category of emerging economies.

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form the foundation of inquiry to offer an understanding of the environment and development (Epure 2015). Investigating the specific political dynamics underlying environmental struggles is subject to a range of methodological approaches (Bryant 1998; Robbins 2012). Closely linked to fields such as cultural ecology and developmental geography, corresponding research must usually take into account aspects of historicity and include the cultural legacy of colonisation. By tracing the historical path, it provides an understanding on how colonized people and their environment became integrated into “a first world-dominated global system of capitalist production” (Bryant 1998:85).

With regard to this case study, political processes and interests already shaped different interpretations about the Goddess's origin and identity throughout the village history. Yet political ecology comes into play as soon as the hydropower project and the company implementing it enter the stage and exert their strong influence on the interpretations of the Goddess, her temple and her connection to the riverscape. Manifestations of political ecology are reflected in instrumentalisations of the deity and of floods and in purported historical backgrounds or in debates around ownership issues. Questions on power and dominance, which initially concern processes of interpretation and later translate into material realities, set the tone as they emerge during the temple conflict. Such key issues exhibit their underlying political dimension, whereby they fall within the identified core concerns of political ecology—ecology, environmental knowledge and power (Robbins 2012).

The realisation of a hydropower project in India and in the ecologically sensitive zone of the Himalayas, with all its accompanying and contested ecological and social implications, automatically associates this study with the thematic area addressed here. Large dam projects in India once again look back on a history of long-standing and fierce disputes. They have been examined from various angles—among them in terms of ecological effects, but also in terms of the power relations that determine how people deal with their environment. The most outstanding dam projects in particular, have been extensively studied within a political-ecological frame of reference (see Baviskar 1995; Dwivedi 2006; Mawdsley 2010; Werner 2015). At the forefront here are the realisation of a large number of hydropower plants on the Narmada River in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh and the Tehri Dam, which is geographically close to Srinagar Dam. According to Nüsser (2003) it seems expedient to analyse “conflicts and development models associated with dam construction” with the help of “an actor-oriented approach of political ecology.” Again, these frequent conflicts related to large dams unfold in a “politicised environment,” and such environmental controversies cannot be separated from their political and economic background (Nüsser 2003). Questions concerning power structures are also relevant to issues related to water in general. Water can be controlled and directed and the element is understood to be “an expression of agency, identity and productivity” (Krause & Strang 2013:99). As Krause and Strang note, “water can be



both the means and the object of political action, and a statement of bio-political ideology” (Krause & Strang 2013:99). These reflections now lead to the next point, the importance of water for this thesis and the study of water in the context of the ANT.

### 1.2.2 Actor-Network Theory, Water and Disaster

The central focus and the connective element of this study is water. Water appears primarily in the form of a river and its various states; beyond that in conceptions of the watercourse and finally in its entanglements with a technical undertaking. Water’s predominant property, its flowing nature, largely corresponds with a theory like ANT that exhibits a likewise fluent, or dynamic character. In other words, the nature of water conforms to a scheme designed for research scenarios that encompass variable factors and evolve in fluctuating environments. Krause and Strang (2016, 2013; Strang 2014), who dealt extensively with the interconnectivity of water, point out the notable benefits of including actor-network theory in research on socially oriented engagements with water. Yet they suggest that water should not be regarded “as an *object* of social and cultural production—something produced through social relationships and imbued with meaning through cultural schemes.” It should rather be understood “as a generative and agentic co-constituent of relationships and meanings in society” (Krause & Strang 2016:633). Discussing transformed notions of meaning-making, the authors demonstrate that this process consisted in a form of projection onto the material realm in the early phases of the humanities and social sciences. Culture was assigned the role of “a veil or filter that mediates between human beings and the real world” (Krause & Strang 2016:634). According to this idea, though, “meaning” stands in the way between man and nature and thereby impedes a direct relationship to the surrounding material objects. Only a reversal of the separation between man and nature would allow understanding the quality of the relationship between man and water and through water. Water’s characteristic fluidity in particular underlines and promotes the importance of reflecting on the relationship between people and the material realm; “water’s ubiquitous capacity to flow between articulates most clearly that persons are biocultural beings, and that human-environmental relationships are composed of interactions between material and social processes” (Strang 2014:135). Strang and Krause’s research addresses the multifaceted implications of water and its key role in shaping the past, present and future of man and Earth. They particularly emphasise the central role it plays in human conceptualisations, whereby it greatly exceeds its material dimension.<sup>26</sup> Water flows

26 Here is an excerpt from the long list of their accounts on this subject: “It is clear that water ‘does’ particular things, in accord with its unique properties, behaviors and

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encompass a “combination of topography, power relations, built infrastructure, institutional arrangements property relations, money and market forces, ideologies, social networks, and the properties of water itself” (Krause & Strang 2016:635). Complementing this, Edgeworth (2014) highlights the uniqueness of water’s agency. He describes water, based on its properties, as markedly different from notions of agency associated with other material artefacts. The special nature of water clearly comes to the fore in the interaction of humans with the element. Unique is its enormous power, which goes far beyond the simple “material resistance” of other physical phenomena. Considering water in this way, the element translated into the complexity of a river system, is consequently an “actor network.” People or groups living near a river inevitably enter into a tangible dialogue with the watercourse (Edgeworth 2014). Edgeworth draws on archaeological evidence for an exemplary dialogue about the interaction of people with a river. A mutual exchange unfolds when people in view of their vital interests induce some kind of alteration to the flow pattern of the river. The watercourse then usually reacts in an unanticipated way to its obstruction, which in turn requires renewed human intervention. This form of interaction thus becomes a continuous process. Edgeworth compares such an exchange between human and non-human constituents to a wrestle—a “dynamic entanglement or enmeshment” (2014:158) with a river course. Another distinctive feature of water resides in its potential destructive power and hazardousness, which “can ravage, inundate, overcome and submerge cultural forms” (Edgeworth 2014:159). Yet even beyond its most extreme manifestations, water still intervenes actively and regularly in human affairs and objectives. Even when a river is largely controlled, the watercourse retains its wild and non-human nature. These facets of unpredictability and hazardousness therefore always lurk in the background when water is employed “as a metaphor or model for reconceptualising human-non-human relationships” (Edgeworth 2014:159).

As the last lines already indicated, the river and its water are closely linked to physical events that are experienced as adverse. These include floods and other hydrological disasters. Floods are rhythmic and the most intense phenomena that determine the watercourse. And they too can be examined in terms of their social interrelationship. During the 1980s, when theoretical considerations related to disaster research began to link economic influences with ecological mechanisms,

capacities. It carves river valleys and shapes land and waterscapes; it provides opportunities for and obstacles to the movements of humans and other species; it mixes with other fluids and carries sediments, flora and fauna; it both destroys and enables human settlement. It also hydrates and maintains the physical processes of all living things, creating ‘substantial’ connections between all organisms and so highlighting the social, ecological and biopolitical relationships between humankind and other species” (Krause & Strang 2013:100; Helmreich 2009, as cited *ibid.*).

also the study of hazards and catastrophes underwent a radical shift towards a more holistic perspective (Bryant 1998). Research on floods and hazards has not only been fuelled by ideas that bring together social and material aspects of environmental change, but also contributed substantially to this newly defined scientific orientation.<sup>27</sup> A key question posed is how the effects and behaviour of floods inform the relationship between man and nature. Krause (Krause & Strang 2016:636) in fact suggests a “hydrosociality” of floods, which should be taken into account in view of a better flood risk management. Katanha and Simatele (2019) even more explicitly assert the validity of ideas of actor-network theory for hazard mitigation strategies. They highlight the persistent lack of studies investigating the complexity of human-environment relations with the aim of improving risk reduction policies. The ANT would have a special competence in expanding knowledge about “current dynamic social and ecological complexities in alternative hazard mitigation strategies in developing countries” (Katanha & Simatele 2019:4). Other practical gains of integrating the relationality of water would precipitate on and improve systems of water supply- and irrigation, flood management, aquifer governance or coastal zone protection (Krause & Strang 2016).<sup>28</sup>

Apart from the fact that water is a political and economic or an ecological issue and a subject to various other material and cognitive associations and meanings, water knowledge and beliefs also have a considerable transcendental dimension. While the agency of water has implications for the understanding of the divine, the transcendent in turn influences the perception of water. Given the largely sacred status of the subcontinent’s water sources and streams (cf. Haberman 2006; Eck 2012, 1996; Alley 2002; Feldhaus 1995) and the prevalence of water-related practices, the agentic power of water in relation to religious beliefs is particularly pronounced in India. Especially the imaginations about the most famous of the revered rivers, the Ganges, fulfil the idea of agency in a multitude of ways and on a number of scales. The entire river is worshipped as the personification of a goddess (Gaṅgā) and represents a purifying entity (Eck 1996). Furthermore, various locally worshipped gods and spirits are also bound to the agency of the river or stand in

27 Bryant’s more general view of the role of the then new form of disaster research is reflected in his statement that the foregrounded preoccupation with real and potential catastrophes “was simultaneously a wider comment about the need for work on the political economy of environmental change in the third world. As such, it was an influential strand in the development of third-world political ecology, a point acknowledged in key political-ecology texts” (Bryant 1998:81).

28 Strang and Krause even extend the list of potential benefits to cover aspects of corporate policy—“If the social nature of water and the intrinsic links between culture, political economy, and hydrology are taken seriously, managers will be able to better deal with material infrastructures following social logics or social processes sparked by hydrological events” (Krause & Strang 2016:635).

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a reciprocal relationship to the spiritual essence of the river course. These reflections on water, divinity and agency now lead to the last point, which elucidates the implications and new conceptions about the divine as an actor for this analysis.

### 1.2.3 The Agency of Divinity

Considering that a (river) goddess is a primary subject of the discussion, reflections on divinity and agency form the central element of this study. Based on this premise, the access offered by William S. Sax to the question of the complex mechanisms of agency in conjunction with Western Himalayan deities provided relevant inspiration in this regard. Through his numerous publications, Sax tailored reflections on agency to the distinctive pantheon in Garhwal. This was particularly interesting with regard to the prevailing practices of direct communicative exchange with local deities. When the concept of non-human agency was introduced in Latour's or Callon's system of thought to designate an agent in a ramified social system, they excluded in principle "entities that are entirely symbolic in nature" and "entities that are supernatural" (Sayes 2014:136).<sup>29</sup> Sax, by contrast, incorporated representations of the metaphysical into his conception of the actor-network theory. One of his motivations was the personal dilemma he encountered after establishing relationships with the people in his research environment. The rationale for his concerns was that he could not, on the one hand, build personal ties and friendships and then, in a second step, snub his companions by declaring their worldview irrelevant. In pondering on how to accommodate the divine, he asked:

How can I write about their culture and religion, according to which the presence of this divine king in their midst is a self-evident fact, without making them appear backward and superstitious to my readers? How can I analyze the way in which they construct a world of meaning and significance—a world in which embodied deities are part of the fabric of daily life—without dismissing their understandings as mystified or deluded? (Sax 2002:158)

29 The question remains, why the creators of the new theory explicitly excluded these transcendental facets from their considerations. Under the basic premises of the idea, the understanding of agency of the divine would be largely congruent with Latour's account on the matter. The system of distributed agency, even if initially with a focus on technology, with the integration of diverse non-human actors, would logically have to extend to cosmological frameworks. Manifestations of the divine after all meet the general requirements of wielding their influence on the cluster of participants along the system of their participation.

Studies of faith and spiritual experience are generally confronted with the problem Sax addresses—how to integrate religious experience into academic research? A great part of the population of South Asia, when asked whether gods possess the capacity to act, would confirm this idea and defend the ability and volition of deities to perform actions in the physical world (U. Rao 2002). U. Rao contends, “the presence of the divine is considered to be a ‘proven fact’ rather than a question of belief, a fact established through ‘sensory experience’ and ‘physical experimentation’” (2002:3).<sup>30</sup> However, academic research that engages directly in discussions about the veracity or non-veracity of transcendental phenomena has been accused of pursuing a “‘protectionist strategy’ aiming to safeguard religious experience from social scientific explanations” (Proudfoot 1985, as cited in Hollywood 2004:518). Since Enlightenment, religious studies in general have followed an approach of scientific rationality or “explanatory reductionism,” while highly abstracting the research issue from its given context and explaining it with ontological concepts predefined by the natural sciences and by a rationalist worldview. It goes without saying that such interpretations are in stark contrast to the life worlds of a religious individual. As Hollywood (2004:518) points out, “the religious person’s explanation of his or her experience [ . . . ] is not even considered as one possible explanation of the experience by the social scientific researcher.” Further elaborating on the inconsistencies arising from this attitude towards religious knowledge, she notes:

[ . . . ] it seems unlikely that the scholar of religion, who presumes the primacy of naturalistic explanations, will be able to describe religious experience without recourse to categories derived from such explanations. Social scientific descriptions themselves are often subtly at odds with the experiences they purport to describe. (Hollywood 2004:518)

Hollywood concludes:

[ . . . ] we cannot unquestioningly presume that our own explanatory and descriptive categories are valid and those of our subject are invalid. Yet the dilemma—how to take seriously the agency of the other [ . . . ] when the other seems intent on ascribing her agency to God [ . . . ]—remains unresolved. (2004:524)

30 As Chapter 3 will show, in a contemporary context and in order to gain credibility, this belief is often supported by scientific language or arguments (U. Rao 2002).

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Scholars have explored a range of options to overcome or circumvent this discrepancy.<sup>31</sup> Unlike other strategies, however, Sax' approach seems to allow the most intimate proximity to the experience of the divine and to the living practice of his research subjects. The central idea is that deities exercise their form of agency in a complex social system while expressing the intentions of the community. Gods are therefore not direct actors, but display their agency within a network of distributed agency. This concept obviously circumvents the delicate debate on whether the supposed metaphysical properties of deities exert their unmediated influence on the human sphere. Whitmore (2010:135) suggests that Sax thus not only avoids irreconcilable disagreements between different world views, but his concept also overcomes the immanent differences "between the world of the western anthropologist and the world of Garhwali culture." It thereby functions "as a disciplinary bridge between the study of religion and the social sciences" (Whitmore 2010:135).

Notably, studies based on the distinctive culture in the Western Himalayan mountain region and in Nepal, and dealing with local cults, either directly investigate the agency of local gods and goddesses or indirectly involve the issue (see e.g. Baltutis 2009; Michaels 1993; Jassal 2014, 2017; Smith 2018; Whitmore 2018). The very designation of the region as *dev-bhūmi* alludes on the one hand to the authoritative role attributed to the deities of the local culture, while at the same time referring to imaginaries of the sacred on a more overarching cultural level. The prominent role of the gods is reflected in Berti's various writings on the deities in Himachal Pradesh (2001, 2004, 2006; Berti & Tarabout 2009) and in their all-pervasive presence, such as in legal proceedings and land disputes (Berti 2015).<sup>32</sup> Even when not the focus of research, the deities' extended scope of agency appears as a significant factor in many studies conducted in this area (see e.g. Polit 2012; Drew 2011, 2014; Wagner 2013). Several authors also explicitly refer to and adopt elements of Sax's approach and understanding of agency (e.g. Halperin 2012, 2017; Polit 2012; Whitmore 2010, 2018). This fact at the same time reaffirms

31 Hollywood considers various existing alternatives of integrating agency attributed to the divine into scientific treatises. Among others she refers to Keller, who regards cases of spirit possession within categories of "instrumental agency" (2004:525). This concentration on the adepts' own perception of religious experiences and states of possession or even on the psychological characteristics of people who are susceptible to such conditions (Dwyer 2003) largely pushes the question of direct influence by divine actors into the background. Other authors solve their predicament by integrating the divine through its materiality (cf. Pongratz-Leisten/Sonik 2015), thus seeking an understanding of how material objects associated with religious conceptions extend their influence on the experience of the adept, or the worshipper (cf. Higgins 2016).

32 She investigated the representation of the *devī-devtās* in court, but noted that their position in court proceedings is generally not recognised.

the need to apply modified practices concerning the gods' capacity to interact, especially with respect to the mountain deities of the Himalayas.

Before turning to the practical approach of this thesis in the next step, a brief look at the practicability of ANT in relation to the metaphysical completes this section. To promote an understanding for the form of agency of divine beings, Sax pointed out the most salient characteristic of an agent, namely its potential to generate effects and bring about changes in the external world (Sax 2006, 2009). In his own words: “perhaps the most straightforward definition of agency is ‘the ability to transform the world’ [. . .]” (2006:474). This consideration can be regarded as a valuable tool, primarily for identifying an agent, including from the metaphysical domain, but also for the recognition of further participating elements in a distributed network.

### 1.3 ANT in Practice—The Research and an Account of the Different Actors

Research for this discourse-oriented study was conducted on the basis of a multipronged approach. The raw material was drawn from a wide range of sources, covering a broad spectrum of voices and perspectives. General information about the trajectory of the temple and its extended interplay with floods and a dam project was first obtained through several field visits between 2014 and 2017. As a form of participant observation, I spent these visits on site with exploration walks, longer sojourns in a road-side temple on the path to the main Dhārī Devī Temple, whilst conducting informal interviews with villagers, priests and passers-by. Further interviews were held in other places, as in Delhi and around Srinagar, with activists and experts that engaged with the issue of the Srinagar Dam or with related subjects. Such an access strategy provided an ethnographical account of the situation on the ground and an understanding of the background realities. The stays on site were particularly conducive to finding the textual sources used in this study. These were documents of court cases as well as booklets and books, some of which were only available through personal contacts, or probably only within the state. A subsequent material search was to a large degree conducted digitally. This also comprised the compilation of video and audio material, blog entries, online articles and extracts from special disaster broadcasts.

One of the reasons for exploring the topic with an overriding emphasis on textual sources arose from the initial consultations with participants in the earlier opposition to the reconstruction of the temple. These first personal contacts led to the realisation that after the relocation, detailed memories of the events and discourses before the disaster, especially of the exact sequence of events, had already

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faded. Sometimes those involved were even reluctant to look back at the stages of their activism, since it was still an emotionally charged topic and accompanied by feelings of frustration and defeat. Thus not only the temporal distance seemed to have constituted a hindrance to reproduce what happened before the shifting of the Goddess, but especially the turning point of the flood of 2013 profoundly altered the memories of the former temple struggle. Obviously, the time factor and the progression of developments as well as of communication processes had led to further alterations and distortions of the flood and other memories on which I wanted to base my investigation. Textual and here mostly web-based sources along with their statements and narrations, on the other hand, are considered discourses that are “frozen in time” (Davey & Adamopoulos 2016). This means that they are preserved in the form they possessed at the time of creation. With regard to interviews, this approach also circumvented the filtering of information on the part of the interviewees and their readjustment to moral and political standards (Moran 2011; Davey & Adamopoulos 2016).

One of the foundations of this study, especially to comprehend the chronological dimension and to retrace the unfolding discourse of the socio-ecological conflict preceding the disaster in 2013, was the perusal of the local Hindi daily Amar Ujālā, Garhwal edition. The Amar Ujālā is, beside the Dainik Jāgraṇ, the leading vernacular daily of the area. The newspaper has a special status in Uttarakhand and is closely intertwined with its regional history and political developments (cf. Chapter 2.4.1). The search covered every edition from the beginning of 2009—the starting point of the newspaper’s internet archive—until the end of 2013. Amar Ujālā’s online archive was still academia-friendly at the time, as it consisted of text-based articles that could be searched by keyword. The retrieval of articles was based on search terms relevant to the temple and the Srinagar Hydroelectric Project: *dhārī*, *alaknandā*, *jal vidyut pariyojnā* (hydroelectric project), *visthāpan* (relocation/resettlement), *jīvike* (GVK), *daivīya āpadā* (alternatively: *daivya āpadā*, *daivī āpadā*; natural disaster or divine disaster). The search option by keywords, however, was discontinued at some point when the archive was converted to a pdf-based e-paper edition that corresponds to the print edition. The number of articles collected for this period is around 346.<sup>33</sup> But I continued to read and collect news items from the daily paper, which is why occasionally some information from a later stage has been incorporated.

The interviews were conducted partly in English, partly in Hindi. I translated most of the written Hindi material myself. My good friend and pandit from Kaliyasaur, M. P. Pandey, assisted in the translation of a book chapter which will be presented shortly, as it contained many expressions unknown to me. The same

33 The exact number is difficult to determine, since, for example, reports on the subject often consisted of several sub-articles.



applied to a booklet he had authored himself. This one was linguistically simpler, but he still provided valuable additional information on his publication. M. P. Pandey likewise very generously and patiently supported me in translating my collected audio and video sources, which assume relevance especially in Chapter 5 of the dissertation, respectively in the discourses after the 2013 catastrophe.

As Chapter 1.2 outlined, ANT is not clearly a method or a methodology; there are no binding instructions on how to deal with a chosen research question. Nevertheless, authors like Dankert (2011) offer some thoughts on this topic and I have tailored my approach along such vague guidelines. In his considerations on the ANT he distinguished two different paths for gaining access to a research object. On the one side there is the purely descriptive method, which would only “tell a story,” use all the available data and not even lead to a conclusion. On the other end is the more epistemologically oriented research with a clear focus on knowledge gains. The aim of this study has already been clarified as putting an emphasis on disaster research and the idea of contributing to this area. The objective thus required a selection of the present material with regard to the intended gain in knowledge and a recognition of already existing academic literature. Taking the identified central actor as a starting point, the relations of this actor with the various other human and non-human participants in this ramified network are then to be investigated and disclosed (Dankert 2011). Based on such methodological considerations, the way to approach the issue of Goddess Dhārī, the floods and their multiple interrelationships, was in the first place to identify the different actors and agents that participated in her and her environment’s transformation. Now confronted with a multitude of influences that impacted on further developments, and since it was impossible to identify them all, this strategy had to be restricted to a rough description of the most important and predominant agentive units. The following list and characterisation of the 13 key actors more or less reflects the order of their appearance and, to some extent, the order of the different chapters of this study:

1. The deity and its place

The investigation begins with the Goddess herself and her abode on River Alaknanda. The deity and her place stand in tight interconnection with the local society, the inhabitants of the two adjacent villages. In many aspects, the villagers form a unity with- or an extension of their place of worship.

2. Floods

Floods, as a focal point of research—either or not labelled disasters—form part of the temple and its multitude of constructed narratives from the very beginning of its existence. The floods, with their capacity to induce change, exert a catalytic effect on the place of worship. Although the focus of the study is on the most violent manifestations of the river, floods and their meanings could

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not always be completely distinguished from other conceptions of the river. In some cases, its gentler forms or other notions of water had to be included if they helped to complete the overall picture of the cultural understandings, interests and power relations involved. Similarly, in some passages landscape features distinguished from the river assumed a role in the discourse. Often such features possessed qualities, which were obviously opposed to the perceived nature of water and were hence formulated as a counter-concept or an “antithesis to water.” In this way, they complemented the notion of the river or delimited its properties by a juxtaposition.

### 3. A dam project

The agency of a dam project is first demonstrated by the fact that it changes the shape and characteristics of a riverscape and directly impacts the trajectory of a place of worship. But a dam can also assume an agentive role with regard to flood events—not only by mitigating or amplifying them, but even by generating a flood. Linked to the dam project, further agentive power is distributed among the construction company, GVK and its subsidiary, AHPCL and other subcontractors and persons affiliated to it. Other strong actors were the local- and state administration, who helped to push through the implementation of the dam and the hydroelectric plant. All of them contributed to the creation of meaningful narratives about floods and the temple.

### 4. Village disparities

As especially the first part of the thesis with concentration on the local level will show, not only historically informed memories about the Goddess and the temple had a decisive influence on the interpretation of flood events, but also significant divisions among the village society. These divides were to a high degree defined by caste boundaries. Obviously, old disputes and ownership issues concerning the Goddess had flared up anew in view of the upcoming dam project.

### 5. Written documents—a book chapter and a booklet

How a single book chapter managed to assume a pivotal role for the future of the temple and the interpretation of floods needs some elucidation at this point. Reference is made here to the chapter on the Dhārī Devī Temple in a book on the history of temples around Srinagar “Uttarākhaṇḍ, Śrī Kṣētr Śrīnagar” (Uttarakhand, sacred field Srinagar). The volume of the historian Naithany is one of the few, and certainly the most elaborate, source available in print providing historical information on the Goddess and the place of her worship. This is the case although the writings of the author may lack validation and the local newspaper also concludes that there is no “reliable history” of the temple (Amar Ujālā 2012, July 8b). Most of the knowledge, and that means the knowledge about floods pertaining to the Goddess, was therefore gained from this book by different actors. There was another booklet, which also appeared on the scene,

or which precipitated on argumentations regarding the temple and the dam project. The talk is about Pandey's booklet from 2005 "Siddhapīṭh Dhārī Devī Kā Itihās Evam Mahimā" (Siddhapīṭh Dhārī Devī's History and Glory). Its circulation was much smaller, however, and according to the author, he eventually withdrew his work altogether because of conflicts it had triggered at the village level. Thus not only did the discourse before the relocation predominantly bear the marks of the temple descriptions in Naithany's treatise, but also after the catastrophe in 2013 the information available here was used to interpret the catastrophe. Whichever media reported about the case of Dhārī Devī, especially after the 2013 flood, at some point referred back to his book, or even to other texts that had quoted it. Naithany's depiction of the temple had consequently dominated the lines of argumentation during the conflict and informed interpretive processes concerning flood events. As I suspect, the book had spent many years more or less dormant on the shelves of bookshops around Srinagar. It was only with the advent of questions of movability or non-movability that the document began to take on a key role, and Naithany's text was assigned the authority of interpretation for the history of the temple. This authoritative role became even clearer, when a committee entrusted with the task to find out if the deity's statue can be moved from her place, consulted Naithany as an expert on the temple. Obviously here not only the book chapter but also the author appear both as actors, and even in conflicting positions regarding the debates lead during the critical phase before the temple relocation (see Chapter 2.4.2). All these manifestations render the publication an integral actor in the reconstruction of the water-based transformations of the temple. As will become apparent, also the following two points are closely intertwined with this one.

#### 6. Oral narratives

Together with these writings and rather invisibly also a further non-human actor enters the scene here, which is the collection of locally obtained oral narratives. In spite of the existence of a few ancient documents for the reconstruction of the history of the Goddess, most of the accounts are based on an initial consultation of local actors and on the narratives they contributed—and on the choice of interview partners by the author. By this mechanism oral narratives, although translated into written form, turned into central argumentative elements in the course of an environmental conflict. The stories about the Goddess form part of the oral history and handed-down knowledge, but once they were compiled by a recognised historical expert and printed in a book, they acquired more credibility and evidential value. The narratives, having assumed a fixed form when printed on paper, thus became authoritative and a valid testimony for the place's historicity—just as the author of the book had become the authoritative person for interpreting the place's past and meaning. Oral narratives in this modified form as a result became means for legal

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claims, in this case claims by different social groups and actors to their rights over a deity and a temple. The narratives eventually made their way up to the Supreme Court and impacted various hearings and the final ruling about the Srinagar Hydropower project.

### 7. A leaflet

There was another document that had gained prominence during the extensive debates that preceded the relocation of the temple. It was a pamphlet written and published by the temple *pūjārīs* in defence of their rights to the deity, and it constituted a response to the claims of the village's other caste group, the *dhunār*. This point is reminiscent of the village disparities already mentioned and is therefore closely related to point four. The leaflet is also interesting because an elaborate form of circular reasoning is constructed on the basis of its content. Although the pamphlet comes from the rural community and thus directly from the source of all memories, it draws its evidence in part from the Naithany chapter, even though this in turn relies on village narratives as its evidence base.

### 8. The local newspaper

Much of the information, such as the overview of the sequence of events on a regional scale, arguments of the activists and their opponents, as well as the background to the temple and dam project, was taken from the newspaper Amar Ujālā. The paper played a major role not only in transmitting information, but also in shaping perceptions about the temple, the project and the floods in its wake. In addition, the Amar Ujālā also occupies a special position in the state (Chapter 2.4.1). This rendered it another of the key actors in relation to the processes addressed in this thesis. As Meyrowitz (1997) elucidated, newspapers, like the other various media, do not only function as channels for the transmission of information, instead they “[. . .] are themselves social contexts that foster certain forms of interactions and social identities” (Meyrowitz 1997:59). Newspapers assume agency by influencing public dynamics, but they equally become a relevant indicator of current developments and their nature across a society. The Amar Ujālā was therefore not only best suited to reproduce the chronology of events around Srinagar, but it was also the medium of choice to identify and access contemporary narratives circulating in the public sphere of the mountains.

### 9. Expert committees and the court

As already indicated under point five, different bodies such as expert committees and courts contributed to the interpretation process of the Goddess's and the flood's agency and the developments thus catalysed for the riverscape.

### 10. Persons and groups from a religious-political spectrum

Once the conflict over the Goddess became more widespread and the counter-movement against the temple relocation grew stronger, it shifted from a locally

generated protest to a broader form of opposition. At this stage, new actors entered the scene who connected the topic not only to their vision of the river and eventually also to their flood imaginations, but also to a broader political agenda in the tow of their activism. The dominant topic in this context became the nature of the Hindu Right's environmental engagement. The role of religious authorities and partially right-wing actors for the temple issue and their later reading of the flood in 2013 will be sufficiently elucidated from Chapter 3 onwards.

#### 11. The sacralised region

Uttarakhand is not only a cultural space for its inhabitants, but also a region of unique religious significance for a pan-Indian Hinduism. The "sacred space" of the Garhwal region is based on textual traditions of Hinduism. It is a concept fed by stories about mythological figures, by the presence of the region's sacralized watercourses and the venerated sites, the Char Dhām, but also by more general ideas about mountain landscapes and the Himalayas in particular. The reticular entanglements of these components combine to form a field of sacredness that is considered highly meritorious. The characteristics of its intertwining with the temple, the dam project and with flood disasters will soon be widely discussed.

#### 12. Planetary conditions

It may be a surprising point, but as will be demonstrated, astrological conditions had quite a strong share of agency. This was mainly due to them posing a significant obstacle prior to the implementation of the temple relocation and just before the main disaster. In that phase, planetary conditions were positioned as a counter player to memory-fed imaginations and anticipations about coming floods. After the disaster, on the other hand, astrological reasons were used to explain the devastating impacts of the flood.

#### 13. The national media

After the Flood disaster in 2013 occurred a switch of the interpretive entities. Before the flood and at the public level, the local newspaper was the main source of knowledge about the temple and its connections to its surroundings. Whereas following the catastrophe, the national media took over the stage and the interpretive authority about the deluge and its association with the deity.

