

3 From Rock to *Bhūmi* to *Dhārā* The Protest against the Goddess's Removal

While following Dhārī Devī's transformations and her relationship with the river, this part now transcends local flood memories and also the flood history of the Goddess. At this point it appears crucial to present the line of reasoning of the defenders of the former temple to highlight the significant differences in the conceptions about the place of the Goddess that accompanied the conflict. The subsequent passages demonstrate how the natural elements water and earth, notions of the native soil and of the flow of the river—and eventually of floods—have transformed from factors embedded in a local culture into symbols of national politics.

People from the neighbouring town of Srinagar initially formed the bulk of the opposition to the temple relocation, so the resistance at first crystallised from a largely local backdrop. Soon however, the symbols and rhetoric of the demonstrators merged with the imaginations of “external” actors about the place and their pursued agenda.¹⁴¹ Their supra-regional ideas related to the sacred landscape encompassing the Himalayan region and the state of Uttarakhand in particular, as well as the entire Ganges system. The accompanying arguments of the protestors against Dhārī Devī's relocation spanned the arc from initial ecological, legal and site-related considerations to later concerns for the holy Himalayan region and at the heart of this concept the sanctity of the Ganges. Thereby, locally anchored representations, which include the folk tradition associated with the temple, played a diminishing role. The account of this transition process provided here begins with the ideas most closely linked to the locally formed identity of the temple. Ensuing passages will then illustrate the gradual shift in the debate onto an expanded scale and towards an overarching sacred space. This approach is going to shed light on the shifting patterns of the applied symbolism, as the title of the chapter already pointed out: “from rock to *bhūmi* (soil) to *dhārā* (flow).”

In order to better understand the social dynamics of the processes at hand, it is first necessary to elaborate on the historically evolved mechanisms at play in the mountain region. Local movements such as resistance to dam projects build on long-standing structural patterns that persisted throughout the existence of the

141 See in this context the discussion on local identity in Chapter 5.2.4.

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former mountain states or principalities that eventually merged to form the state of Uttarakhand. The region looks back on a long history of immigration and emigration as well as social, political and trade flows. At the same time, it has been marked by invasion and domination by external forces and their indiscriminate exploitation of the mountains and their inhabitants (Aryal 1995:14; Drew 2014:237; James 2004:368). This theme became evident with the invasion and occupation by the Gurkhas from 1790 onwards (A. Kumar 2011), and continued and aggravated later with the presence of the British Raj.¹⁴² One of the first dramatic and visible effects of this seizure of local people's rights was felt when the hill communities were stripped of their centuries-old forest rights around mid-19th century (R. Rawat 2004).¹⁴³ Such practices contributed significantly to deepening the chasm between local and supra-regional interests in the area. Often, and even more pronounced after the attainment of statehood, state institutions themselves fostered those mechanisms. To this day the diversification and conflicting claims to spaces in the mountain region are repeated at various levels. They feature in the articulation of antagonisms, such as when the *pahārī* (mountain people) are juxtaposed with the *maidānī* (people from the plains). As a vestige of the centuries of political rule of the hill states from the Indian lowlands, these conceptions carry with them meanings of the dominant group as opposed to the dominated (Rangan 2000, as cited in R. Chakraborty 2018). Also attributes attached to the mountain dwellers, such as “backward, uneducated, superstitious and morally and spiritually inferior to the maidanis” (Whitmore 2016; Mathur 2016, as cited in R. Chakraborty 2018:18) still represent a legacy from the colonial era.

Given this background, it was hardly surprising that early mobilisation processes in this part of the Himalayas emerged as resistance to the practice of external forces claiming the mountains with the intention of extracting resources. In

142 Due to the very violent regime of the Gurkhas in the region, and even the call for their support by the erstwhile ruler of Garhwal, king Sudarshan Shah, the invasion of the British into the mountain states was partly regarded as a salvation from the Nepali forces (A. Kumar 2011). This move was however anything but altruistic and rather part of British aggression. As an important strategic initiative, it gave them access to and control over trade routes to Central Asia and Russia, as well as other opportunities for economic gain. For that reason, the British kept the separate states of Kumaon and to some extent Garhwal under their dominion. On the other hand, they reinstated the earlier king of Garhwal (within the boundaries of present-day Tehri Garhwal), which was politically and economically of much lesser significance (Whitmore 2010:52).

143 However, the roles of outsiders and local actors are usually not so clearly delineated. During the mentioned period it were also the local princely rulers that collaborated with the British and especially they weakened the population's rights to the earlier village commons—mainly to fill their own pockets. Initial protests against these practices were thus directed at the local Rajas. See in this context also the developments leading to the Tilarī massacre on May 30, 1930 (A. Kumar 2011).

fact, this was one of the factors leading to the initiation of one of the most famous social movements stemming from Uttarakhand—Chipko, the tree-hugger movement in 1973 (James 2004). Ownership questions that surfaced during this time subsequently found expression not only in the struggle against large dams in general (Werner 2015:119) and particularly in the case of the Tehri Dam (James 2004),¹⁴⁴ but, as scholars have argued, entailed also the struggle for an independent state (A. Kumar 2011:84).¹⁴⁵ The development of hydropower was eventually the point at which this paradigm of resource exploitation from the mountains clearly returned to the fore.

Apart from social and economic dimensions, the same pattern also applies to religious aspects or a geography of the sacred. Geographical assignments of meaning here led to a variety of sacred spaces in the mountains. Broadly speaking, the mountains comprise two distinct cultural strands. On the one hand, there is the lived culture of the mountain people, the *pahārī* culture with its own sacred geography. Then there is the imagined sacred landscape of the religious tourists. Coming from the framework of a more homogenised or normative pan-Indian Hinduism, their main focus is on the mythologically charged sites that are significant to their belief system. Authors as Whitmore (2010; also Sax 2009) in particular highlighted the features of these parallel, mutually influencing and sometimes competing spaces. Their presence comes to the fore most notably in the famous pilgrim centres, such as Kedarnath, a location of Śiva worship.¹⁴⁶ The mountain culture, for its part, is defined by a complex network of regional deities and the interactions with them.¹⁴⁷ Halperin classified the prevailing *pahārī* belief system as “locals follow a stream of Mountain Hinduism that centres on the *devīs* and

144 James goes so far as to draw an analogy between Tehri and the dynamics that led to the Chipko movement. In the latter case, ash trees were given to outside companies to manufacture products for a distant market, while local people were deprived of their own forest resources. Similarly, the Tehri dam would only bring benefits to other regions—electricity to Delhi and irrigation to western Uttar Pradesh. The locals, on the other hand, would only suffer losses (of “heritage, history and habitat”) and not even benefit from the electricity generated (James 2004:368).

145 “Thus, the genealogy of all the socioecological protests in the post-independence period can be traced back to the struggles in the colonial period that have served as an inspiration and template for future struggles such as Chipko and even the *jan andolan* for Uttarakhand” (A. Kumar 2011:94).

146 [. . .], I present, as I experienced it to be, the *local-yatri* binary as the normative frame for thinking about social organization and interactions in Kedarnath” (Whitmore 2010:68f.).

147 Here a selection of literature dealing with the culture of the Western Himalayas; Sax 1990, 1991, 1995, 2002, 2006, 2009; Smith 2018, Berti 2001, 2004, 2006, 2015; Berti & Tarabout 2009; Halperin 2012, 2017, Berreman 1961, Bhardwaj 2015; Jassal 2014, 2017; Jettmar 1974; Atkinson 1974; Sutherland 1998; Wagner 2013.

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devtās: village goddesses and gods, who are enshrined in relatively modest temples and worshipped mainly by community members” (2016:1f). While the mountain beliefs to a lesser extent encompass also the main pilgrim centres (Sax 2009; Whitmore 2010), they however mostly constitute a space of economic concern for the local population. A large part of the state’s revenue comes from the tourism sector and provides income for a significant portion of the village population.¹⁴⁸ The pilgrims, on the other hand, even if they should pay tribute to the local places of worship, often regard them with a kind of exoticising curiosity.

Given that the “outsiders versus natives” motif thus plays a predominant role in the region, it is regularly cited as a crucial factor that must inevitably be taken into account in social science research on the region (Aryal 1995; Drew 2011, 2017; Werner 2015; Whitmore 2010, 2018). Also the temple in Kaliyasaur became part of the split between the “local” and “external” including all its intermediate shades. However, the notion of what is perceived as “external” in its antagonistic form proved negotiable. In the case at hand, for example, the dam construction company as an external actor was deemed trustworthy and a guarantor for the livelihood of a large part of the nearby residents. The actors involved in the protest against the temple relocation, in contrast, who were only partly “external,” were accused of ignoring the basic needs of the local population (Niebuhr 2017).¹⁴⁹

These dualities between outsiders and locals already assumed significance in the case of the first protagonist presented here, who was involved in the struggle for the Dhārī Devī Temple and over the dam. This part concentrates largely on the line of argumentation of the leading activist Bharat Jhunjhunwala and is based to a great

148 According to World Bank et al. (2013:44) the tourism sector accounts for 25 percent of Uttarakhand’s GDP and provides a source of income for 100,000 people.

149 Here is a noteworthy opinion from the commentary section of the *Amar Ujālā* in this regard; “यह सही है कि राष्ट्रहित या समाज के व्यापक हित के नाम पर कई बार ऐसी परियोजनाओं के निर्माण के समय स्थानीय समुदाय के हितों की और खासकर स्थानीय पारितंत्र पर पड़ने वाले प्रभाव की अनदेखी कर दी जाती है। उत्तराखंड में परियोजना विरोधी बाहरी लोगों के अलावा ऐसे लोग भी हैं, जिनको बांध और बैराज में फर्क नजर नहीं आता है। लोग भले ही गरीबी, भुखमरी, शोषण और महंगाई जैसे मुद्दों पर चुप रहते हैं, मगर जब धर्म की बात आती है, तो सड़कों पर उतरकर मरने-मारने पर उतारू हो जाते हैं। गंगा के मामले में भी धर्म को अफीम की तरह इस्तेमाल किया जा रहा है।” (J. Rawat 2012). “It is true that in the name of national or broader societal interest, the construction of such projects sometimes ignores the interests of the local community and especially the impact on the local ecosystem. Apart from external anti-project activists, there are people in Uttarakhand who see no difference between a dam and a barrage. Even though people may remain silent on issues like poverty, hunger, exploitation and inflation, but when it comes to religion, they take to the streets to kill and die. In the case of Gaṅgā too, religion is being used like opium.” Note also an article of *India Today* from 2012 on the subject of support for the hydroelectric projects in Uttarakhand. The respective text even claims that “the Srinagar project is a symbol for the changing mindset and sentiments of the local people towards hydropower projects” (Babele 2012).

extent on an exhaustive body of material obtained from him. Despite the fact that additional information was collected from several local activists, he had taken a leading role and discursive dominance. This arose not only because of his activism, but also from his various publications on hydropower. As the main driver of the protest, he was the one who prepared the petitions for the court (cf. Niebuhr 2017) and who engaged in close exchange with the local opposition base. Yet, Jhunjhunwala's approach to preserving the temple was also controversial with regard to the key issues outlined above. His way of campaigning for the temple oscillated from the outset between a local focus and an orientation driven by a more holistic vision, thereby mirroring his own position in the region. As an immigrant living intermittently in a village between Devprayag and Srinagar, he and his wife had to some extent assimilated into the local community and gained an understanding of its practices and values. On the other hand, owing to their professional and personal background and their only episodic presence on site, they remain clearly distinguished from the established social structures of their newly chosen place of residence. The social fabric in this central part of the Himalayas has always been exposed to the effects of increased transit flows. This characteristic definitely makes it difficult to distinguish features of a more demarcated "local" nature (see Chapter 5.2.4), meaning a social fabric that is less affected by external influences and whose local culture is maintained in a more homogenous form over an extended period of time. Such features of amalgamation also apply to activism in Srinagar. Although the people who led the first movement against the relocation of the temple would qualify as locals who have their roots in the surrounding villages, they are residents of the city and thus exposed to a hodgepodge of cultural influences. The town is a transit point for a constant flow of goods, people and pilgrims, has a large student population from all parts of the state and beyond, and even a significant proportion of Muslim residents (7.65% according to Census India 2011). Local realities aside, Jhunjhunwala further emphasised that he was following his own individual path in this matter and thus did not necessarily represent the comprehensive views of other fellow campaigners. Although familiar with the local culture, he consciously decided against starting his engagement from a regional angle. In his opinion, a movement that deals with local and therefore mainly social issues does not provide a stable basis for his particular way of environmental activism (B. Jhunjhunwala, personal communication, Oct. 22, 2014). He was actually aware of the unstable and fluid nature of the local argumentation, especially with regard to financial aspects, such as a "buying up" of a movement by representatives of the hydropower companies (ibid.).¹⁵⁰ His attention was therefore not exclusively focused on the temple,

150 Drew (2011:73f) also points to this problem, namely that financial benefits influence the course of environmental movements. This aspect is also one of the reasons for public support of dam projects in the mountains. Jhunjhunwala adds, "[. . .] what is important is

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but rather on the hydropower project. Although he incorporated the subject into his argument, the Goddess and her temple were more of a secondary aspect.

Like other opponents of the elevation of Goddess and temple, Jhunjhunwala primarily criticised that this form of relocation would change the religious character of the temple. The key criterion in this context was that the bond between the Goddess and the rock on which she formerly resided, would be broken. Jhunjhunwala even argued that the statue itself is not actually of great importance, but that the rock (*śilā*)¹⁵¹ was the central element of worship (personal communication, Oct. 22, 2014).¹⁵² Therefore, with the removal of statue and temple, the key object of veneration would no longer be worshipped. The “change in character” that would ensue is that the “spiritual effect” of the temple would diminish and as a final consequence the temple would degenerate into a “tourist destination” (ibid Oct. 22, 2014). The spiritual significance and the possible touristic attraction value of a holy place were clearly seen as antagonists (cf. B. Chaudhary, personal communication Oct. 27, 2016).¹⁵³ This supposed incompatibility of tourism and pilgrimage

that when you make a movement mainly focused on the impacts upon the local people, the moment those impacts are mitigated or compensated, then the movement goes. [. . .] So from day one I recognised this reality, I never built this movement on local issues. My argument against this project is ecological, environmental, water quality and things of that kind, which are of totally different dimension, which don’t go away. You cannot compensate it. [. . .] You cannot give me money and say that water quality will be okay” (B. Jhunjhunwala personal communication Oct. 22, 2014).

151 Note the statement of Susheela Bhandari, a committed Garhwali activist for the *avirtā* of the Ganges—“हमारी आस्था केवल मूर्ति ही नहीं बल्कि पूरी शिला में है। इसका अंग-भंग करना हमें कतई स्वीकार नहीं।” (Amar Ujālā 2013, May 13). “Our faith is not only in the statue, but in the whole rock. Under no circumstances will we accept that it gets mutilated.”

152 Jhunjhunwala, asked about his personal relationship with Goddess Dhārī, elaborates on this spiritual energy at the former site of the temple. “So my connection with Dhārī is that I see her as a symbol of the primeval energy of the universe, of the inner energy of the universe and on the mundane level, you see, I don’t think that the idol is important. The reason . . . if you know the history of the Dhārī Temple, the idol was not there originally. Originally, there was a holy rock and the rock itself was worshipped. There was no idol. So what my understanding is that when a large number of people and maybe originally who knows [. . .], when this universe was created, the primeval energy entered into that rock, there was a greater concentration of primeval energy into that rock and that is the religiosity, that is sanctity of the rock. It’s like a magnet, you see, you have an electromagnet and you have a permanent magnet. In order to make the permanent magnet you have to do a lot of rubbing on the iron but once it gets magnetised it stays there for a very long time. So the holy rock is something like the magnet. The primeval energy was . . . how it got there I wouldn’t know [. . .] but the holy rock was energised with the primeval energy, it symbolises primeval energy” (personal communication Oct. 22, 2014).

153 Local activist Beena Chaudhary said she now regards the place as a picnic area, or a place where honeymoon couples go, and her son admits that he likes to visit the temple with his friends for recreational purposes (personal communication Oct. 27, 2016).

in fact emerges more frequently in conversations at the local level, which deal with questions on the sacrality of the mountain region (e.g. Whitmore 2018:10; Drew 2017:194), and even more distinctly in connection with the interpretation of the flood disaster in 2013 (see Chapter 5.2.4). To give an understanding of the here promoted concept of “spiritual power,” Jhunjhunwala elucidates that the “power” of a temple is based in the first place on the *prānapraṭiṣṭhā*, the installation and life giving ceremony of a deity. This is then followed by the energetic charging of the place through ongoing spiritual practice, such as the “chanting of mantras and undertaking of worship” (Jhunjhunwala 2011a:10). Following the relocation of the deity the defenders of the former temple indeed claimed that the place had lost its spiritual significance and therefore refrained from further visits (cf. B. B. Chamoli, personal communication Apr. 2, 2015). As activist Beena Chaudhary clarified, the decline in the temple’s spiritual potency is especially related to its former “wish-fulfilling capacity,” which vanished when it was disconnected from the ground (personal communication Oct. 27, 2016).¹⁵⁴ But even if the comprehensive power of the place seems to have been lost by severing the connection between the statue and the rock, this does not apply to the potency of the deity herself.¹⁵⁵ Jhunjhunwala has elaborated on this topic of spiritual loss with regard to the Dhārī Devī Temple in his book “Economics of Hydropower” (2009). As a former economist, he summarises the non-material or indirect costs of hydropower projects in it. Prior to the temple relocation, an assistant of Jhunjhunwala conducted structured interviews with 60 randomly selected visitors to the Dhārī Devī Temple. Differentiating between local and other visitors, he found that 62 percent of local visitors and 30 percent of all others were convinced that the spiritual efficacy of a temple on pillars would decline significantly (ibid. 2009:268). Respondents also expected that the reduction in transcendental power would most likely be accompanied by a decrease in the number of visitors. And that in turn would inevitably affect the temple’s income. For comparison, Jhunjhunwala presents other cases of temple

154 “दिलचस्प भी यह है की जो यह धारी देवी है यह खली मूर्ति नहीं है। अगर आपको मन्नत मांगते है न? जैसे धारी देवी की जिसे कोई मन्नत मांगते है आप, तो वह पूरी होती है। वह रियल में थी लेकिन आज के डेट में वहां कुछ नहीं है अब धारी देवी नहीं हैं खली मूर्ति है हाँ देवी का जो हम लोगों जिसको जो आस्था थी वह खत्म हो चुकी है” (B. Chaudhary, personal communication Oct. 27, 2016). “It is also interesting that this Dhārī Devī is not an empty idol. When you put forward a wish, right? Like, if someone makes a wish to Dhārī Devī, then it is fulfilled. This was real, but nowadays there is nothing, now there is no Goddess Dhārī, there is an empty idol. Yes, the faith in the Goddess that we had is over.”

155 Several of my interviewees made it clear that although the temple has lost its potency, the Goddess herself, although in her spiritual presence no longer bound to the temple site, is still as powerful as before. However, they established their own private ways to connect with Goddess Dhārī, for example in a domestic shrine, but thus not mediated through her official seat.

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displacement related to the construction of the Tehri Dam. Sanctuaries like the Saccheshwar and the Laxmi Narayan temples were also apparently experiencing a decline in their “spiritual power,” which was accompanied by reduced importance and income. Further questions in the questionnaire related to the spiritual quality of water when it is held back by a dam.¹⁵⁶ Here is a first allusion to the unobstructed flow, a theme that will soon crop up more extensively.

Jhunjhunwala and others had thus clarified their conviction that the rock and the *bhūmi*¹⁵⁷ or *dhartī* (B. Chaudhary) are the central element of worship beside the river. But Jhunjhunwala also draws on other mythical elements in his argument, on which the unique identity of the site is based. Having taken most of these historical accounts from Naithany’s book, Jhunjhunwala mentions some of the dominant figures who have left their imprint on the folklore of Uttarakhand.¹⁵⁸ An example is the story of the Śaṅkarācārya who is said to have passed the village at the Alaknanda on his way to Badrinath and interacted with the Goddess (Jhunjhunwala 2012; cf. Chapter 2.3.2).¹⁵⁹ As evidenced by some land records in Naithany’s book, the ground is likewise described as a direct property of the Goddess to underscore her rights. In earlier times, the land on which the Goddess is located was a “gooth” (Jhunjhunwala 2011b:1) or *gūnth*,¹⁶⁰ a piece of village land that had been assigned

156 The corresponding question: “What will be the change in spiritual power of water after extraction of electricity?” (Jhunjhunwala 2009:270) appears somewhat critical in its formulation, since the water is of course not deprived of electricity and the question already implies that the water has lost some of its power.

157 *Bhūmi* does not only stand for the earth, the land or the soil, but *bhūmi* is, in terms of Indian mythology, a variant of the names for the Goddess of the Earth (cf. Venkatesan 2018).

158 Jhunjhunwala lists different mythological characters such as the Pandavas, but also an unnamed “claimant to the throne of Bhansahi” (Jhunjhunwala 2012:1) who crossed the river at this ford in 1625 and had encamped nearby. This account also provides evidence of the earlier presence of another saint. “An ancient footprint of Dheereshwar Mahadev has been found here hence the name Dhari (ibid.)” To support the uniqueness of the place he refers to other historical claims by Naithany that the temple site was an earlier Tantra cult centre. The nearby Jogini cave is adduced as a testimony to this theory. Likewise, he proclaims the previous names of Goddess Dhārī, one of which is Tārā Devī, as the basis for the fact that “the Deity’s historical importance dates to the Buddhist period, at least” (ibid.).

159 This story however is taken from the booklet of M. P. Pandey (2005).

160 “गूठ – वह गाँव जो मंदिर को भेंट किया गया है” (Benjwal & Purohit 2007). *Gūnth*—“the village, which was given to the temple,” is the translation of an entry in the Garhwali-Hindi dictionary. Correctly it should be (village) land given to the temple. This practice of “endowments of land for religious and charitable purposes” (Regmi 1976:46) formed part of the Guthi system, which arrived with the Gorkha rulers from Nepal. Whitmore elaborated on the establishment of two “related systems of land revenue connected to Kedarnath and other important temples” (2010:55) during the British Colonial period. They

to the temple.¹⁶¹ By identifying the Goddess as landowner, Jhunjhunwala also promotes Dhārī Devī as an actor in the controversy.¹⁶² The emphasis on the connection to the statue's earthly foundation is repeated in drafts on which Jhunjhunwala based his line of argument at a hearing before the Nainital Supreme Court.¹⁶³ Here, however, the ground on which Dhārī Devī resided begins to change its meaning. In Jhunjhunwala's presentation, it gradually transforms from a site determined by its respective local features into a place connected to the idea of the *bhūmi*. This becomes clear with a statement he quoted from Swami Chinmayanand. Chinmayanand declared with regard to the Kāmākhyā Devī Temple (Guwahati, Assam) that the "bhoomi [. . .] is itself worshipped" (Jhunjhunwala 2011a:10) and therefore there would never be any question of changing the temple's location. In a similar vein and in a document prepared for the Archaeological Survey of India, Jhunjhunwala compares the same Kamakhya temple as well as the Vaiṣṇo Devī Temple (Jammu), the Kālī Temple in Kolkata and others with the Dhārī Devī Temple (Jhunjhunwala 2012). Given the generally important position of lineages in South Asian traditions, he describes the latter as standing in line with the other, far more prominent places of worship and as equally significant.¹⁶⁴ Drawing of comparisons with other temples and narrowing the question of the Dhārī Devī Temple to its connection with the *bhūmi*, however, then turns to the highly critical example of the Rām Janmabhūmi case; the struggle over the alleged birthplace of the God Rāma. Jhunjhunwala notes that "The Allahabad High Court has held in the Ram Janma Bhoomi case that the bhoomi itself is worshipped in the Hindu tradition" (Jhunjhunwala 2011a:10) and then projects the relevance of this ruling directly onto the Dhārī Devī Temple. The matter is again linked to scripture-based precepts using a declaration of two religious authorities. Hansdevacharya and Maa Poorna

were called "*gūmṭh* (*gunth*) and *sadāvart* (*sadavart*). *Gunth* refers to lands whose product belongs to the temple as the result of a donation, usually from a king. *Sadavart* 'is the term applied to an endowment provided by the land revenue of assigned villages, originally for the purposes of providing with food indigent pilgrims visiting the shrines of Kedarnath and Badrinath'" (Whitmore 2010:55; Walton 1994, as cited in Whitmore *ibid.*).

161 "Village Kalia Saur was categorized as 'Gooth.' The land revenue was used to maintain the temple of Dhari Devi. This may help establish that land rights belong to the Devi" (Jhunjhunwala 2011b:1).

162 Jhunjhunwala's emphasis on her agency also refers elsewhere to the aforementioned local cultural practice of mutual communication with the deities and regularly performed public enquiries about their advice or demands. Such a ritual was indeed performed during the planning phase for the new temple.

163 High Court of Uttarakhand Writ Petition (P.I.L.) No. 54 of 2011.

164 See the term *sampradāya* and its various associations with different ways of preserving traditions and transmitting knowledge in Malinar (2018).

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Pragya,¹⁶⁵ confirmed that “lifting on [*sic*] temples is against the Hindu beliefs” (ibid.). Yet the inclusion of symbolic figures, such as that of the *svāmī* cum politician Chinmayanand, critically ties the Dhārī Devī Temple issue to the most controversial chapter of the Hindu right. His person in particular is closely associated with the ambition to build a Ram temple on the site of the demolished mosque, the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. Chinmayanand actively worked in the past towards the gradual merging of issues such as the Ram Janmabhūmi, the Ganges (and its free flow) and the propagation of “Bharat Mata” (Alley 2002:224).¹⁶⁶ Although Jhunjhunwala does not see himself as affiliated to any party or Hindu nationalist agenda, the examples and individuals cited here could be problematic as they create a critical proximity to such political groups and their engagement. It is suggested that this type of rhetoric, even if used unintentionally, can provide potential support for a thus shaped agenda.¹⁶⁷ The conceptuality of the *bhūmi* is specifically a central theme of religious thought that has been reformulated by right-wing Hindu figures and is now closely linked to such political currents (Alley 2002:224).¹⁶⁸ The Ram Temple, however, is apparently mentioned in this context only to criticise the general attitude of the BJP with its strict concentration on a single temple. The intention is to urge the party to give equal attention to every other place of worship as well. The text alone though makes it difficult to decipher this message.¹⁶⁹

165 Swami Hansdevacharya of Swami Jagannath Dham Trust and Maa Poorna Pragya of Akhandbodh Ganga (Raiwala).

166 Further information on Chinmayanand is given in 3.2.

167 Mawdsley (2006) acknowledges that, what she calls “neo-traditionalist readings of environmental struggles and politics” as “popular amongst sections of India’s academy, elites, NGOs and activists, as well as with Western audiences” (2006:387). She discusses the question if there is such thing as “guilt by association” (2006:388) asking, if “[. . .] neo-traditionalist activists and scholars, who seek to mobilise cultural precepts around the environment in positive and well-meaning ways, [are] tarred simply because their ideas share some things in common with the Hindu Right?” (2006:388).

168 See, for example, Venkatesan (2018), who describes how, under the emerging Hindu nationalism of the late nineteenth century, age-old beliefs associated with earth-worship became closely linked to a glorification of India as a geopolitical unit and merged with concepts of ‘Bhārat Mātā.’

169 The website Ganga Today, run by Jhunjhunwala, Vimal Bhai and others, later also takes up the issue of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya to support Dhārī Devī’s cause. But there a clearly critical attitude towards the political conflict can be seen. An essay on the website cleverly argues that the BJP government is trying so hard to reconstruct the Ram temple, but ignores the temple of the Devī, which is in a comparable situation. “A major political issue of the present Government is to build Ram Mandir in Ayodhya. Belief is that the temple of Lord Rama should be built on that same place where He was born, that is the sanctum sanctorum. But in other locations the Government behaviour is against maintaining temples at the same place. The Holy Rock at the temple of Dhari Devi was earlier located on the banks of the Alaknanda in Uttarakhand, [. . .] Question is this: If the BJP Government

As has now become evident from the discursive process, the Kaliyasaur Rock, a local feature encompassing a temple, was transformed into a component of the *bhūmi* and thus changed its entire scope of meaning. Where local activist Beena Chaudhary (personal communication, Oct. 27, 2016) still maintained that they used to worship the rock, and the *dhartī* (earth, soil) of the place, the designation *bhūmi* eventually combines the identity of the rock with the indicated reconception of the Hindu right.

There is yet another association that goes along with ideas concerning the soil, it is this of the *dev bhūmi*. The expression meaning “land of the gods” commonly denotes the state of Uttarakhand with reference to its sanskritized history as well as nowadays to its booming pilgrimage tourism. This term can be considered an epitome for the various competing interpretive scopes with regard to the mountain region of Garhwal. A so-formed conceptualisation of the region is furthermore very tempting to be woven into Hindu nationalist imaginations. This manifests itself in the form of efforts to shape the image of the state in a certain way that is in line with the Hindutva ambitions. Werner highlights the divergent interpretations in this sense, reflected in the split between local perceptions and nationalist visions of the *dev bhūmi*.

Its significance for Hindu mythology is crucial; the region has been described in the puranas and the *Mahabharata*. Hinduism and sanskritization are strongly anchored in the hills. But ethnographic research shows that there is a great difference between the ‘sacred image’ that has been ascribed to the region in the scriptures, and more recently, by the efforts of a growing Hindu right-wing to create an exclusive landscape, and the beliefs of the local population. (2015:108)

Jhunjhunwala adopted another line of argumentation for a presentation in court, which in a wider sense established a connection to the *bhūmi*, but with less religious-political charge. To protect the former state of the temple, the activist invoked an existing law, the “places of worship act,” which was created to preserve sacralised sites and buildings. “4(i) It is hereby declared that the religious

is committed to maintaining the sanctity of the sanctum sanctorum of Ram Mandir, then why not maintaining the sanctity of the Holy Rock at Dhari Devi? On one side, the BJP is spreading a movement in the entire country to make a temple at the sanctum sanctorum in Ayodhya. On the other hand, they have willingly submerged the Holy Rock of Dhari Devi. The reason it seems is that the commercial interests have dominated at Dhari Devi” (A. Rawat 2018). The essay ends with the radical conclusion, “BJP should protect the sanctity of all Temples and not pander to commercial interests at its convenience; or it should abandon the movement of Ram Mandir” (A. Rawat 2018).

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character of a place of worship existing on the 15th day of August, 1947 shall continue to be the same as it existed on that day” (Jhunjhunwala 2011a:9). From this paragraph he deduced that not only did the Dhārī Devī Temple fall under this law because it already existed at that time, but also that therefore the place of worship in Kaliyasaur had to be maintained in the same condition as on August 15, 1947. Knowing the eventful history of the temple, this argument is certainly problematic. As already observed in the previous chapters, the temple underwent several structural changes before the transfer of the statue, which have only been implemented in the last 30 years. Such changes were even used as arguments for the mobility of the place and the Goddess. The consensus is that before these alterations, the statue stood on the rock, while the walls and roofs surrounding the deity were only erected in the 1970s.¹⁷⁰ The return to a state of 1947 would therefore have been rather illusory and most probably against local interests.

3.1 *Aviral Dhārā*, Going with the Flow

Framework conditions related to development projects along the Ganges are rooted in a context that differs not only from other dam sites in India, but also from other global settings. The Ganges in particular is considered a “national” river assuming more than any other river India-wide importance. The national dimension is expressed in metaphors pertaining to the river, such as “lifeline of millions” which denotes the importance it has on the livelihoods especially of downstream communities. Furthermore, the Ganges carries cross-national conceptions that are attached to its transcendental and mythological nature. This relates to the notion of eminent sanctity bound to the river, which is recognised throughout the sub-continent and beyond. Understandings of holiness refer to properties associated with the river, such as its purity, and especially to the perception of the river as purifying (Alley 2002; Zühlke 2013). The creation of dams on the river Ganges and its subsidiaries, on the other hand, is not only considered to interfere with the river’s flow from an ecological point of view, but also to have a negative impact on the inherent spiritual qualities of its water and, above all, on the efficacy of the river in a metaphysical sense. These features differ from dams on other rivers, where concerns tied to the spiritual quality of water are likely to play a lesser role. Combined with the special status of the river, development projects along the Ganges, especially the large-scale ones, attract a certain segment of politically and

170 Some lines in the *pūjārī* leaflet (Dhārī Devī Temple Pujārī Trust 2011), describe the state of the temple from around 1973, when the statue stood on the open rock, without sheds or safety precautions around it.

religiously oriented activists (Mawdsley 2005, 2010; M. Sharma 2009, 2012). This phenomenon renders the composition of protest structures different from other dam struggles. It entails that the issue of dams is integrated into certain political and overarching ideological ideas and agendas.

The last section disclosed that the “preservers” of the earlier temple built their reasoning on the rock that housed the deity as well as other concepts that fit well with the objective of conservation. These different facets surrounding the perception of the *bhūmi*, as well as its further adornment, for example with mythological elements, support a necessary continuum of the status and thus also guarantee the sacrality of the place. Returning now to the river, it will be demonstrated in what way also the opponents of a new construction of the temple were concerned with the stream, its water and—mainly implicitly—with its floods.

Throughout the controversy surrounding the temple and Srinagar Hydropower Project, several activists from a religious spectrum and partially with a Hindu right-wing background entered the movement to oppose the relocation of Goddess Dhārī. It was however not an unwanted “takeover” of the local protest movement. The local level activists actively sought the participation of these actors. Beena Chaudhary, the leading female figure, for example, invited different members of the religio-political spectrum to strengthen the local group’s campaign (See e.g. Amar Ujālā 2012, March 4). Bharat Jhunjhunwala likewise maintained networks with religious personalities such as Swami Nischalanand, Uma Bharti and G. D. Agrawal. One reason for this was that the construction of Srinagar Dam was a follow-up conflict to several other dam disputes in Uttarakhand, first and foremost the Tehri Dam struggle (see Niebuhr 2017; Werner 2015), in which several of these actors were already involved. Moreover, the dispute over the temple coincided with a climax of the movement of *sādhus* and saints for the preservation of the holiness and purity of the Ganges. The emergence of these individuals in the case of Dhārī Devī shifted the issue of the temple to a new level. In the process, the Goddess issue was absorbed by a broader debate on hydropower projects in the upper Ganges region. Top priority of the faith-oriented actors in their campaign against the dams and with regard to the pollution of the river was to maintain or restore the free or unconstrained flow of the Ganges. So when the different rallying cries, which encompassed the term “*aviral dhārā*” (unhindered flow) became closely associated with the struggle for the Dhārī Devī Temple, the imaginations and agendas of “outsiders” merged inextricably with this conflict.¹⁷¹ The demand

171 For example, “गंगा को निर्मल रहने दो, गंगा को अविरल बहने दो” (Prakash 2014); “let Gaṅgā be unspoilt, let Gaṅgā flow uninterruptedly.” It is only a side thought, but possibly Dhārī Devī became appealing to the religious agitators in this context also because of the alleged kinship of the words Dhārā and Dhārī and the resulting understanding of Dhārī as the Goddess of the flow (see Chapter 5.2.3 expounding on this issue).

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for a free flowing river may in itself be a legitimate interest and is also supported by activists beyond any nationalistic aspirations. However, as the tag-line had been broadly and conspicuously employed by the Hindu Right and was also particularly coined by the predecessor conflict in Tehri, this slogan was already highly ideologically charged.¹⁷² The ideas contained in such a catchphrase consequently also infiltrated the temple issue with the often-criticised component of right-wing environmentalism and its associated rat tail of Hindu identity and nation building.

The way the defenders of the old temple coupled the issue with their broader campaign dealing with the sanctity of the Gaṅgā is evident in a memorandum from several BJP politicians to then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. It expresses criticism of the practices and alleged shortcomings of the National Ganga River Basin Authority (NGRBA).¹⁷³

In our opinion, one of the ‘design failures’ of NGRBA has been its reluctance and refusal to recognise the need to protect the cultural and spiritual heritage associated with the Ganga. This heritage manifests itself in many temples and holy places, right from the river’s origin at Gangotri to its merger with the Bay of Bengal at Gangasagar. We were both surprised and distressed [*sic*] to see that the ‘Function and Power of NGRBA’ does not even mention the aspect of River Ganga’s cultural-spiritual heritage. No plan to save the river can be regarded as holistic if it limits its concerns only to the aspects of development and abatement of pollution — both of which are undoubtedly crucial — and ignores the unique dimension of Mother Ganga as a revered symbol of India’s nationhood and her civilisational legacy.

172 This is how the Gandhian activist Vimal Bhai, convenor of the social organisation Matu Jan Sangathan, framed the argument on the cover text on one of the collective’s booklets: “गंगा जी बंधन मुक्त रहें, स्वच्छ रहें! सबकी रहें, बहती रहे!” (Bhai 2015:36). “May Gaṅgā Jī remain free of dams, may she remain clean, may she belong to everyone, may she flow on!” As can be seen here, although he points to the same targeted physical state of the river, his choice of words, under avoidance of *nirmal* and *aviral*, and the other connotations adopted, differentiate his statement from the rhetoric of the right-wing. Most notably the concern that the river should remain everyone’s property clearly distinguishes his engagement from the ambitions of activists with the goal of a Hindu nation and their attempts to create divisions between different social groups.

173 The following persons signed: L. K. Advani, Working Chairman, National Democratic Alliance; Nitin Gadkari, President, Bharatiya Janata Party; Sushma Swaraj, Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha; Arun Jaitley, Leader of Opposition in Rajya Sabha; Sushri Uma Bharti, Ex. C. M. Madhya Pradesh; B. C. Khanduri, Ex. C. M. Uttarakhand; B. S. Koshiyari, Ex. C. M. Uttarakhand; R. P. Nishank, Ex. C. M. Uttarakhand.

This failure is at the heart of the grave situation that has arisen in Uttarakhand, where Dhari Devi Temple, one of the most important pilgrimage centres located on the banks of the Ganga and its tributaries, today stands threatened by a hydro-electric project. Our party is not opposed to hydro-electric and other developmental projects along the Ganga. However, we are strongly opposed to any thoughtless measure that leads to the extinction of the sacred ecology of the Ganga and the cultural-spiritual heritage along the banks of the river and its tributaries. (Advani et al. 2012)

This excerpt clearly shows the concern and the approach of the religious-political faction towards the Dhārī Devī Temple issue. Their modus operandi is to channel their interest in the Ganges by focusing their activism on a symbolic place by the river, thus “pouring” the cultural facets of the Ganges into a temple. This is accompanied by an enhancement of the significance of the temple or the deity for the sacralised and riverine landscape. “Dhari Devi Temple, one of the most important pilgrimage centres on the banks of the Ganges and its tributaries [. . .].” The temple is obviously not presented here as a local place of worship with its corresponding folk tradition and its meaning for the surrounding population, but is rather equated with the great pilgrimage sites, the *dhām*. Thereby the temple, embedded in the theme of pilgrimage and the associated understanding of the Garhwal region, becomes an element of a larger landscape and subsequently part of ideas associated with the “cultural-spiritual heritage” of the Ganges, and ultimately a matter of nationhood.

The BJP politicians involved in the drafting of the memorandum not only explicitly connect the cause of the Dhārī Devī Temple to the sanctity of the Ganges and its cultural heritage as well as the central aspect of its free flow. Beyond that, they build their engagement on a precedent for the free flow at Haridwar in the beginning of the last century.

Honourable Prime Minister, the people of India venerate all rivers and water bodies as holy. However, they have a special emotional and spiritual attachment to the Ganga. This is evident from the fact that both Gangotri in the Himalayas and Gangasagar in Bengal are among the holiest centres of pilgrimage in India. Situated all along the course of the river are other holy places, Dhari Devi being one of them.

Even Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru’s last will testifies to the profound civilisational significance of the Holy Ganga. We would like to mention here that no less a person than Mahamana Pandit

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Madanmohan Malaviya, who was president of the Congress four times, had led an agitation for the protection of the Ganga and its heritage in the second decade of the last century. The call for *Aviral Ganga* (free-flowing Ganga) was first given by him in 1912, when the then British government tried to divert the flow of the river near Hardwar. The nation celebrated Malaviyaji's 150th birth anniversary year in 2011. Our memorandum seeks to carry forward his important legacy (Advani et al. 2012).

Before going into the historical dimension, just a short remark towards the first passage of this text. One major point of critique of the faith-based environmental engagement and a marker of right-wing activism constitutes its focus on the river Ganges. The allegations of other environmentalists (Seth 2016; Del Bene 2014) and critics of a nationalist policy state that by conferring exclusive status on the river, the Hindu extremists and their supporters ignore other river basins and areas that would require equal ecological attention. This renders their ecological commitment questionable, because even activities for the preservation of the Ganges are not carried out with a view to issues such as maintaining the ecological balance or sustainability. The overriding aim also of these initiatives is to preserve a symbol of Hindu identity and to promote the manifestation of a Hindu nation. Authors such as Mawdsley (2010) and Alley even question the existence of a genuine Hindu right-wing environmental agenda. Based on observations in Tehri, Mawdsley described the engagement of, in this case the VHP, as a purely political matter, entirely “[. . .] falling in tune with political logics and timetables of the State and national elections rather than in relation to dam developments” (Mawdsley 2010:161). Additionally, most ecological struggles in India are tightly intertwined with livelihood issues (Gadgil & Guha 1995). This subject though is not only largely ignored by actors of the respective political spectrum, but many aspects of it are diametrically opposed to their broader concerns (Mawdsley 2010).¹⁷⁴

As the second paragraph of the above-cited passage illustrates, the discussion about the free flow of the Ganges is already a historical topic that has recently been revived by the proposed construction of a large number of dams along the Ganges.¹⁷⁵ The politicians mentioning these historical events in their memorandum obviously expect their recipients to be familiar with the story of the British

174 See Mawdsley (2010:163) for a detailed analysis on this matter. See also Drew (2011), M. Sharma (2002, 2009), Niebuhr (2017), Werner (2015), for a further understanding of the criticism levelled at the linkage of Hindu nationalist aspirations with ecological issues and especially the associated engagement with the Ganges.

175 See also Amar Ujālā 2012, July 3 on Uma Bharti creating references to the events in Haridwar at the beginning of the century.

construction plan—and how Hindu leaders thwarted it. Mallet (2017:167) indeed depicts the outstanding figure of this early debate, Malaviya as “renowned in India as a religious champion of the Ganges and its need to flow [. . .],” while he is also considered an “Indian nationalist icon” (Lochtefeld 2010:88). The place involved, Haridwar, is the holy city, or *tīrtha*, where the Ganges, coming from the mountains, enters the plain of India. The location forms part of the mythologised landscape, as Alley (2002:107) expounds:

For Hindus, Haridwar is the gateway to earth for Mother Gaṅgā. It is here that she descended from heaven on the locks of Lord Śivā to relieve human suffering and purify souls. Kapilā and other early names for this place suggest that this site has been connected with Gaṅgā’s descent from heaven for centuries.

At the turn of the twentieth century, when the discussion about the free-flowing river unfolded, the English administration was in the process of implementing the construction of a dam along the Ganges in order to divert the water at Haridwar into a British-engineered irrigation channel (Parmanand 1985; Lochtefeld 2010; Alley 2002; Drew 2007; Mallet 2017). The Hindu community, however, became apprehensive of this plan, fearing that an obstructed water flow would hamper religious practices at Haridwar’s holiest spot, the Hari ki Pauri Ghat. Further concerns about the purificatory power of the Ganges resulted in the revolt of several Hindu leaders. They “insisted that Gaṅgā’s purificatory power was tied to her flow and that to alter one would ultimately affect the other” (Alley 2002:107). As a result of a prolonged agitation, the details of which will not be discussed here, an agreement was reached to ensure the consistent flow of the Ganges (Parmanand 1985). This was done in December 1916 during a conference in Haridwar with representatives of Hindu interests such as members of the All-India Hindu Sabha, the Ganga Hindu Sabha, the Indian dynastic rulers and officials of the British Raj.

Several authors, in assessing the commitment of the religious faction to the Ganges, have juxtaposed the quality of the present discourse with that of the first appearance of the said demand. But unlike the depiction in this memorandum, they note inconsistencies with the modern use of the free-flowing river slogan. While the resistance to scientific control of the river is in defence of a sacred space, the events in Haridwar were rather politically motivated: “the demands for an unobstructed flow of the river were not part of an environmental movement but rather part of a strategy to oppose political rule” (Alley 2002:210).¹⁷⁶ Political processes

176 Stressing again that such a demand was not based on an environmental movement, she adds that “rather, it invoked religious symbolism to bring religious leaders and nationalists together on a common platform” (Alley 2002:210).

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of that time were also identified as having a communal background that fostered the emergence of a movement for a Hindu identity. “Communal rivalry between Hindus and Muslims and the government’s presumed partiality to the latter, had created conditions favourable to Hindu revivalism” (Parmanand 1985:246). But unlike today, where other communities see themselves sidelined in the movements for the Ganges, Hindus and Muslims eventually joined hands and pursued the same goal of preserving the river. What becomes clear is this: when the free-flow argument is supported by historical events in a current context, ideas about past processes have been modified to fit the contemporary discourse on the Ganges. Evidently, only in later phases the creation of divisions between the different communities gained prominence. At one crucial event in 1983, the “Ekatmata Yatra (All India Harmony Expedition),” the VHP for the first time explicitly connected the cause of the Ganges with its pursuit of Hindu identity and nation building (Alley 2002; Rajagopal 2015; M. Sharma 2009). Alley delineates the inherent motives and mechanisms of this newly modified political form of pilgrimage:

The VHP’s stated aim was to teach Indians about the importance of Mother India, Mother Cow, and Mother Gaṅgā and, as they claimed, bring unity to a Hindu Community that had ‘fallen asleep.’ Their printed material stressed the importance of the cow for agriculture and Gaṅgā for the advent of Hindu civilization. But these themes were really meant to set the context for resurrecting their 1984 promise to destroy Muslim mosques in Ayodhya and Kashi and a Muslim Idgah (place for prayers on the Id festival) in Mathura. To these sites of Muslim worship they linked rivers held sacred by Hindus: the Sarāyū with Ayodhya, the Yamuna with Mathura, and the Gaṅgā with Kashi (Varanasi). Mother Gaṅgā, the archetype of all rivers in India, acted as the key symbol of these associations. (2002:221)

As part of a contemporary and to a great extent religiously driven environmental “movement,” the argument of the *aviral dhārā* gained momentum first time with the construction of Tehri Dam. A broad and enduring protest movement accompanied the mega dam project that was implemented in the neighbouring district to Srinagar from 1978 until 2006. Many elements and political mechanisms of the struggle in Tehri resurfaced in Srinagar (Niebuhr 2017). This included some actors of the opposition who became involved in the Srinagar Dam project and temple issue. When these actors transferred and modified their previously acquired knowledge to the new conflict, they obviously rewrote their earlier used script with reference to the Ganges to fit with the subject of a threatened temple. On a general level, “the free flow argument has shaped the perception of

hydropower projects and the ensuing discourse in the region” (Werner 2015:158). Tehri, however, represented the dam struggle in which already described features of an association of the Ganges with themes of Hindu identity emerged and which was considered to have been captured by the forces of the Hindu Right. In Tehri, it was also primarily the VHP that framed the issue with the catchy slogan: ‘गंगा अवरिल बहती रहे,’ “may the Ganges continue to flow uninterruptedly” (Rajalakshmi 2002). Various authors such as M. Sharma (2002, 2009, 2012) and Mawdsley (2010, 2006) discussed in depth the mechanisms and trope of the “Hindutva” forces used in the struggle against the Tehri Dam. It was one of the factors that is thought to have ultimately led to the weakening of the Tehri dam movement (Rajalakshmi 2002). Another motif that came to the fore was the creation of a putative hostile threat, underlined by stories of conspiracy against the dam by China and other neighbouring countries as well as Muslim aggressors (M. Sharma 2009).¹⁷⁷ This made the communal question a salient theme in the rhetoric on Tehri, thus distinguishing it from the debate on the Srinagar Dam. There the communal rhetoric was largely absent and the issue pervaded the conflict only by association, through the presence of the respective actors. The suggestion of a conspiracy arose in several instances, however, and this was where a threat from outsiders was evoked as well. The *Amar Ujālā* reported about a meeting of the VHP in Pipalkoti, where Madan Mohan Tiwari, the minister of the organisation, tried to tune the other members into the earlier rhetoric in Tehri by establishing:

कुछ विदेशी ताकतों द्वारा साजिश के तहत विश्व प्रसिद्ध सिद्धपीठ को डुबाए जाने का प्रयास किया जा रहा है। जिसका हिंदू जनसमान सड़कों पर उतरकर पुरजोर विरोध करेगा। (Amar Ujālā 2009, Nov. 19)

As part of a conspiracy, some foreign forces are trying to submerge the world-famous *siddhapīth*. Therefore, the masses of Hindus will take to the streets and stage fierce protests.

But this was a lone example when opposition to the project first emerged and the participation of foreign conspiratorial forces was implicated. Later, the extremist voices fell silent in this regard. What happened instead was that the existing

177 As Mawdsley notes, the Hindu Right placed the struggle over the Tehri dam in the category of the Babri Masjid conflict, thereby evoking the communal issue. She states that “the events at Ayodhya mark a deeply symbolic moment in the changing political landscape of India, and it still acts as a referent for the political debates and manoeuvrings of the Hindu Right, as well as ongoing communal violence. Situating the Tehri Dam struggle in relation to the Babri Masjid is making a clear threat to Muslims, symbolically locating them as foreigners whose presence and in influence must be purged from the nation” (2010:159).

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unease towards people coming from outside the state of Uttarakhand became one of the dominant arguments of the dam proponents. They in turn now saw the conspiracy on the side of such faith-based outsiders. Allegations were levelled that external actors sought to subjugate the mountain region to their agendas. The promoters of a “Gangatva” were thereby identified as being driven by (political) self-interest and motivated by the goal of undermining local visions of the riverscape.¹⁷⁸

3.2 River Flows and the Right—the most prominent Hindu National Campaigners

Swami Chinmayanand, a former Home Minister of the state government and the head of a large Ashram in Haridwar, is the first one of the now successively introduced influential players in the Dhārī Devī struggle. Alley (2002:223) categorises him as the first visible actor post-independence to incorporate the rhetoric of the “free flowing Ganges” into a political election campaign in 1998. At that time, Chinmayanand was a member of the Bharatiya Janata Party. Already before the electoral engagement, he was campaigning for the Hindu national organisation VHP in connection with the river’s pollution. Chinmayanand had concurrently become a leading campaigner for other issues being pursued by the VHP and RSS, most notably the Ram Janmabhūmi movement (Alley 2002). To support the latter, he conducted a rally or a politically tinged *yātrā* prior to the 1998 parliamentary elections. Chinmayanand had formed the Ganga Raksha Samiti for this purpose and ideologically combined the issues of pollution control of the Ganges with nationalistic concepts such as the Cow-Protection movement and the conception of “Bharat Mata.” Ultimately, “all three issues were to feed into the resurrection of the Ram-Janmabhumi movement” (Alley 2002:224). Speeches delivered by participants during the *yātrā* in 1997, which was conducted on the

178 Here one of the typical statements in this regard: “उन्होंने कहा कि प्रदेश की जनता को बांधों से कोई दिक्कत नहीं है। बाहरी लोग गंगा के नाम पर राजनीति कर रहे हैं।” (Amar Ujālā 2011, May 13). “He [Diwarkar Bhatt] said that the population of the state does not have any problem with the dams. External people are making politics in the name of the Ganges.” Similar comments from other speakers in Amar Ujālā 2011, May 20, 23; 2012, June 24b. Regarding the temple protesters and their position as outsiders, their relation to the local culture is also addressed, or rather their lack of it. The same speaker points out that “these people” have no knowledge of the local history, culture and geography (“ऐसे लोगों को यहां के इतिहास, भूगोल और संस्कृति का पता नहीं है।” Amar Ujālā 2011, May 23) and says with reference to Uma Bharti that she is not familiar with the history of the temple (“मंदिर का इतिहास भी उमा भारती को पता नहीं है।” Amar Ujālā 2011, May 13).

Ganges by boat from Calcutta to Allahabad, included declarations of resistance to the Tehri Dam.¹⁷⁹ This phase cemented the notion that the “free flow” of the Ganges inextricably meant that no dams could be built on the river. An interesting feature of the *yātrā* was the participation of several actors who later reappeared in Srinagar, such as Uma Bharti and Ashok Singhal, which puts the commitment of this core group on a solid historical footing. Although Chinmayanand was not regularly visible in Srinagar, and other activists took over the predominant roles in the conflict, it is crucial to recognise him as an important figure in the Dhārī Devī struggle. This is because of his earlier formative influence on the free flow argument and its broader associations. While he thus exercised his clout mainly as a symbolic figure, on the ground Chinmayanand occasionally expressed his views on the temple issue and engaged in emblematic actions. In 2010, he led a delegation of *sādhus* and saints from Haridwar and Rishikesh to the Dhārī Devī Temple to save the place from falling into the inundation zone.¹⁸⁰ Later that year, he resurfaced as a speaker at a convention held at the public assembly ground, Gola Park, in Srinagar:

स्वामी चिंदमयानंद [sic] ने कहा कि श्रीनगर जल विद्युत परियोजना की ऊंचाई 63 मीटर से बढ़ाकर 95 मीटर ऊंचाई करने की स्वीकृति कैसे मिली है यह जानना जरूरी है। जिस तरह कंपनी यहाँ कुछ छुटभैया नेताओं और पुलिस को खरीदकर फूट डालो और राज करो का संदेश दे रही वह निंदनीय है। जब-जब मां धारी करवट बदलती है तब-तब कॉफर बांध टूट जाता है। (Amar Ujālā 2010, June 28)

Swami Chinmayanand said it would be important to know how the Srinagar Hydropower Project received approval to increase the height from 63 metres to 95 metres. The way the company buys up some nondescript politicians and the police here and sends the message “put your foot down and make this your kingdom” is despicable. Every time Mā Dhārī’s fate changes, the cofferdam breaks.

179 The *yātrā* called “Ganga Sanrakshan Jagaran Yatra” [Ganga Protection Awareness Yātrā] started on October 16, 1997 in Calcutta (VHP n.d.). See Jaffrelot (2009) on the ways in which Hindu nationalists frame the topic of pilgrimage and how the politicised practice it promotes is in turn subject to different recontextualisations in public space.

180 “स्वामी चिंदमयानंद [sic] के नेतृत्व में साधु-संतों का जत्था यहां पहुंचेगा। श्रीकोट-गंगनाली में धरने के उपरांत साधु-संत धारी मंदिर में भी पूजा-अर्चना करेंगे।” (Amar Ujālā 2010, June 27). “Under the leadership of Swami Chinmayanand the group of *sādhus* and saints will arrive here. After the *dharnā* in Srikot-Gangnali, the *sādhus* and saints will perform *pūjā-archanā* (worship) in the Dhārī Devī Temple.”

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Apart from the *svāmī's* criticism of allegedly faulty and fraudulent processes in connection with the construction of the hydroelectric power plant,¹⁸¹ at this point appear the first references of the dam opponents to the anger of the Goddess in connection with the project—and to her ability to actively damage the enterprise as well as to cause flooding. In the above quote, Dhārī Devī is depicted as responding to injustice with destruction and floods. Chinmayanand's remark is presumably inspired by other speeches made a few days before his appearance on the protest ground. At a gathering there on the 19th day of their *dharnā*, local activists organised as Utthan Sanyukt Samiti (Joint Uplift Committee) mentioned the meanwhile triple incident of a broken cofferdam.

वक्ताओं ने कॉफर डैम के एक बड़े हिस्से के टूटने को धारी मां का प्रकोप बताते हुए कहा कि इससे पूर्व भी दो बार जल विद्युत परियोजना का कॉफर डैम टूट चुका है। यदि इन संकेतों को नहीं समझा गया तो यह प्रकोप कभी भी कहर ढा सकता है। (Amar Ujālā 2010, June 25)

Speakers said that the breaching of a large portion of the cofferdam was the wrath of Mā Dhārī; they told that the cofferdam of the hydroelectric project had also broken twice before. If these signs were not understood, this ire could have devastating consequences at any time.

The matter of a divine or spiritually elevated expression of anger manifests on different levels, in one variant this rage is directed against the self. Not only Chinmayanand, but also other saints and *svāmīs* and Sādhvī Uma Bharti uttered in their indignation the threat that a forced flooding of the temple would entail their self-drowning, respectively that they would take *jal samādhi* by submerging themselves in the river.¹⁸² While the river and its capacity to flood and drown is employed as a weapon of protest, here the threat of self-destruction serves as a dramatic

181 This seemed to have been a general line of critique he had followed. Alley remarks that as early as 1997, Chinmayanand blamed the government for its failure to address the problem of river pollution. However, the rhetoric in this regard ceased at once when he was elected to office in 1998 (Alley 2002).

182 “इस मौके पर पूर्व गृह राज्य मंत्री स्वामी चिन्मयानंद ने चेतावनी दी कि यदि धारी देवी मंदिर गंगा में डूबा तो वे वहीं पर जल समाधि ले लेंगे।” (Amar Ujālā 2011, May 30). “On this occasion, the former state interior minister Swami Chinmayanand warned that if the Dhārī Devī Temple was flooded, he would immediately take *jal samādhi*.” Likewise, another member of the *yātrā* group announced that if the Goddess could not be saved from the water, the religious people would practice *jal samādhi*: “योगी राकेश नाथ ने कहा कि यदि मंदिर को जबरन डुबाया जाएगा तो वे जल समाधि ले लेंगे।” (Amar Ujālā 2010, June 28). “Yogi Rakesh Nath said if the temple would be forcibly set under water, they would take *jal samādhi*.”

rhetorical tool to amplify the set demands. It is obvious that the announcement to drown oneself is only a symbolic declaration in the current case. There are also no reports of activists from a religious-political spectrum drowning themselves during recent environmental struggles.¹⁸³ The threat, however, is supposed to convey and to stir sublime emotions among the audiences, while evoking mythical pictures of heroic self-sacrifice for the Ganges. *Samādhi* in this connection hints to the attainment of a heightened state of awareness, or transcendence connected to this mystical death ritual (Justice 2005), although the usual practice of *jal samādhi* is rather understood as a water burial reserved for the holy men, or ascetics. Suicide, as discussed in Indian scriptures is a complex issue and is rejected under most circumstances, with a few exceptions. Justice (2005) in this regard describes the probable earlier existence of a historical self-drowning ritual at the confluence of the rivers Yamuna and Ganges in Prayaga tied to the hope of attainment of immediate *mokṣa*. Other indications though suggest that these accounts may only represent an invented tradition or “re-tellings of apocryphal tales” (Justice 2005:295). The way in which this theme is addressed in the temple struggle may have been inspired by such tales, but it is probably much less sophisticated and more geared towards drawing the catchy picture of valiant self-offering in the simultaneously liberating and purifying river Ganges. The articulated intention of a *jal samādhi* is in addition reminiscent of the equally prevalent motif of martyrdom in a holy battle or war.¹⁸⁴ Such conceptions of a holy war do indeed surface on several occasions where defenders of the Dhārī Devī Temple frame their approach to the topic.¹⁸⁵

183 Greater radicalism in relation to this statement was much more likely to be seen in relation to a people’s movement. For example, in the Narmada River struggle groups of protestors came close to drowning by standing already deep in the water of the lake forming behind the dam. Yet these were not, as is of interest here, representatives of a religious spectrum, but groups of the people affected by the dam. Other than this, two saint-activists (G. D. Agrawal 2018, Swami Nigamanand 2011) are considered to have given their lives for the sake of the Ganges, albeit they died from consequences of their prolonged hunger strikes and not because they took *jal samādhi*.

184 When the question of martyrdom became a topic of the public discourse after the terrorist attack on an army convoy in Pulwama, S. Pandey (2019) asked why so much attention is given to the soldiers who died for the country, but not to the saints who sacrificed themselves for the Ganges.

185 Evocations of a holy war emerge above all with the culminating event of the gathering of the saints and *sādhus* in the Jantar Mantar in Delhi under the banner of the Ganga Mukti Mahasangram (see next section). Apart from the chosen name of the event, the saint activists in many of their statements actually conjure up motives and symbols of a holy war, which are inspired by the holy scriptures. At some point, an initiative of the national “Jal Biradari” (water community) came up to connect the annual *kāvaṛ yātrā* of the Śiva devotees with the Ganga Mukti Mahasangram and also explicitly with the aim of preventing the construction of the Srinagar Dam. (The objective of the annual *kāvaṛ yātrā* is to collect sacred water from various holy places on the Ganges. *Kāvaṛ* refers to a carrying

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The concept of martyrdom in connection with the Ganges and the unhindered flow of its stream also permeated the engagement of the next activist to be presented, the late G. D. Agrawal. He was a retired doyen of environmental engineering with former positions as an environmental impact assessment consultant and professor at the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur, as well as the first member secretary of the Central Pollution Control Board. The issue of the deity's temple gained relevance at a time, which was marked by several of his long hunger strikes. Especially in 2009 and 2012, when the matter of Dhārī Devī and the Srinagar Dam turned into a bone of contention, or when the conflict reached its peak, he agitated under his spiritual name Swami Gyan Swaroop Sanand against hydroelectric power projects in the upper Ganges basin. Although he followed a binary approach, drawing on his earlier academic and later spiritual identity, his main commitment embraced "faith, culture and 'Hindu tradition'" (Drew 2011:99). Agrawal assumed an influential, though controversial position as an activist. When two hydropower projects on the Bhagirathi River were scrapped, this was to a large degree seen as a consequence of his several widely noticed fasts in 2009. Because of this earlier and successful intervention, when he extended his campaign to the Dhārī Devī Temple and against the Srinagar Dam during another fast in 2009, he also became the target of fiercest resistance from dam-supportive locals and government officials. Werner describes the period since Agrawal's involvement against dams on the Ganges as a "turning point for the debates on hydropower" (2015:186f). As she points out, spiritual and cultural arguments related to water-based development projects, such as the reference to the religious significance of a location threatened by inundation, had also come up earlier in the context of protest movements. What was new in Uttarakhand, however, and a parallel to Agrawal's activism, was that such argumentation became an end in itself and not just a supportive contribution to primarily socially and politically oriented core concerns of an opposition.¹⁸⁶ As a matter of fact, this novel, belief-based feature of environmental conflicts over dams also created the conditions for a temple to become, as in the case of Dhārī

pole or shoulder pole made of bamboo and to the ends of which vessels can be attached). In this context the so-called "waterman" of India and leader of the Jal Biradari, Rajendra Singh, using likewise martial rhetoric, states that "श्रीनगर बांध को रोकना देवता और राक्षसों के बीच युद्ध जैसा हो गया है। इसलिए हम देवतारूपी कांवड़ियों की टोली तैयार कर रहे हैं।" (Amar Ujālā 2012, July 6). "The activities to stop the Srinagar Dam virtually turned into a war between gods and demons. For this reason, we are setting up a troop of godlike *kāṅvār̥s*."

186 From a political point of view, Werner (2015:187) attests a high degree of dubiousness to this new faith-based approach to environmental conflicts. At the same time, she concedes that such an approach may be considered advantageous because it has the potential to appeal to much broader segments of the population through the popularity of the imaginary employed, thus creating a wider base of support.

Devī, the central aspect of a dam struggle and the focus object for religiously motivated activists like G. D. Agrawal and others.

Why then was his activism so radically rejected on the local level? Undoubtedly, the discrepancy between the local perception of the ultimate environment and the pursued visions of activists from places outside the state came to the fore especially in G. D. Agrawal's engagement.¹⁸⁷ Unlike in Srinagar, where local opposition was rather minuscule, in other mountain places, such as Uttarkashi, there was a strong local front against the installation of hydropower plants. Yet the forms of local resistance observed had markedly different characteristics compared to Agrawal's activism. Werner once again detailed the controversial facet of Agrawal's form of protest:

Another aspect that renders the importance of Agrawal's agitation somewhat dubious is the fact that local objection to hydro-power projects, initiated and led by villagers, has often been much more radical in its resistance against developmental projects than the construction of a sacred landscape, which seems to respond rather to nationalist sentiments than to actual livelihood issues. (2015:187)

Drew (2017) similarly exposed his rather out-of-touch attitude towards the interests of the mountain population. First of all, Agrawal regarded the majority of the population as having fallen prey to the "state-led" rhetoric of "development and economic growth" (2017:132). It was also on this basis that he deemed it the responsibility of the saints and the elderly to work for the sustenance of the Himalayan environment and the Ganges. Agrawal's position though moreover embraced, quite critically, the idea that only certain segments of society have the integrity to take charge of the societal-environmental concerns altogether (Drew 2017:13). This understanding went even further into a caste-based argumentation, declaring only the upper strata competent to fulfil such tasks. In this sense, Agrawal proclaimed the "common masses" ignorant and largely incapable, and therefore in need of leadership from elders and/or upper caste saints (Drew 2017:132). It goes without saying that his stance outlined here is very much at odds with the views of the average citizen and clearly explains his unpopularity at the local level.

Against this portrayed mind-set, the issue of the temple came in handy for his and the other faith-driven actor's agenda. First of all, imaginaries connected to the sacred place are fertile ground for their transcendental concerns and the very images they use for their activism. Although the site in Kaliyasaur was initially associated with a different understanding of the "sacred" in terms of an individualised local

187 See Amar Ujālā 2012, April 13; May 28, 29, 31; June 1, 17, 19b, 23 etc.

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culture, it nevertheless had a tendency to be used for a political agenda and to be infused with ideas of a normative Hindu culture. Secondly, because at first sight a temple was not that directly tied to social issues or the very basis of people's livelihoods. This factor ostensibly alleviated the struggle of dichotomies such as culture against subsistence. However, this was clearly a misconception. The temple was very much connected to the livelihood of the villagers and in multifaceted ways (see Chapter 2.3.4). As the shrine became downright symbolic of these social concerns of the affected villagers in the course of the struggle, this in turn also provoked the extent of the resistance against the religious groupings.¹⁸⁸

The next group of actors involved in the opposition to the temple relocation took forward the promoted mission of martyrdom of Agrawal and now complemented it with the motif of a holy war. They were the members of the Save Ganga Movement, a community dominated by saints and *sādhus*, with a stronghold in the ashrams of Haridwar and Rishikesh. Their activism, under the same banner as Agrawal's protest, likewise included the preservation of the Dhārī Devī Temple in its agenda. At its peak in 2012, the saints, together with supporters from politics and different sectors of society, held a protest rally at Jantar Mantar, a traditional venue for demonstrations in Delhi.¹⁸⁹ They called it the Ganga Mukti Mahasangram, the great battle for a free Ganges. As the newspaper Amar Ujālā reported, the saints blew the conch horn for the *nirmaltā* and *aviraltā* of the Ganges. This is a symbolic act not only announcing prayer, but also employed as a call to battle.¹⁹⁰ Meanwhile, the widely revered and influential but also controversial (and

188 As an example for the widespread local attitude, serve the reports following the arrival of one of the expert committees that were to assess the dam and temple issue. The question of the dam and in its wake the temple was portrayed a matter of life and death for the villagers. The caption of the Amar Ujālā synthesises the perceived nature of the villagers' response: "काम बंद मत करना साहब, हम भूखे मर जाएंगे" (2012, June 18b). "Do not stop the work [at the project] Sahib, else we will die of hunger." On another occasion, the merchants of Srinagar decided to protest against the dam opponents. During a meeting on the subject, the chairperson of the merchants explained that some "external elements" were protesting against the dams to satisfy their political self-interest. At the same time, he demanded that these people should be prevented by the administration from entering the Srinagar territory. Another speaker at the same assembly contended that the *sādhus* and saints opposing the temple were in reality a "religious mafia" (*dharm māphiyā*) (Amar Ujālā 2012, June 24b).

189 The list of participants as published in the Amar Ujālā (2012, June 19a): The general secretary, Congress Party, Digvijay Singh; Senior leader of the BJP, Uma Bharti; Vijay Kumar Malhotra (BJP); actor Mukesh Khanna; Afzal Khwaja Nizami; the convener of Ganga Seva Abhiyanam, Swami Avimuktेश्वaranand; Swami Sanand [G.D. Agrawal]; Jal Purush (waterman) Rajendra Singh; Kalki Peethadheeshwar Swami Pramod Krishnam; Chakrapani Ji Maharaj; Bharatiya Kisan Union National President Thakur Bhanu Pratap Singh.

190 "दिल्ली के जंतर-मंतर पर संतों ने गंगा की निर्मलता और अविरलता के लिए शंखनाद किया।" (Amar Ujālā 2012, June 19a). See K. V. Singh (2015) expounding on this custom. "As a

2022 deceased) religious guru Shankaracharya Swami Swaroopanand Saraswati led the procession of the religious activists.¹⁹¹ Due to the powerful resistance of the saffron clad fraction, the further implementation of the Srinagar Hydropower Plant was even threatened. The central government at the time was contemplating sacrificing or cancelling the project in order to meet at least some of the demands of the protesters (Faridi 2012).

Another participant of the Ganga Mukti Mahasangram had already been mentioned: Uma Bharti. She was yet another high-profile and dominant activist who incorporated her multiple identities into the agitation to save the Dhārī Devī Temple. Uma Bharti is a BJP politician from Madhya Pradesh and also a *sādhvī*, a female spiritual ascetic who is commonly portrayed as a firebrand politician owing to her prominent role in the Ram Janmabhūmi movement.¹⁹² In 2014, she was appointed Minister for Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation under the Modi government. With regard to the Dhārī Devī Temple, she showed increased activity at the political level by holding talks with Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh and also entering into dialogue with the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. In order to emphasise her demands to the state government, she too carried out a hunger strike in May 2011. In 2012, already in the midst of fierce disputes, Bharti framed her activism with the following words:

‘मैं ना तो बांधों की विरोधी हूँ और ना समर्थक। मैं तो स्थानीय लोगों के हितों की रक्षा के साथ गंगा की अविरलता व निर्मलता के लिए अभियान चला रही हूँ।’ (Amar Ujālā 2012, July 6)

trumpet or wind instrument, a hole is drilled near the tip of the apex of the shankha. When air is blown through this hole, it travels through the whorls producing a loud, sharp and shrill sound. This particular quality of sound is the reason why shankha was used as a war trumpet, to summon helpers and friends. The shankha continued to be used in battles for a long time. The war sound it produced was called Shankhanad” (2015:153).

191 How he too connected the Dhārī Temple with the salvation of the Ganges, reveals a statement he made a year earlier at an assembly held at the Ganga Sewa Mission. “जगतगुरु शंकराचार्य गंगा और धारी देवी को बचाने के लिए गंगा सेवा मिशन की ओर से आयोजित गोष्ठी में देशभर से आए गंगा भक्तों को संबोधित कर रहे थे।” (Amar Ujālā 2011, April 2). “The Jagatguru Shanakaracharya addressed the Ganges worshippers who had come from all over the country at a seminar organized by the Ganga-Sewa Mission to save the Ganges and Dhārī Devī.” Clearly, the Ganges and Dhārī Devī are treated here as concurring concepts.

192 Although inextricably associated with a “Hindutva” cause (see Basu 1998), political experts of late attested her a metamorphosis in her political engagement: “Sadhvi Uma Bharati, to name a few—have remained controversial political players; at the same time, someone like Uma Bharati, once seen as a divisive rabble-rouser, has metamorphosed into a mature and responsible politician of sorts” (Kanungo 2017). Recommended read on the issue of “Female Political Leadership in India,” Spary (2007).

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I neither oppose dams nor support them. But along with protecting the interests of the local population, I am running a campaign for the free flow and purity of the Gaṅgā.

As this quote and others of her statements suggest, during her activism she tried to unite and pacify various interest groups and even opposing sides.¹⁹³ While declaring to protect the interests of the local population and to advocate for the unhindered flow of the river and against its pollution, she tries to reconcile these apparent dichotomies. She not only presents these two objectives as combinable, but also implicitly the condition of the river as a vested concern of the local community. One of the reasons for this multi-pronged approach may have been, as I have pointed out elsewhere (Niebuhr 2017), that the BJP manoeuvred itself into a difficult position during the struggle over the Srinagar Dam. With the BJP's central leadership largely sympathetic to the protest against the temple relocation, the Dhārī Devī issue became a politically challenging issue for the regional branch that formed the opposition in Uttarakhand at the time. Although some members of the regional branch of the party joined the protest against the temple conversion, the critical point was that by being seen to be thwarting a dam project, the regional BJP would have been associated with an anti-development orientation. Given that development is a central issue for the economically underdeveloped state with a high rate of emigration (e.g. Pal 2015), this could have cost the party dearly in the next elections. It was probably against this background that Uma Bharti, but also other actors involved, strategically emphasised that the implementation of the dam and general development is a strongly pursued agenda. This would also be true regarding the currently prevailing cultural concern as in the case of the temple (Niebuhr 2017:245). Her applied rhetoric and already the figure of Uma Bharti, however, met with resistance from all sides. From the local people and activists I spoke to, I learned that they did not place much faith in Bharti's efforts to save the temple. Her intervention was rather understood as motivated by self-interest or political ambitions (also Amar Ujālā 2013, May 13). The same reaction, and even more pronounced, came from the side of the dam supporters. Whereas the occasional visits of Uma Bharti to the dam site even triggered violent responses.¹⁹⁴ The advocates of a proposed new temple

193 Here is one subtitle of an article in which Bharti mentions the conflicting objectives like the dam, *aviraltā* and *nirmaltā* together. “गंगा की अविरलता निर्मलता बनाए रखते हुए बनाए जाएं बांध” (Amar Ujālā 2012, July 3). “The dam should be built in such a way that the cleanliness of the Ganges and its obstacle-free status are maintained.”

194 In 2012, when for a while it looked as if the Srinagar hydroelectric project might be shelved, supporters of the project began burning effigies of Uma Bharti, as she was considered to be one of the people behind this move of the central government (Amar Ujālā 2012, Aug. 12b). In another earlier incident, when she visited the construction site, her car was pelted with stones and the windows were smashed (Amar Ujālā 2011, March 13).

countered Uma Bharti's activism against Dhārī Devī's relocation with references to her past activities and accused her of inconsistency:

परियोजना प्रभावितों ने क्रमिक धरना जारी रखते हुए मध्य प्रदेश की पूर्व सीएम उमा भारती पर जमकर हमला बोला है। कहा उमा भारती भव्य राम मंदिर निर्माण की बात करती हैं और वहीं धारी मंदिर का भव्य सौंदर्यीकरण का विरोध। (Amar Ujālā 2011, May 19)

The people affected by the project [the standard euphemism for the proponents of the HPP] fiercely attacked Uma Bharti, the former CM of Madhya Pradesh, who continues to perform a phased *dharnā*. They said that Uma Bharti talks of constructing a grand Ram temple and opposes the grand beautification of the Dhārī Temple.

Due to her earlier presence in the movement of saints and *sādhus* for the unobstructed flow, her pro-dam rhetoric also gained little credibility, as it was common knowledge that the actors involved campaigned against dam projects on the Ganges. The “free flow” argument and the earlier insistence on a sacralised Ganges waterscape with the various sacred sites it encompasses was apparently too closely interwoven with the rejection of dams to be persuasively modified in the short term. A year before the first quoted statement the objectives associated with her commitment to the Dhārī Devī Temple actually sounded very opposite and were obviously aimed at halting the construction of dams on the Ganges.

इस मौके पर उमा भारती ने कहा कि गंगा पर बने बांधों से पैदा हो रही बिजली का लाभ सिर्फ अमीरों को मिल रहा है। उन्होंने कहा कि अनशन और धरने देश में बहुत किए जा चुके हैं। ऐसे आंदोलन का गंगा विरोधियों पर कोई असर नहीं पड़ा। उन्होंने गंगा की रक्षा के लिए आंदोलन की कमान उमा भारती के हाथों में देने की अपील की। [. . .] उन्होंने सुझाव दिया कि गंगा भक्तों के दो प्रतिनिधिमंडलों को गंगा पर बन रहे बांधों पर रोक लगाने के लिए प्रधानमंत्री और उत्तराखंड के मुख्यमंत्री से वार्ता करनी चाहिए। (Amar Ujālā 2011, Apr. 2).

In addition, supporters of the development project pointed to the perceived discrepancies in the practiced faith of Uma Bharti, who was accused of being entirely subject to political considerations and therefore only feigning her interest in the local population. “उन्होंने कहा कि उमा शुरू से ही कालीमठ जाती रहीं, लेकिन कभी यहां दर्शन करने नहीं रुकी। अब परियोजना का कार्य प्रारंभ होते ही उनकी आस्था धारी देवी में कैसे बढ़ गई।” (Amar Ujālā 2013, May 13). “They said that Uma from the beginning only went to Kālīmaṭh but never stopped here to pay obeisance. Now how did her faith in Dhārī Devī grow once the project started?”

3 From Rock to *Bhūmi* to *Dhārā*

On this occasion [a seminar organised by the Ganga Sewa Mission in Haridwar] Uma Bharti said that only the rich will benefit from the electricity generated by the dams built on the Ganges. She said that many hunger strikes and sit-ins have already been conducted in the country. These movements had not made any impact on the opponents of the Ganges. She appealed to put the command of the movement with the aim to protect the Ganges into her hands. [. . .] She suggested that two delegations of Gaṅgā worshippers should hold talks with the prime minister and chief minister of Uttarakhand to stop the construction of the dams on the Ganges.

The first detail that stands out is that here too she is trying to get a backing from the common people by reminding them that they will be the last to benefit from the hydroelectric projects that are being implemented. With this grassroots support, she aims to be accepted as the leader for further action against the Ganges development projects. At the same time, she calls on the population to take matters into their own hands and to oppose the construction of dams. Her strategy is quite different from the one pursued by G. D. Agrawal, who sees himself as a lone and privileged warrior for the Ganges. She underscores instead that her agenda is the concerns of the people. But this is an understandable tactic for a politician as opposed to an ascetic, who holds very different sets of interests.¹⁹⁵ The idea presented in the last quotation is thus still without the intention to combine the preservation of the Ganges and the construction of dams. Whatever the reason for her later turnaround—a reaction to perceived pro-dam attitudes among the state’s population or other political manoeuvres, for example based on the critical position of the BJP—linking the unhindered flow of the Ganges with the construction of dams proved to be a problematic issue. Werner (2015) argued that the two agendas are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but rather could form a critical alliance and provide a new blueprint for the line of conduct of the Hindu Right. In this context, she expresses her apprehension that “with regard to the recent Hindutva interventions in the debate, one is even tempted to assume a fatal merge of ‘developmental’ and ‘cultural nationalism’” (2015:155). Since the construction of the Tehri Dam, not only activists, but also technical experts developed aspirations to guarantee and maintain the free flow of the river—partly for ecological, partly for spiritual reasons (Werner 2015). In Srinagar, there have similarly been various attempts to find alternative ways of development and to combine power generation with maintaining a minimum flow of the river. Not

195 Even though U. Bharti presents herself as an ascetic, in these discussed mechanisms, the part of her personality that acts as a politician clearly takes centre stage.

3.3 Free Flow and Free Floods—Deluges as an Aspect of Flow

only did Uma Bharti come up with several ideas in this respect, also Bharat Jhunjhunwala brought in many suggestions for not only religiously accepted ways to preserve “sanctity,” but also ecologically more sustainable options to maintain the vitality of the river. However, they were generally dismissed by the implementing agencies as unfeasible and unaffordable. It also seemed that the general resistance to the advocates of a culturally but also ecologically more sustainable vision of development was so entrenched that there was little acceptance to even consider their proposals.

3.3 Free Flow and Free Floods— Deluges as an Aspect of Flow

This section now turns back to the understanding of floods and asks what role floods play in the ideology of the groups concerned with the unhindered flow of the Ganges. Floods were only a marginally discussed topic when the temple question was coupled to the mission of activists from a religious backdrop. The varying physical states, including floods as the most dramatic expression of a river, are nevertheless part of their holistic conceptions of the sacralised Ganges riverscape. The free flow obviously not only denotes a calmly flowing river, but encompasses floods as an integral part of the Ganges’ identity. The characteristics of floods along the Ganges are significantly distinguished from most other rivers in the South Asian region as well as globally. Since the rivers of the Ganges basin are known to carry one of the highest sediment loads of the world (Alley 2002), floods were the means of transport to distribute this load across the plains. Flooding during the rainy season transformed the affected soil into highly fertile agricultural acreage. For the most part, floods along the Ganges were considered a beneficial part of nature’s seasons and not perceived as hazardous events. The framing of that phenomenon manifested itself rather in the notion of an overflow “of the rivers’ fresh water” because “the silt deposited serves to fertilize and improve the land and increase its productivity” (V. Singh 2018:3). This distinctive flood-defined feature shaped the mythical stories about the river and left its impact on the cultural history and the formation of the river civilisation. Bhargava (2006) contemplates the multifarious agency of rivers like the Ganges. In his view, rivers come with their own history, which is shaped by floods and the resulting frequent changes in course. The Ganges moreover “played an active role in the lives of its people and earned a place as both a dynamic but also destructive personality in Indian folk tales and songs” (Bhargava 2006:188). Yet the perception of the annual floods began to change with the introduction of flood-control measures by the British administration. These epitomised a transformation from

3 From Rock to *Bhūmi* to *Dhārā*

an agrarian system defined by floods into an area classified as flood-prone and vulnerable (V. Singh 2018).¹⁹⁶

While the Ganges floods in the countryside are primarily understood as a source of fecundity, they are also seen as a self-cleansing process of the river. Especially in relation to sacred sites or cities, floods are attributed the role of a cleansing agent and a means to purity. Excerpts from interviews conducted by Alley (Alley 2002:106) in Varanasi exemplify an urban perspective on flood events:

As one paṇḍā of Daśāśvamedha put it, ‘Gaṅgā cleans herself during the monsoon’ (*Gaṅgā khud hī sāph kartī hai*). Many described to me that, during the monsoon, Gaṅgā climbs up the ghāt steps and takes away the silt and gandagī [dirt]. Following this line of reasoning, one merchant said, ‘From the scientific view, there is pollution, but I do not understand this. Gaṅgā takes the pollution away in floods.’ In the understanding that purity is connected with flow, Hindus have argued over many centuries that the river should not be contained, manipulated, or diverted by any form of technology (Alley 2002:106).

These described specific flood imaginations with an emphasis on the gentleness of the river are obviously more oriented towards the lowlands and the delta section of the Ganges system than depicting the mountainous region. This is because floods in the elevated alpine landscape display quite different, much wilder and more destructive traits. Nevertheless, the commonly accepted and deeply ingrained understanding of the river’s beneficence stretches from the source of the Ganges at Gangotri to its delta in Bengal. The mythological view of floods as blessings has a counterpart with respect to the mountain region. The rainy season with its increased river discharge is not only conducive to carrying the precious load from the mountains down to the Ganges plain, but the mountains are also mythologically seen as regulators of the unrestrained power of the Ganges water. This function emerges in the stories about Śiva, where he tames the force of Gaṅgā’s fall

196 V. Singh gives as an example the transformation of the Orissa Delta: “[. . .] British administration tried to dismantle the ‘flood dependent agrarian regime’ through its flood control measures, and in this process it transformed the Orissa delta into a ‘flood vulnerable landscape’” (V. Singh 2018:14). Werner (2015), however, urges caution against a too romanticised picture of past water management: “As D’Souza rightly remarks, analyses of colonial and precolonial knowledge hierarchies often tend to glorify the past, more specifically the assumption that precolonial water management practices were per se egalitarian and harmonious. Primarily, it would be misleading to assume an evaluative dichotomy of ‘modern’ (technocratic) and ‘traditional’ engagements with nature” (D’Souza 2006, as cited in Werner 2015:41).

from heaven with his locks, whereas his tresses are a symbol for the Himalayas, or the Himalayan forests.¹⁹⁷ Even though this may not be a generally accepted reading of floods at the local level, nevertheless, also in the high mountain zone itself exist narratives about floods as instruments for purification.

Residents of Uttarkashi often shared stories of the Ganga's movements in Uttarkashi that upheld the river's role in the sustenance of moral integrity. One example, also cited in the tourist pamphlet, was the sudden shift of the river's flow from the east to the north to the south side of the city in 1857. The changed course is linked with tales of transgression in Uttarkashi that the Ganga undid by flooding—and therefore purifying—much of the city. Such events enhance the city's importance. As the pamphlet states, 'Indeed, natural disasters including floods, earthquakes, fires, and landslides are a huge part of recent local memory but, with a startling resilience, Uttarkashi has only grown bigger after each one' (Andurai Ustav Uttarkashi 2006, as cited in Drew 2011:79).

This quoted passage, demonstrating one of the possible interpretative patterns of catastrophes in the mountain locality, exhibits several features related to the floods of the Ganges. They are considered not only as a purifying measure, but also as a corrective mechanism for various cultural infringements. Eventually, these water-based events are evaluated positively, as they have promoted development and growth for the better. Based on such a multi-layered understanding of the beneficence of Ganges floods, the arguments of the religiously motivated dam opponents inherently also embrace the mountainous section of the river when they present their idea of the free flowing river in terms of its flooding.

3.4 A Flood Vision for the Ganges and the Scientificity of Spiritual Concerns

Natural calamities, in this case floods, are seen as a frequently occurring natural given, which must not be controlled but rather handled: 'All embankments made along the Ganga and her tributaries should be removed. Water of the Ganga must be allowed to

197 Note, for example the translation for the Shivaliks, the Himalayan foothills—Śiva's locks. Bahuguna (1997b:50) elaborates "the locks are the natural forests of the Himalayas which help contain the water in the soil and protect the land from floods."

3 From Rock to *Bhūmi* to *Dhārā*

spread in their natural way and replenish this holy earth. People should be encouraged to live with the difficulties and benefits associated with floods' (Werner 2015:163; Nischalanand 2009 as cited in Werner *ibid.*).

Such a quote, with its rejection of all man-made modification of the river, could indicate that the representatives of the "free flow," in their most extreme endeavours, might want to maintain a river condition before the intervention of any engineering measures. In other words, they intend to return from the paradigm of flood control, as envisaged also by the implementation of dams, to an earlier version of flood management, or even to none at all. Of course, these few lines do not convey a comprehensive vision of a river system without dams or embankments, or what exactly the "natural flow" would imply. One could speculate that the underlying vision here is of the Ganges as it was before any "outsider intervention." In the last consequence, this could mean a condition before colonial powers took control and successively developed the river and its landscape. Especially in view of current tendencies of the Hindu Right to erase parts of Indian history, above all the Mughal history (Truschke 2016), one could conclude more precisely that the ideal would be a state of the river before the invasion and interference of any party, which is (re-)branded as foreign even centuries after its arrival.¹⁹⁸

The ambivalent scenario of an unregulated water flow is also based on scientific arguments and draws from an ongoing expert debate on the validity of dams and embankments as means of flood control on India's rivers (see Baghel 2014). In the discussion, which questions the understanding of dams with regard to this purpose, G. D. Agrawal alias Swami Sanand, but also Bharat Jhunjhunwala openly confront the conception of such a kind of flood regulation. They point out that dams rather aggravate floods, instead of serving as a tool to exert control over them. A website run by Dr Jhunjhunwala and others in this regard cites a report of a member of the "Center for Built Environment:"

'The government's anti-flood measures have actually boomeranged. Dams and embankments have now become an important cause of floods. The man-made barriers, he [Anil Agarwal] says, prevent drainage of excess water from floodplains into the main channels of rivers and streams. Embankments also tend to break

198 Needless to say that such efforts to shape or rather "unshape" the riverscape would prove to be rather impossible, since various forms of river management mostly at communal level are "as old as civilisation itself" (Baghel 2014:9), and generations of state rulers were involved in the gradual transformation of the landscape and its rivers (see e.g. Mallet 2017).

3.4 A Flood Vision for the Ganges

when rivers rise suddenly, sending water gushing into the countryside. Sixteen major dams have burst in India; the worst disaster, in 1979, sent a wall of water through the town of Morvi in Gujarat state, killing 1,500 people.’

Based on this information the author infers,

We must remove large dams like Tehri and cease to remove flood waters from barrages so that normal floods take place every year. Then groundwater will be recharged and more than make up for the loss of irrigation from dams and barrages. Also, sediments will get flushed to the sea and by accepting normal floods we will be saved from devastating floods such as those taking place nowadays (Ganga Today 2018).

The last quote also addresses the issue of the sediment load of the river. There is indeed sufficient evidence telling that dams and embankments on the river Ganges are extremely difficult to manage because of the high presence of silt. The lower Gangetic plains are confronted with the problem of oversilting, which increases the height of riverbeds and leads to the aggravation of floods during monsoon times. The problem of silt accumulation is in fact also visible behind the Srinagar Dam near the Dhārī Devī Temple. What was supposed to be a lake had already turned in 2018 into a shallow, sand-filled waterbed. Interestingly, this specific physical property of the Ganges—the high sludge load of the water and the resulting problems in connection with river control and economic exploitation schemes—predestines the river to be promoted both spiritually and ecologically with the demand for the *aviral dhārā*.¹⁹⁹ Further, this underscores an exclusivity of the river that is similar to the aforementioned critical position given to the watercourse by the “Hindutva”-driven engagement.

199 An article by journalist D. C. Sharma (2017) highlights how also with regard to the problem of siltation, technical and spiritual aspects of the river conflate. “For the river to be really clean, it has to achieve the twin goals of—*nirmalta* (purity) and *aviralta* (free flow). Oversilting comes in the way of achieving the second goal of ecological flow of the river. An engineering solution to the problem would be to undertake large-scale desilting by dredging. It’s a costly option and not ecologically sustainable. It also goes against the notion that silt in Indian rivers is an integral part of the rivers themselves. The Chitale committee set up last year to keep an eye on the desiltation of Ganga has acknowledged this in its recent report. ‘Rivers should be provided with sufficient floodplains without any hindrance to the flow. Instead of ‘keeping the silt away,’ a strategy to ‘give the silt way’ should be adopted,’ the panel has observed.”

3 From Rock to *Bhūmi* to *Dhārā*

As illustrated here, it became increasingly difficult to separate arguments from a scientific context with regard to environmental issues from those pertaining to a religious background. Contrary to earlier studies, which stated that scientific considerations were largely rejected in faith-centred discussions on the purity of the Ganges (Zühlke 2005, 2013; Alley 2002; Mawdsley 2010 discussing Alley; Haberman 2006:177),²⁰⁰ spiritual and scientific arguments lately converged in these debates. In the course of this development, the entanglement of sound scientific argumentation and religious aspirations became another critical factor of right-wing engagement. A particularly shaped relationship between Hindu-nationalist politics and science gained increasing prominence in recent years and reached academic debates even at the university level.²⁰¹ The practice of combining scriptural evidence with scientific truth has been identified as another popular tactic of the Hindu Right “to further their propaganda of superiority of Hinduism by making claims of its ‘being scientific’ in factual terms” (Tripathy 2019).²⁰² Such an objective is strategically supported by an agency with the name “Vijnana Bharati (VIBHA):”

[. . .] The science wing of Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS)
[. . .] VIBHA aims to educate the masses about science and technology and harness research to stimulate India’s development, but it also promotes ‘Swadeshi’ (indigenous) science and tries to connect modern science to traditional knowledge and Hindu spirituality (S. Kumar 2019).²⁰³

200 The two authors Alley and Zühlke, who studied the problem of Ganges pollution, found that most people who came from a religious-ideological background did not acknowledge the physical condition of the river. This was because the Ganges had such a purifying agency in their system of thought that the physical pollution was considered non-existent or not important—and accordingly there was no need to take care of it. As Alley pointed out, “There are, in other words, many religious leaders and ritual specialists who are explicit transcendentalists and deny any possibility of an upper limit to Gaṅgā’s purifying power” (Alley 2002:219f); or further: “several activists have argued that this ‘apathy’ for the problems of material pollution is most noticeable among religious leaders and pilgrim priests working and living on the banks of the Gaṅgā [. . .]” (Alley 2002:211).

201 Its most extreme manifestation consists of bizarre claims to prove that modern knowledge and technology already existed in the Vedic age. Note the statement of the Vice-Chancellor of Andhra Pradesh University that fighter jets and airports already existed in ancient India (Tripathy 2019).

202 See how Tripathy (2019) traces in great detail the historical roots of the merging of the two spheres into what he terms “pseudoscience,” a process that reaches back to nineteenth century British India.

203 Swadeshi literally means “one’s own country,” a term that emerged in the late 19th century. After the partition of Bengal, its underlying idea led to a people’s movement

These tendencies are again reflected in the approach of G.D. Agrawal towards the temple and dam issue. As Werner (2015) pointed out, in Agrawal's eyes the function of science is subordinate and the use of his scientific expertise constitutes just another instrument to "confirm faith-based knowledge" (2015:184). Drew (2011:99) similarly stated that Agrawal "[. . .] grounded his activism against hydro-electric projects in Uttarkashi District in concerns for faith, culture, and 'Hindu tradition' rather than the scientific knowledge of his engineering profession. In his view, these non-material considerations were, and continue to be, primary" (Drew 2011:99). Based on this conviction scientific arguments should not assume any major role in his dam protest because "he considered the scientific and environmental factors [. . .] to be 'meaningless auxiliaries' that are limited in their ability to affect politics and government decisions" (ibid.).

Despite the subordinate position he accorded to scientific reasoning, there was an episode in the present case when Agrawal intended to take water samples from the Alaknanda near the Dhārī Devī Temple. The aim of such an operation was to establish that the quality and hence the spiritual nature of the water changes with the erection of dams and the accompanying blockage of the hydrological flow.

रविवार को मातृसदन में पत्रकारों से स्वामी ज्ञानस्वरूप सानंद ने कहा कि बांध बनाए जाने से गंगा के जल में मौजूद महत्वपूर्ण पदार्थ वहीं रुक जाएंगे, जिससे जल शुद्ध नहीं रह जाएगा। यदि शासन-प्रशासन ने उन्हें नजरबंद नहीं किया है तो वह सोमवार को श्रीनगर के लिए कूच करेंगे। उनके साथ दो वैज्ञानिक भी जाएंगे। जो वहां से गंगा का सैंपल लेकर जांच करेंगे। (Amar Ujālā 2012, May 28).

Swami Gyan Swaroop Sanand told reporters at the Mātṛsadan (Haridwar) on Sunday that the construction of dams would especially block the major substances in the water of the Ganges, which would not allow the water to remain pure. Unless the administration places him under house arrest, he will travel to Srinagar on Monday. Two scientists, who will take samples from the Ganges and examine them, would accompany him.²⁰⁴

and later became an important component of Gandhi's freedom struggle (Bayly 1986). It has always had Indian nationalist connotations, but underwent new modifications as part of BJP's political strategies (Lakha 2002).

204 This episode grew more dramatic the next day when G.D. Agrawal tried to travel to Srinagar. Government officials stopped him at the first checkpoint behind Haridwar and arrested him for allegedly disturbing the public peace. He was then temporarily detained at an undisclosed location and later taken to Delhi (Amar Ujālā 2012, May 29).

3 From Rock to *Bhūmi* to *Dhārā*

Agrawal's or Sanand's plan to test the water quality at the gradually emerging lake near Srinagar draws on another scientifically justified feature put forward by the campaigners for a free-flowing Ganges. This is about certain types of bacteria that are said to be present in the water of the Ganges. The preservers of the Ganges cite evidence to support their thesis, which is also a common belief among Ganges worshippers, that these microorganisms are the physical explanation for the purity and purifying agency of the Ganges. This theme emerged in Jhunjhunwala's (2014) line of argument in his concern with the environmental aspects of the Ganges. When Agrawal raised the same issue, however, one can assume that his engagement is consistently oriented towards the transcendental nature of the river.²⁰⁵

Although the objective of the present study was to leave aside normative scientific considerations on the dam and temple issue, these reflections and the analysis of statements demonstrated that they cannot be considered completely separate from the faith-based argumentation. This is the case because scientific reasoning also informed the religious discourse. The last paragraphs gave a very general introduction to the notions of flow and floods as advocated by the opponents of the construction of dams on the Ganges. Direct statements related to Dhārī Devī and her connection to floods were accordingly sparse in this final passage. Yet the temple underwent the same process of generalisation in terms of a semantic change. It therefore seemed essential to provide this kind of contextualisation of the Srinagar Dam and the Dhārī Devī Temple struggle. Taking such an approach revealed the meanings given to flows and floods by the people who stepped into visibility during the conflict. The thorough exploration thereby disclosed that together with discourses on flow and floods Hindu nationalist agendas permeated the conflict over the Goddess Dhārī and her temple. This detailed discussion will ultimately prove important for the understanding of the soon to be investigated 2013 floods and their eventual interpretation.

205 However, the diverging missions of the two actors may have been difficult for the general observer to discern. The two men were closely associated in the eyes of the public. This was evident in the course of another incident in which a group of Srinagar Dam supporters simultaneously burned the portraits of G. D. Agrawal and Jhunjhunwala (Amar Ujālā 2012, June 17). A few days later a group of the project proponents first intimidated and then physically attacked G. D. Agrawal and Jhunjhunwala at the latter's home in Laksh-moli (Amar Ujālā 2012, June 23). Obviously, the group of violent dam advocates did not consider the nature of the argumentation too important, as long as they felt that it endangered the project and the benefits they expected from it.

3.5 The Temple Preservers' Perspective: Summary and Conclusion

This chapter examined the motives of the opponents and the characteristics of the movement against the relocation of the Goddess. The arguments and symbolism employed by these actors gradually transcended the narratives associated with the local temple, and by linking it to a Hindu-nationalist framework, broadened the understanding of the sacred place more and more towards implications of a larger ideological scope. This slow transition from a local site to a location of ideological relevance took place, on the one hand, via concepts related to the fixed constituents of the locality, such as the different notions concerning the earth and the soil. On the other hand, this happened through perceptions linked to the flexible aspects defining the place of worship, namely the river and the condition of its water. The gradual shift in attributions also went along with a re-emergence of historical antagonisms, which manifested in a dynamic clash of external and local participants and factors. In contrast to the flood narratives presented in the previous chapters, it became clear in the present analysis that the perspective of the “temple preservers” with their eventual focus on the “*bhūmi*” and “*dhārā*” differed considerably from the local knowledge about the temple and the river. The locals’ personal connection to their place of worship turned into a depersonalised relationship in the opponents’ approach. As a result, the groups involved in the conflict appeared at times as if they were talking about a different temple—as well as about a different watercourse. A direct comparison of the dichotomous positions suggests that while local imaginaries embrace floods, the sanctity of the river is not actually a very prominent component within the narratives of past events. The first and most important concern of local cognition represents the uniqueness and sacredness of the deity, whose identity is in turn largely informed by the presence of the river. The defenders of the former temple on the contrary, and as evidenced here, placed almost exclusive emphasis on the sanctity of the river and the entire sacralised landscape of the river system. For them, the characteristic identity and site of the Goddess Dhārī may have been of some significance, but in a sense she constituted only one element in the sacred terrain that forms the centre of their activism. In this way, the temple of the Goddess, having been identified as part of the Ganges, merges completely with their imagination about the venerated riverscape and framing of the Himalayan region. An obvious form of agency of the Goddess is of course quite limited here, as she or her distinct individuality had been diluted in a larger discourse. Nonetheless, embedded in the outlined dynamics, Dhārī Devī assumed the status of a symbol for the resistance against hydro-power projects and the corresponding target to maintain the purity and sanctity of the Ganges and therefore its integrity in a metaphysical sense. With the transformation of the Goddess into a token of “Hindutva,” the concomitant dynamics at

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the same time exposed several of the specific strategies of the Hindu Right. These include supporting their argumentation by scientific findings and charging their rhetoric with mythological motives. In line with this overall process of semantic expansion, the perception of floods presented here reflects a broader and more general understanding of this phenomenon along the Ganges. This is opposed to the previously featured very specific and highly localised interpretations of floods from the surroundings of the place of worship and the people in the villages of Dhari and Kaliyasaur. In the discourse of the temple's preservers, the idea that the Goddess causes floods is also discussed for the first time. However, floods play an ambivalent role when it comes to these arguments. For one aspect, floods are idealised because they are seen as an ideal state of the river. But conversely, when floods are placed in the context of the Goddess's wrath and claimed to retribute misconduct, the emphasis is on their destructive rather than beneficial quality. Even if there is ample ethnologically based evidence that local traditions rooted in the area interpret catastrophes as a social regulative and endow them with attributions of divine (enraged) agency, this is very different from the understanding of floods in this locality as elaborated in the previous chapters and as reflected in the corresponding flood narratives. Yet despite the existing archetypal traits of a "wild goddess," especially floods in the presented narratives about the deity do not show such elements of divine ire or hostility, but rather of companionship with the raging element and compassion with the people. There is no such exaggeration that the Goddess is above the deluge or that she is its creator, but she adapts to the floods, she lives with them and can make the best out of their emergence. In this, she strongly mirrors the local people who traditionally live with the river and their interaction with nature, or specifically their ways of adapting to the given conditions. But as the temple and its Goddess became so closely linked to the distinctive features of the preservationists' rhetoric, the Goddess simultaneously assumed the role of a symbol for, or custodian of, the flow and the floods. It follows that the Goddess was required to remain in her traditional place so that the watercourse could retain its intrinsic character as a free-flowing river with unrestrained floods.